

The Twelve Links – Part 5 of 5 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 8 Feb 93

Contents (click on heading to view text)

- Relating the twelve links to the Four Noble Truths
 - How a set of twelve links occurs over two lifetimes
 - How a set of twelve links occurs over three lifetimes
 - Many sets of twelve links created
 - The twelve links in forward order
 - *Compassion for ourselves*
 - The twelve links in reverse order
 - Purpose of looking at the twelve links from different angles
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Relating the twelve links to the Four Noble Truths

The teaching on the twelve links can all be put into the Four Noble Truths.

The twelve links are:

1. Ignorance
2. Karmic formation (conditioned factors)
3. Consciousness
 - a. Causal consciousness
 - b. Resultant consciousness
4. Name and Form
5. Six sources
6. Contact
7. Feeling
8. Craving
9. Grasping
10. Becoming
11. Birth
12. Aging and Death

The **first Noble Truth** is true sufferings, which are what we want to be free of, the samsaric existence that we want to be free of. Relating this to the twelve links, true sufferings are the projected effects and the actualized effects. They are Links 3b through 7, and Links 11 and 12. These comprise our samsaric life, the nature of which is suffering.

Remember suffering here doesn't mean just the 'ouch!' kind of suffering. It means undesirable experiences, being under the influence of afflictions [['Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.](#)] and karma. It sounds like technical language—true sufferings—but if we look, it's just basically our experience. The body that gets old and sick and dies; our senses which activate contact, which activates feelings.

Attached to happy feelings and hostile to unpleasant ones, in our ignorance we act to get rid of what seems to be the source of pain and to get what seems to be the source of pleasure. These actions are karma, and since most of these are done with ignorance, anger, and attachment, they put negative karmic imprints on our mindstream. These ripen in more unhappy circumstances in the future. This is why it's called cyclic existence—we just keep going around in circles. This all arises from our body and mind, which are in the nature of suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

The **second Noble Truth**, the true causes of suffering, are Links 1, 2, 8, 9 and 10. These are the ones that cause all of the undesirable experiences.

Ignorance (Link 1) causes suffering because it doesn't perceive reality and as a result, we generate afflictions* and create karma.

Karmic formations (Link 2) cause suffering because karma is what ripens at the time of death and propels us towards another unsatisfactory rebirth in cyclic existence.

Craving and grasping (Links 8 and 9) cause suffering because they are what help the karmic potency ripen, especially the karma that ripens and throws us into the next rebirth. They are causes because they help ripen the karma that is contaminated by ignorance.

Link 10, becoming, also causes suffering, because it is the karmic imprint when it is about to ripen and is ready to bring forth the next rebirth.

When we are in cyclic existence, we are under the influence of afflictions* and karma and experience undesirable effects because of those. Among these links that are true causes of suffering, three of them are afflictions* and two of them are actions, or karma. Ignorance, craving, and grasping are afflictions* and karmic formations and becoming are actions or karma.

Ignorance is the root of all the other afflictions*, such as attachment, hostility, resentment, jealousy, arrogance. By not perceiving reality, it acts as the basis for all the other negative emotions and afflictions* to arise. Craving and grasping are afflictions* because they are a type of attachment. When attachment arises very strongly, especially at death, our mind is propelled right back into another body.

Two of the causes are actions or karmas. Link 2, karmic formation, is any action that has the power to cause another rebirth. This is where the ten destructive actions (that we have gone through previously) fit in. When we do any of those ten with all factors complete—object, intention, action, and completion of the action—that karma has the power to bring another rebirth in cyclic existence.

Link 10, becoming, is also a type of karma, because it is that same karmic potency when it's about to bring its result. So Link 2 is the action that leaves the potency or the seed on the mindstream. The potency stays there for some time, until the craving and grasping that can ripen it arise. Link 10 is this potency at the time of death, when it has been nourished with “water” and “fertilizer” and is ready to propel rebirth in another body.

So of the twelve links, three are afflictions* and two are karma, and together they are the true cause of suffering. The remaining seven links are true sufferings, because they are the results of afflictions* and the karma. They are the undesirable circumstances that we experience, and as such, they are the first of the Four Noble Truths.

I'm hoping that you are seeing how all these things fit together in different ways and the different ways of looking at the same thing. Think about how the Four Noble Truths relate to the twelve links. Think about your life: Which parts of it are true sufferings? Which are true causes of suffering?

Remember that the whole reason for learning all of these is because it's actually describing our experience and it's taught so that we can generate a strong wish to get out of this unsatisfactory cycle of existence. Instead of re-enacting the twelve links again and again, which is what we've been merrily passing our time doing since beginningless time, if we have a strong determination to be free from them and attain liberation, then we we'll actually become interested in creating the causes for the lasting happiness of liberation and enlightenment. Lasting happiness comes from true cessation and true path, the **last two Noble Truths**.

How a set of twelve links occurs over two lifetimes

Now, we're going to look at how one set of twelve links occurs over two lifetimes and over three lifetimes.

Remember that we have begun many sets of twelve links. When we talk about beginning one set of twelve links, we are talking about one specific moment of ignorance that causes a specific action, that plants the karmic potency on the causal consciousness at a particular time. For example, let's say I got angry at a family member this morning and spoke harshly to them. Under the influence of ignorance (link 1), I spoke in a mean way (link 2), and that left a karmic seed on my consciousness (link 3). This is the beginning of a new set of twelve links. We are talking about very specific instances here, therefore we

have begun many sets of twelve links. Some have already been completed and we've experienced the rebirths they've caused in the past. Other sets are only partially completed, with ignorance, karmic formations, and causal consciousness created. Unless we purify the karma, or unless we attain liberation, these sets will bring our future rebirths.

If we look at one set of twelve links, they can occur over two lives or over three lives.

The way in which they occur over two lives, is: Let's say in this lifetime, due to our ignorance, we hold a grudge against somebody and retaliate for harm they caused us in the past. This creates karma which leaves an imprint on the causal consciousness. These are the projecting causes (Links 1, 2 and 3a). These occurred in a particular situation, for example, we retaliated when a playmate made fun of us when we were ten years old.

Then, at the time of death, we generate craving for our present body and grasping for the next life. These, combined with other circumstance – what's happening around us at death-time and what thoughts and feelings are in our mind at that time – make that one particular karma (of retaliating when we were ten years old) ripen. (By the way, it can also be a good karma ripening, it doesn't always have to be a bad karma.) This ripening is Link 10 – becoming. Craving, grasping and becoming are the actualizing causes (Links 8, 9 and 10).

The projecting causes and actualizing causes all happen in this lifetime.

Ignorance, karmic formations, and causal consciousness, as well as craving, grasping and becoming occur during this lifetime. As a result of them, rebirth into another body occurs. In that rebirth, the seven remaining links will be experienced: resultant consciousness, name and form, six sources, contact, and feelings (Links 3b through 7). They are mostly referring to the first instances of these things happening. Therefore in the case of a human rebirth, they are mostly happening in the womb.

Links 3b through 7 occur at the same time as Links 11 (birth) and 12 (aging and death). 'Birth, aging and death' is an abbreviated way of speaking of all of these links. Birth (Link 11) is roughly corresponding to resultant consciousness (Link 3b), the consciousness that takes rebirth in the new body. But I have also heard that it corresponds to name and form. I have heard it both ways. All the other links – six sources, contact and feelings – occur while one is aging.

Or we can put it this way. Links 4, 5, 6 and 7 (name and form, six sources, contact and feelings) occur during the time of Link 12 (aging and death), because from the moment after we are conceived, we are automatically aging and in the process of heading towards death. Even though we are in the womb, the sense sources are forming and contact and feeling arise.

Links 3b through 7 are the projected effects, while Links 11 and 12 are the actualized effects.

In that way, one set of twelve links occurs over two lives. All the causal ones occur in one life, and all the resultant links (effects) in the very next lifetime.

How a set of twelve links occurs over three lifetimes

There is another way in which one set of twelve links can happen. It happens over three lifetimes.

Let's say, fifty million eons ago, there was a person called Joe Schmo in the Land of Ish Kabibble (Life A). Joe Schmo made an offering to the Buddha, but his mind was ignorant. He was still grasping at everything as truly existent. At the time when he made the offering to the Buddha, he prayed for a good rebirth in the next lifetime. That action of making offering to the Buddha left an imprint on the causal consciousness.

At the time of his death, Joe Schmo was very attached to his house. The attachment rose strongly and he didn't want to die and be away from his house. As a result, he was reborn as a mouse in the house. The rebirth as a mouse was a result of another set of twelve links. It was not a result of the set of twelve links that was created from making offering to the Buddha. In this latter set of twelve links, there are only Links 1, 2 and 3(a) so far, and these were created fifty million eons ago. Since then, the continuity of

mind which was Joe Schmo was born as a mouse and then as so many other different rebirths in those fifty million eons.

Then this lifetime, the continuity of that mindstream again takes rebirth as a human being (Life B) named Sarah. At the time of Sarah's death, her Dharma friends remind her to take refuge, think kind thoughts, and meditate on love and compassion. She does that and has a very positive frame of mind when she dies. Even though she has craving and grasping, the positive frame of mind enables the karmic potency that was created from making offering to the Buddha fifty million eons ago to ripen.

In the lifetime as a human being (Life B), the links of craving, grasping and becoming are present, and in the very next lifetime (Life C), all the other links, which are the resultant links of that particular set of twelve links begun fifty million eons ago, ripen.

In this way, this set of twelve links happen over three lifetimes. Life A, which occurred fifty million eons ago, had ignorance, karmic formations and causal consciousness (Links 1, 2 and 3a). Life B which is now, has craving, grasping and becoming (Links 8, 9 and 10). Life C has to be the life right after Life B, and it has the resultant links (Links 3b through 7, and Links 11 and 12).

Between Life A and Life B, fifty million eons may pass. Or Life B can be the very next life after Life A. In other words, between Life A and Life B, there can be any amount of time. It doesn't matter.

But between Life B and Life C, because there was craving, grasping and becoming in Life B, the results of that set of twelve links are experienced in the very next lifetime. There is no gap between Life B and Life C.

Many sets of twelve links created

So you see, we have many sets of twelve links going on at the same time. Joe Schmo started many sets of Links 1, 2 and 3(a) in previous lives. At the time of his death, he had craving, grasping and becoming from one of these sets and was reborn as a mouse where he experienced the remaining links. That mouse also begun more sets with Links 1, 2 and 3(a). At the end of that life as a mouse, craving, grasping and becoming from another of the sets of twelve links he had started arose, and they propelled the resultant links that were experienced in the very next rebirth. While experiencing these resultant links, that being again initiated more sets of twelve links. And the process goes on and on.

This is samsara, isn't it? This is confusion. [laughter] This is the mind in a state of confusion. Although we want to be happy, we get tangled up and do many different actions – some positive and some negative – under the influence of ignorance, and thus we get reborn again and again. This is because we don't understand the path to enlightenment, because we don't understand who we are—or rather, who we aren't—and because we can't differentiate between positive and negative actions.

This is why the determination to be free is so important, because the determination to be free says, "I'm sick of this. I've had it! This has gone on long enough. I'm putting my foot down! Enough is enough. This has got to stop!" All the language that you usually use when you are really mad at something, this is where you can use it. [laughter] "This can't go on. I'm setting up realistic boundaries. I'm getting out of this dysfunctional situation. I'm going to do something!" We make a genuine determination to seek real happiness instead of wanting just to distract ourselves all the time. When we seek genuine happiness, we know we have to create the causes for this. Thus we turn to the Dharma, and learn, think about, and meditate on it.

In some Dharma books, the determination to be free is translated as 'renunciation'. I don't think 'renunciation' is a very good translation, because in English, 'renunciation' makes you think of going off and living in a cave, doesn't it? "I'm renouncing the world. I'm going to go live in a cave and eat nettles."

We think that is what renunciation is. That is not renunciation. Renunciation doesn't mean going to live in a cave. You can go live in a cave and eat nettles but still be incredibly attached to a lot of things. You can be attached to your nettles. [laughter] You can dream about pizza and Chinese food and everything else while you are meditating. You can also be incredibly attached to your reputation, thinking, "I hope all those people back in Seattle know how ascetic I am and what a great and glorious meditator I am sitting

out here eating nettles. They probably all respect me a lot. How great I am!"

Renunciation does not refer to where you live and what you eat. That is why I don't like the term 'renunciation'. I think it brings forth some misconceptions. I prefer to translate the Tibetan term, which is 'nge-jung', to mean the determination to be free, because when you have made that determination to be free in your heart, then it doesn't matter whether you are here or in a cave, because your mind is single-pointedly seeking liberation and you have a clear direction in life, a clear meaning and purpose to your life. You are not wishy-washy.

I have been taking a pastoral care course. In today's session, we talked about what are the things that are likely to be your concerns if you have a terminal diagnosis. We brainstormed this and made a big list. Here, it became very clear to me what the advantages are of meditating on death. In my meditation, I'd thought of all these concerns many times, so thinking and talking about them didn't frighten me. Lama Zopa has been pounding awareness of impermanence and death into me for quite some time and so has His Holiness and all my other teachers. Even though I don't have a deep understanding of impermanence and death, at least, superficially, I've thought about it.

However, some people in the room looked very worried during the discussion. One of the questions that came up in the session was, "What is the meaning of my life?" People are likely to think about this when they are terminally ill. This could be a very traumatic question when one is terminal and lacks a spiritual path. The person may think, "I've lived my whole life. What's the meaning of it? What have I done? When I die, what's going to happen to me? What's the meaning of being alive?" It is a real concern of people when they are dying.

If we have meditated and have been able to develop the determination to be free, we have a very clear purpose in our life, a very clear meaning for our life. The meaning of our life is to get ourselves out of cyclic existence. We have been able to spend our life working towards that meaning, working towards that purpose. When we get a diagnosis of a terminal illness, we don't freak out because we know we have a purpose in life and we have been living that purpose up until now. We know we'll keep living that purpose for however long we have to live. We'll also make prayers to have another precious human life in order to continue progressing towards liberation and enlightenment in our future lives.

When there is a very clear purpose and meaning to things, life is easier and so is dying.

[Audience:] You mentioned that renunciation is not where we live and what we eat. What, then, are we renouncing?

What you are giving up or renouncing is being born repeatedly in cyclic existence under the influence of ignorance, anger and attachment. We are renouncing true sufferings and true causes. We usually think that renunciation means giving up money, possessions, relationships, and these things. The money and the relationships are not the problem. It's our ignorant attitude towards them that has to be given up. We are making a very clear decision in our life not to follow ignorance, anger and attachment. This kind of clear decision is included in the determination to be free. We want to be free from cyclic existence and the afflictions* and karma that cause it.

I'm explaining this because when you read Dharma books and come across the term 'renunciation', try and look beyond your first impression of the word.

The twelve links in forward order

We are going to talk about the twelve links in forward order. Here we look at why they are called links of dependent arising. How do they arise? How do they come into existence? By depending on other things. In other words, the links don't happen by accident. They don't happen without cause. They don't happen because of God. They happen because when there is ignorance, there will be formative action or karma. When there is formative action (karmic formations), there will be consciousness. When there is consciousness, there will be name and form, and so on.

Because of one, the next arises. And because of this later one, there is the next. When you meditate on the twelve links in this forward order, you are studying the evolution of cyclic existence, how it comes

into existence. You come to understand why ignorance is the root of cyclic existence. You also come to understand how, if we cut ignorance, we can cut off all of the complicated results that come from it. Meditating in this way is called meditating on the forward order, because you see the development, the evolution of cyclic existence. It is also called meditating on the afflicted side because this sequence is afflicted by the afflictions* and karma.

When you are meditating, don't just sit there and think, "La-la-la, because there is ignorance, there is karma. Because there is karma, there is..." Don't just say the words, but make examples. "Today, I got very ticked off at somebody and I told them off. Well, what was going on? First of all, there was a lot of ignorance. I was grasping at an inherently existent *me*, an inherently existent person and an inherently existent thing that they did that was inherently awful. There was definitely ignorance in there. Everything seems very solid and concrete. Because of the ignorance, which is the first link, I got angry. I acted upon that anger and told that person off. That is the second link. My consciousness received a new 'present'. It got this new seed planted on it. That's Link 3(a), the causal consciousness."

Then you think, "What happens if, at the end of my life, craving, grasping and becoming from that same set of twelve links arise? Let's say I just live this life not doing much Dharma practice. I don't train my mind in any way. When I arrive at the time of death, I'm scared and don't want to die. I'm not ready to die. I'm craving this body. I'm craving my ego-identity." We can relate to that. "And then I grasp at another body or another ego-identity because I'm so afraid I will stop existing when I die. I don't want to cease to exist, so I've got to have another body that will make me solid again." This ripens that karmic potency. It's going to be there, fresh and ready, the link of becoming. And then I'm going to wind up in another body and the other seven links will follow after that. What kind of a body am I going to wind up in as a result of this action of telling somebody off today? Not a fortunate one."

Meditate on the twelve links in this way and see how one link comes from the previous one. "I will take rebirth. Then I'm going to have name and form. The body and mind will start to develop in the womb. The sense organs will develop, and there will be contact with objects in my environment again. That will generate more feeling and anger and attachment, jealousy and pride will arise. Somebody may say something obnoxious to me that offends me, and I'll get angry again and ..." You begin to see why it's called cyclic existence. [laughter]

Do your meditation in this way. Think of it in terms of your own personal experience, not abstract ideals somewhere in the sky. "This is what is happening right now with me." That gives you a much more personal feeling of, "Wait a minute. I have a precious human life. I want to make this useful. How can I make it useful? By making a determination to free myself from cyclic existence and attain liberation. That is an important objective in my life."

Compassion for ourselves

This determination to free ourselves is compassion for ourselves. You don't hear that term very much in the teachings. We usually think of compassion for others. But the determination to be free is compassion for ourselves, because compassion is wanting somebody to be free of suffering and its causes. When we have the determination to be free, we have compassion for ourselves because we want ourselves to be free from all undesirable experiences and their causes. In the *lamrim* or 'Gradual path to enlightenment', compassion for ourselves is in the form of the determination to be free. It precedes compassion for others and the altruistic intention that wants to free others.

Before we can have the altruism for others, wanting them to be free of cyclic existence, we first have to want ourselves to be free. We must first have compassion for ourselves. This is very important to remember, because sometimes we get into this thing of, "I'm supposed to completely forget about myself to be a great bodhisattva." But we can't forget about ourselves. We have to take care of ourselves, but in a wise way, not in a foolish, self-indulgent way. The foolish way of taking care of ourselves actually harms us.

Meditate on the twelve links in the forward order to see the evolution of cyclic existence. The forward order also shows us the way to attain liberation. In other words, when I realize emptiness directly, ignorance will cease. When ignorance ceases, there will be no more creation of karma that brings rebirth in cyclic existence. When these karmic formations cease, there will be no more causal consciousnesses. When there is no more causal consciousnesses, there will be no more name and form. Then there will be no more six sources. And then there will be no more contact. And there will be no more feeling. And

there will be no more craving. And there will be no more grasping.

You go through like this and see just how all twelve links vanish. You feel, “Fantastic! No more cyclic existence. No more confusion. No more taking one rebirth after another in a whirlwind of confusion. It all depends on just ceasing the ignorance.” That gives us clarity about how to cease cyclic existence.

When you meditate on the twelve links in this way, seeing how ceasing one link ceases the next, it is called meditating on the purified side, or the non-developing order. You are stopping one link to stop the next and so on.

The twelve links in reverse order

If we meditate on them in the reverse order, then we start with the last of the twelve links and go backwards. Death exists because there is aging. Aging exists because there is birth. Birth exists because there is becoming. Becoming exists because there is grasping. Grasping exists because there is craving. Craving exists because there is feeling. Feeling exists because there is contact. And you go backwards.

Start at the end, and work all the way back to the front. Death is definitely something that we don't enjoy very much. We start, “Death is a given in life. How does it come about?” This thing that upsets so many people, how does it come about? We start out considering death and meditate backwards. We see how death came about because of aging, and aging because of birth, and birth because of becoming, and we trace it backwards.

You could even start with the death of this lifetime. It hasn't happened yet, but you could think, “I'm going to experience death. I don't know when; the time is indefinite. How did this situation of having to die arise? Where did it come from? It came from aging. Aging came because I was born.” This is reality. It sounds simple. But really think about it: “I die because I was born.”

Another thing that came up today in the pastoral course on issues faced by people with a terminal illness, was “Why me? Why am I dying?” For Buddhists, the answer is very clear. Actually, for everybody, the answer shouldn't be a mystery. We die because we're born. It's very clear. Isn't it? [laughter]

I was telling you last week how this issue of getting angry at God comes up so much for Christians. “Why am I dying? Why is God doing this to me?” They have a lot confusion and anger. In Buddhism, the answer is we die because we are born. Why were we born? Because the karmic potency for that birth was ready to ripen. That seed was ready to pop into a sprout. How did the seed get so full? Because there was craving and grasping that watered it. And because there was a consciousness that it was set on. Because there was ignorance that created it. You start looking backwards. You trace it right back to ignorance, to the first of the twelve links.

Meditating in the reverse order means you start with the twelfth link and go backwards to see how the sequence of twelve links develops. This is also called meditating on the afflicted side, because you're seeing the evolution of cyclic existence.

Another way of looking at the twelve links in the reverse order is to say that if death has been ceased, it is because aging has been ceased. Aging has been ceased because birth has been ceased. Birth has been ceased because becoming has been ceased. Becoming has been ceased because grasping has been ceased. You trace it back that way, then you get a real sense of how if you want to cease death, it can come about by ceasing all the eleven links that came before it, the prime thing being ignorance.

Purpose of looking at the twelve links from different angles

All these different ways of meditating on the twelve links help very much to bring you a comprehensive understanding, although they are talking about the same thing. That is why I am spending time talking about how to look at the twelve links in terms of the Four Noble Truths, in terms of the afflictions*, in terms of causes and effects, in terms of going forward and being created, in terms of going forward and

not being created, in terms of looking at the last link and how that evolves from the beginning, and how not having the last link depends on not getting the preceding ones.

Look at it in all these different ways, making it a very personal thing and thinking about this very lifetime. Use your body and mind this lifetime as an example of the resultant links and see where they came from. Or, think about the karmas that you have created this lifetime and the different moments of ignorance and afflictions*, and then meditate forward and think of what they will produce in the future. Think about how to cease them by meditating in the reverse order. Don't make it intellectual. Make it very personal because then you will get some experience from the meditation. It will have a transformative effect on your mind and make you want to practice more.

We often face the problem of not having energy to do practice. We have so many other things that we have to do, "I've got to read this newspaper. It's much more important." So we do all these other things, and then we feel guilty because we don't practice. We are afraid to tell anybody else about it. We pretend that we practiced and we put on airs. We get real tangled up.

Why is it that we don't practice? It is basically because we don't have much motivation to practice. When we are motivated to do something, we will do them. When you want chocolate ice-cream, you go to the supermarket. It's very clear. When there's the motivation, you go. [laughter] When there is somebody you are very attracted to, whom you want a relationship with, you have plenty of energy to do it. When there is the motivation, we definitely act.

Here, we're meditating on the twelve links or the Four Noble Truths to give us that motivation to practice. It is useless to just sit there and tell ourselves, "I should practice. I ought to practice. I'm going to feel so embarrassed if I don't practice." That will not really get us to practice. Those thoughts make us feel guilty and uncomfortable with ourselves. But if we sit down and think deeply about the twelve links, we will want to practice. When we have a more accurate view of the kind of situation we are in and how sticky it is, then automatically, we will want to practice.

**[Audience:] In the case of a chocolate cake, we already know what it tastes like. In the case of liberation, we don't know what it tastes like. So it's hard to generate a strong motivation.
[laughter]**

Well, you may never have been to Tahiti, but you hear stories about how wonderful it is – nice beaches, good food. You have never been there, but you can certainly relate to the descriptions. Likewise, when we hear about liberation and it being an incredible, blissful, peaceful state, where you finally have freedom, where you finally have choice, where finally, you have some lasting and stable bliss and happiness, we can get some feeling of what that might be like even though we have never experienced it.

[In response to audience:] Right. When you see just what a mess cyclic existence is, then something has got to be better. [laughter]

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' and 'delusions'.