

**Transcript of the teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on
*Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, 2014***

Root text: *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* by Shantideva, translated by Toh Sze Gee. Copyright: Toh Sze Gee, 2006; Revised edition, 2014.

Lesson 25**8 May 2014**

Discussion on the twelve links of dependent origination.

Question: Of the two karmas of the twelve links (of dependent origination), can we say that:

- the actualising karma actualises uncontrolled rebirth in cyclic existence whereas
- the projecting karma projects either a higher or lower rebirth, i.e., a virtuous projecting karma for a higher rebirth and a non-virtuous projecting karma for a lower rebirth?

Furthermore the actualising karma only comes into play at the time of death whereas the projecting karma is accumulated during our entire lifetime?

Answer: Projecting karma is essentially like the seed from which the sprout appears. Without the seed, you are not going to have a sprout. This is the principal cause.

In order to address the question of whether a projecting karma is accumulated or not, you have to understand the discussion in the lam-rim on how karma is accumulated.

In order for karma to be accumulated, that karma has to be powerful or done over a period of time. There was a discussion you will recall of the permutations between karma that is accumulated and karma that is done. There were examples of karma that is both accumulated and done.

What determines the kind of rebirth you will take, be it good or bad, is primarily dependent on the projecting karma. In order to accumulate virtuous projecting karma, i.e., the cause for a good rebirth, the virtuous karma accumulated has to be powerful and strong and done consistently over a period of time.

This projecting karma will manifest as the actualising karma prior to death. According to the twelve links of dependent origination, prior to the manifestation of actualising karma before the time of death, that karma must be nourished by craving and grasping.

The questions I mentioned a few lessons ago was about these two points:

1. With regard to the nourishing of this actualising karma, when do craving and grasping come into play?
2. Is the desire or attachment of the desire realm necessarily non-virtuous?

Khen Rinpoche: Have you thought about this? Does anyone have any idea, especially the senior students? There was one lady who said she had the answer but she is not here today. I don't see her.

Actualising karma manifests prior to the time of death. Craving and grasping cause this karma to manifest. During death, the inner elements of the physical body undergo the dissolution process with the earth element dissolving into the water element, the water element dissolving into the fire element and so forth.

What I think is this: the craving and grasping arise and have to manifest during the first three stages of the entire death process. When craving arises, depending on which karma is stronger, virtuous or non-virtuous, there is the craving for a future existence. Perhaps this craving for a future existence relates less to craving for a particular or specific kind of body or existence but it is a general kind of craving that wants to take on an embodied existence again. There is this kind of craving.

What I am stating here is just my personal opinion. This is not stated in any texts.

After craving comes grasping, i.e., essentially a stronger form of attachment. The earlier craving for an embodied existence becomes much stronger. One is really wanting badly to get, i.e., grasp at, a particular kind of existence.

This is something that requires much thought. You have to think about this for yourself because you will not find any description or discussion of this in many of the texts pertaining to this topic.

At the time of grasping, there is this very strong desire or attachment that wants to be embodied again, i.e., to take on an existence again. One is wondering, "What rebirth will I get?" and this nourishes the karma.

This craving and grasping nourish the karma that was accumulated earlier, depending on whether it is virtuous or non-virtuous projecting karma. Whatever it is, craving and grasping give it strength and make it very powerful. Then one dies and goes on to the next life.

In the sutras, there is no further description beyond the dissolution of the elements. It is only in tantra that we talk about the later stages that make up the entire dissolution process, i.e., the stages of the white appearance, red increase, black near-attainment and so forth.

Whether you get a good rebirth or a bad rebirth, let's say if you are going to get a good rebirth, the primary cause of that is the seed, i.e., the projecting karma that was accumulated earlier. The primary cause for, say, a good rebirth is *not* craving and grasping. They are the conditions that nourish the primary cause, i.e., the seed or the karma that was accumulated earlier. So the primary cause of a good rebirth is *not* craving and grasping.

Khen Rinpoche: Are you listening? Contemplating? Thinking? This one, you really need to think. If you are interested, then I will talk more about it. Otherwise, I will leave it at

this.

The point is the primary cause of a good rebirth is virtuous projecting karma, not craving and grasping.

As to whether the attachment of the desire realm is necessarily non-virtuous or not, this is also something that we can think about. According to the Hinayana tenets, the *Abidharmakosha* (or *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*), the attachment of the desire realm is necessarily non-virtuous. It is stated very clearly in the *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge* that afflictions such as ignorance, the view of the transitory collection, could be unspecified. This means it can be neither virtuous nor non-virtuous. But it is stated very clearly in that text that all the other afflictions are *necessarily* non-virtuous.

Ignorance, the first of the twelve links of dependent origination, can be said to be unspecified. So the projecting karma that is accumulated is karma that is propelled or motivated by this ignorance which is unspecified. Based on this, there is nothing wrong in saying that craving and grasping can nourish a virtuous projecting karma.

In the Hinayana tenets, when we look at texts like the *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*, the afflictions such as the attachment of the desire realm are necessarily non-virtuous. This is clearly stated.

But when we look at the *Treatises of the Middle Way*, the Mahayana tenets, it is not so clear-cut. It is mentioned in those teachings that there can be instances of attachment that is an apprehension of true existence. As such, I think perhaps one can say that the attachment of the desire realm is *not* necessarily non-virtuous.

Would it be all right then to say that it is possible to have an attachment of the desire realm that is unspecified?

Anyway I am just sharing with you my personal opinion. No one can say for sure, "This is it."

Khen Rinpoche: Are you happy with what I have said? If you are not happy, you must rebut, "What you have said, this is not correct!"

Question: When you are talking about unspecified karma, based on the example of an attachment that is an apprehension of true existence, how does this fall into the general division given in the *Lam-rim Chenmo* of contaminated and uncontaminated karma? In this case, is there the possibility here that contaminated virtuous karma can throw one into a rebirth in the desire realm?

Answer: The discussion on projecting karma in the context of the twelve links of dependent origination is necessarily contaminated karma. Look at the process of how projecting karma is accumulated, motivated by the ignorance of the twelve links of dependent origination.

In short, contaminated karma is the karma that is accumulated, motivated by

ignorance.

Khen Rinpoche: I translate for him! Ven. Gyurme is asking what kind of karma it takes to be able to take rebirth in the pure land? Do you not need karma to be reborn in the pure land? Is it contaminated karma or uncontaminated karma?

(Student's response is inaudible).

Student: I have a problem with Amitabha pure land! Due to the power of the prayers of Amitabha Buddha, he promised that whoever recalls his name, recites his sutra and visualises ...

Khen Rinpoche: Essentially you are saying that to be born in Amitabha's pure land is a result of karma and that karma was motivated by ignorance. Are you saying that?

Student: Yes.

Khen Rinpoche: So it follows that the body of the sentient being in the pure land is true suffering?

Student: Yes.

Khen Rinpoche: It follows that there is suffering in Amitabha's pure land.

Khen Rinpoche: Is there suffering in Amitabha's pure land?

Student: No.

Khen Rinpoche: Why do we have suffering?

Student: The person (in the pure land) has no gross suffering—no suffering of suffering and no suffering of change—but he still has pervasive compounded suffering.

Khen Rinpoche: Why do we have suffering?

Student: Due to our karma and delusions.

Khen Rinpoche: In Amitabha's pure land, there are karma and delusions?

Student: Yes. There are some sentient beings reborn in Amitabha's pure land who still have karma and delusions.

Khen Rinpoche: So they have suffering?

Student: Yes.

Khen Rinpoche: They are the same as us? No difference? Then we may as well just stay here instead of going there!

Student: Just now I was joking.

Khen Rinpoche: *Joking? You joke with me? (Laughter).*

Student: I will go back and do prostrations!

Question: Is the attachment to inherent existence an unspecified attachment that is neither virtuous nor non-virtuous?

Let us say I pray to have a precious human rebirth. Whatever I do in this lifetime, I dedicate the merit to have a precious human rebirth in my next life. But while I am making this dedication, I have no understanding of emptiness. My prayer is fully contaminated thinking that there is an inherently existent next life. It is a dedication made with a mind that is grasping at true existence.

Will such a dedication result in virtuous karma or result in a precious human rebirth with a mind still grasping at inherent existence?

Khen Rinpoche: *I don't know what you are saying. You are saying something like, "In order to achieve a precious human rebirth, you need to realise emptiness?" You are saying something like that?*

Student: Not necessarily.

Khen Rinpoche: *Then I think you got the answer already.*

Khen Rinpoche: It is clearly stated in the teachings that the ignorance of the twelve links of dependent origination is unspecified.

But the karma that is motivated by this ignorance can be virtuous or non-virtuous. There are varieties. This is clearly stated in the explanation of the twelve links by the Svatantrika-Madhyamika (Autonomy Middle Way School).

My earlier question was whether craving and grasping are necessarily non-virtuous or not. According to the Hinayana tenets, they are necessarily non-virtuous. Craving and grasping belong to the desire realm. This means that the attachment of the desire realm is necessarily non-virtuous.

But when you bring the Mahayana tenets into the picture, perhaps you could say that the attachment of the desire realm is not necessarily non-virtuous.

According to the Middle Way Consequence School, there seems to be a discussion of an attachment that is the apprehension of true existence. As such, based on my personal opinion, perhaps you could say that an attachment of the desire realm is not necessarily non-virtuous. These are just my personal thoughts.

The reason I asked you the question is this: when we assert craving and grasping to be necessarily non-virtuous, in the case of someone who is going to get a good rebirth, what they nourish is nevertheless a virtuous projecting karma. Even if

craving and grasping are non-virtuous, is there a problem in saying that they can nourish a virtuous projecting karma? This is why I brought up this issue for discussion.

We can substantiate and justify that craving and grasping, even if they are non-virtuous, can act as the conditions for a good rebirth. The main or primary cause of a good rebirth is virtuous projecting karma, not craving and grasping.

The karma that throws us into the next rebirth is the projecting karma. This can be virtuous or non-virtuous. Which karma will ripen earlier?

- The stronger of the two will ripen earlier.
- If both are of equal strength, the karma that one is more familiar with will ripen first.
- If one is equally familiar with both, then the karma that was created earlier will ripen.

Depending on which karma is stronger, virtuous or non-virtuous, correspondingly, you have craving and grasping.

Let us say that you are going to get a good rebirth. At the time craving arises, you have a desire and a craving to have a future existence.

Can we then say that at the time when grasping arises, there is also a desire for a *specific* kind of existence?

So craving and grasping nourishes the karma and activates it. When it is fully potentialised, you are definitely going to a particular rebirth.

Khen Rinpoche: What do you think? Are you happy with that? You have to think at the next level and not just stop here.

In the case of someone who is going to get a good rebirth, at the time when there is grasping, let us say that there is a desire for a particular good rebirth. Do you accept that? If you accept that, then you also have to accept that the same thing will apply for someone who is going to the lower realms.

For someone who is going to the lower realms, when there is craving and grasping, he is thinking, “I want to go to the lower realms. I want to get this hell body. I want to get this hungry ghost body.” Does such thoughts arise or not?

Khen Rinpoche: That is the question. It never ends. You think that happens? When there is craving, at that time, do you think like that? No? You said no?

Why can't that happen? Your karma forces you to think like that.

(Response from student is inaudible).

For those who are going to the lower realms, do they have the thought, “I want to go to the lower realms”?

Khen Rinpoche: I speak like a Singaporean now. Have or don't have? Easier to communicate!

(Response from student is inaudible).

Student: Don't have! How can there be a craving for an existence to be burned in the hells when we cannot even imagine the fires in the hells? How can we crave for a potential existence that we cannot even imagine?

Khen Rinpoche: You don't have craving at that time? There is no craving?

Student: I think there is the craving for the experience of warmth when one feels cold and that nourishes the particular projecting karma for rebirth in the hell realms. You are not craving for a specific hell existence. It is just the experience of wanting warmth.

Khen Rinpoche: But how does that nourish the particular karma to be born in the hell realms? When you are reborn as a human, you can also feel hot, yes?

Student: I don't know but maybe you crave for a human existence before you experience it. But I cannot imagine that we will crave for a hell existence that entails burning in the hells for hundreds of ...

Khen Rinpoche: Why not? The question is why not?

Student: Because all sentient beings want happiness and do not want suffering. Not everyone is a masochist and there are so many hell beings.

Ven Gyurme: We are asking, is it possible or not?

Student: I mean it is possible but we are saying that this is the experience for a large number of hell beings. There cannot be so many masochists in the world. I may have an explanation of how the nourishing of the karma works.

Khen Rinpoche: First you answer this, "When does the nourishing of the karma take place?" At which age? At eighty years? One year before the time of death?

Student: I don't know. My explanation is like this. Let us say it is attachment. I have an attachment towards a lady. I crave her. Then grasping follows. In a way, this is a kind of craving and grasping.

In my past life, I have committed acts of sexual misconduct and they produce seeds in my mind. At that moment of time, since I have these seeds that are about to bear fruit, my craving and grasping for this lady actually nourishes these seeds. This experience is the same as the fruitional effect. It brings the karmic seeds to fruition. This is how craving and grasping actually nourishes ...

Khen Rinpoche: The example is actually quite nice. Now you apply that to the meaning, ok?

Student: Similarly, at the point of time when I am about to die, for some reason, I feel cold so I crave and grasp for warmth. This nourishes the seed that I had created to be reborn in a hell realm. The experience is the same.

I feel that it cannot be a specific hell experience that one is craving for. To crave for a hell existence that is like living in the sun, so hot that one is melting? It is difficult to imagine that one would crave for that kind of existence at the time of death.

Khen Rinpoche: You are saying that if a person is going to take rebirth in the human realm, he doesn't have any craving for heat or cold? Are you saying that? So when there is the craving for heat and cold, one must go to the lower realms? Your idea is something like that? Not necessarily so, right?

Student: Then what do you crave for in order to be reborn as a human being?

Khen Rinpoche: Even if you were to have a human rebirth, sometimes you can crave for heat or cold. It is possible, is it not? It is not necessarily so that if at the time of death, you grasp at heat or you grasp at cold, then you will go to the lower realms. I don't think so.

At the time of death, if you were to feel hungry, that does not mean that you will go to the realm of the hungry ghosts. It is not necessarily so. When you feel hungry now, you do not go to the lower realms!

Your example is good but when you transfer it to the meaning, it does not match.

Isn't it all determined by karma? So then there is no point in remembering your guru. There is no point in remembering the Buddha. There is no point in remembering the Three Jewels. It is fixed already. Your karma throws you in that direction and there is nothing you can do about it.

Khen Rinpoche: At the time of death, whatever virtue you can think of, it doesn't change (the rebirth you will take), is that right? That is not likely to change.

What are you going to say if someone were to say to you, "Your karma decides everything. What is the point then of generating virtue at the time of death?" What will your answer be? Since your karma decides everything, even if you were to generate virtue at the time of death, can it change the outcome or not?

Student: Even if you have the negative karma, you can cut off your craving and grasping so that they do not come to fruition. In that way, you can actually control the outcome.

Student 2: I remembered a story about a great lama who had great compassion for everyone, especially the beings of the lower realms. He wanted to take rebirth in the lower realms but he dreamt that he would go directly to the pure land. Even though he desired and was attached to the lower realms, somehow his karma propelled him to liberation and enlightenment.

Answer: What you said actually supported the position that it is not our wish but our karma that will determine where we go. Everything is determined by karma.

This lama had the wish to go to the lower realms to help sentient beings but because he did not have the karma to go to the lower realms, therefore he did not go to the lower realms. So it is all determined by karma.

Without the strong karma that will propel one into the lower realms, even if one were to have the wish to go to the lower realms, one will not go to the lower realms. But if one had both the strong non-virtuous karma to go to the lower realms and if one were to have the wish to go there, one will go there.

From this, it is clear that the main deciding factor is karma—whether you have the karma or not. Is that not so? You accept that?

(Student's reply is inaudible).

There is no need for you to state this because I believe it is very clear in the text that just having the karma alone is not sufficient. In order for it to ripen, it must be activated by craving and grasping. Nobody is disputing that.

The two primary causes of cyclic existence are karma and afflictions. From the text, of the two, the afflictions are the principal. Without the afflictions that nourish the karmic seed, no matter what karma you have, it would not be activated and it cannot be ripened. Nobody is saying that just because you have the seed, you would definitely have a sprout.

Khen Rinpoche: You still need to put water. You know how to do gardening? You don't put your seed on the table and wish for it to grow. It wouldn't grow.

Some things that you need to think about:

- What does craving nourish?
- What does grasping nourish?
- What is their manner of nourishing?
- Is there a difference in the way they nourish karma?
- Can we say that the difference in their manner of nourishing karma is this—craving nourishes it in a general way and grasping nourishes it in a specific way?

I guess perhaps it is all right to say that when there is single-pointed faith in the guru or in the Three Jewels, it can change things. Perhaps we can say that that is an exception to the rule. Generally speaking, as a rule, karma dictates everything. But in the case of someone generating single-pointed faith in the guru or in the Three Jewels, then those are exceptions. This is where the power of the object comes into play.

In the lam-rim, we talked about the power of the object. The teachings mention that in most cases:

- When the motivation is non-virtuous, the action is non-virtuous.
- When the motivation is virtuous, the action is virtuous.

This is the general rule that is applicable to almost all situations. What differentiates non-virtue from virtue is the quality of the mind, i.e., whether the mind was non-virtuous or virtuous.

It is mentioned clearly in the *Lam-rim Chenmo* by Je Rinpoche that when the power of the object comes into play, that is the exception. This means regardless of your motivation behind making offerings to the Buddha, constructing holy objects and so forth, even if the motivation is non-virtuous, the karma becomes virtuous due to the power of the object. This is the exception.

Khen Rinpoche: You understand what I just said? Do you get the point that I am driving at?

The essential point is this: At the time of death, if we can remember the guru, if we can remember the Buddha, then that can change the karma.

Question: Among the four divisions of craving, which is virtuous, which is non-virtuous and which is unspecified?

Answer: In the explanation of craving and grasping, different kinds of craving are mentioned. There is:

1. the craving for the goal
2. the craving for existence
3. the craving for the view

Grasping is like clinging on to something.

Maybe there isn't a division of these different forms of craving into virtuous and non-virtuous. It is stated very clearly in the lower *Abhidharma*, i.e., the *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*, that the attachment of the desire realms is necessarily non-virtuous.

Question: If a little baby dies, he doesn't have a consciousness that is able to properly think of virtue or non-virtue. There is also no holy objects around for him to see. Where will he go?

Answer: The rule of thumb is that whether it is a good rebirth or a bad rebirth, it is all dependent on karma. When we talk about karma, which is:

- heavier?
- more familiar?
- created earlier?

So what determines the rebirth is which karma is heavier.

If both karmas are equally heavy, then which karma are you more familiar with?

If you are equally familiar with both, then which karma was created earlier?

The karma that will ripen is the heavier of the two—virtuous and non-virtuous karma. If they are equally heavy, the next criteria is the karma that one is more

familiar with. Whatever manifests at the time of death is likely to be the karma that one is more familiar with.

Student: There are four permutations.

Khen Rinpoche: What is number four?

Student: According to the *Lamrim Chenmo*, the four are: (1) weighty (2) what is manifest (3) what is familiar (4) what is created first.

Khen Rinpoche: Generally, of the two—virtuous or non-virtuous karma:

- The heavier of the two will ripen.
- If they are equal in weight, the one you are more familiar with will ripen first.
- If you are equally familiar with virtuous and non-virtuous karma, then the karma that you created earlier will ripen.

I think it is only these three.

Khen Rinpoche: I don't remember.

Back to taking rebirth in a pure land. For ordinary beings like ourselves to be born in a pure land, we must have accumulated the karma to be born there. Of course whatever the karma is, it is impelled by ignorance. Then you accumulate the karma. That karma would have to be nourished by craving and grasping. Of course, there are many other conditions that are necessary before one can get the result of going to the pure land.

First, one must have accumulated very strong and powerful virtuous karma without which there is no basis to be reborn there. For us ordinary beings, the way we accumulate karma necessarily involves ignorance. Ignorance is always there.

Then at the time of death, there must be very strong craving and grasping to be born in a particular pure land. You need that strong wish. Once you get yourself there, you are still an ordinary being. It is said that there are ordinary beings in the pure land, i.e., ordinary beings who have not entered any paths. Of course, you will also find hearers, solitary realisers, bodhisattvas and all kinds of people there. It is also said that in the pure land, there is no non-virtue and there is no suffering.

Khen Rinpoche: How nice!

Are there afflictions in the pure land? Is there attachment in the pure land?

(Student's response is inaudible).

When you are reborn in the pure land and you see all these beautiful palaces and beautiful goddesses, does attachment arise or not?

Actually I don't know much about the pure land.

Question: It is said in some texts that for ordinary beings who are born in the pure land, it is more difficult for them to develop bodhicitta? Can this be due to attachment arising?

Khen Rinpoche: Not necessarily so.

When there is no suffering in the pure land, won't it be very difficult to generate renunciation? If you cannot generate renunciation, how are you going to generate bodhicitta?

Khen Rinpoche: Is this true? You must listen carefully to what he (Ven. Gyurme) said.

It is clear that there is no suffering in the pure land. Because there is no suffering, you cannot generate renunciation. When you cannot generate renunciation, it is going to be very difficult to generate bodhicitta.

Ven. Gyurme to Khen Rinpoche: It follows then that going to the pure land is an obstacle for generating bodhicitta.

Khen Rinpoche: It is not impossible but it just takes a long time.

Ven. Gyurme to Khen Rinpoche: How long?

Khen Rinpoche: There is no time limit. Not one year, not ten years. You have to develop renunciation, then bodhicitta and then you get enlightened there. Without renunciation, without bodhicitta, you wouldn't get enlightened. Only it takes a long period of time.

Question: There are ordinary beings in the pure land. Therefore there are still non-manifest afflictions in the minds of these ordinary beings. Therefore would it not follow that in the pure land there is suffering?

Khen Rinpoche: You are not listening. I told you from the beginning that in the pure land, there is no suffering.

Question: To me, the state of people in the pure land is like people who have attained calm-abiding. Their afflictions are temporarily suppressed. However since they have not realised emptiness, the seeds of the afflictions are still there. Therefore there is still pervasive compounded suffering?

Answer: Whether they have pervasive compounded suffering or not remains to be examined. It is said that people who are born in the pure land attain the five super-knowledges simply by virtue of being born there. If that is the case, this suggests that such people automatically have calm-abiding.

It is also stated clearly in the teachings that once one is born in the pure land, one will never be reborn in any inopportune state.

Khen Rinpoche: Today we never read the text. Anyway, it is good to think about the

twelve links. Sometimes they look easy but when you think about them more deeply, so many questions arise in the mind. Even I have so many questions but there is no book to read to find the answers. I also don't know who I can ask.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Vivien Ng & Aki Yeo; edited by Cecilia Tsong.