

Chapter 22. The Attitude of a Person of Intermediate Scope

This chapter delves into the mindset required for practitioners who aim to transcend the cyclic existence of samsara but have not yet committed to the altruistic motivations of a bodhisattva.

1. The Measure of Renunciation

The essence of this attitude is renunciation—the deep-seated, spontaneous desire to achieve liberation from samsara’s sufferings. To cultivate genuine renunciation:

- One must fully understand the nature of suffering (*dukkha*) and its causes, particularly through the twelve links of dependent origination.
- This leads to an urgent desire to escape samsara, akin to fleeing a burning house.

The text emphasises that superficial or temporary feelings of renunciation are insufficient. True renunciation should permeate one's mind and actions effortlessly, arising spontaneously from a profound understanding of samsara’s dangers.

2. The Danger of Superficial Renunciation

Geshe Sharawa uses the metaphor of barley flour on beer to illustrate superficial renunciation—it floats but doesn’t penetrate. Similarly:

- A shallow understanding of suffering might inspire renunciation temporarily, but this fades quickly if it doesn’t reach the depths of the practitioner’s heart.
- Without genuine renunciation, deeper realisations like compassion and bodhicitta remain intellectual rather than transformative.

3. The Necessity of Intermediate Practices

Renunciation is foundational, not optional, even for Mahayana practitioners. The meditations on suffering and dependent origination are essential steps on the path, preparing the practitioner for the altruistic commitments of the bodhisattva. Without renunciation, even lofty Mahayana aspirations become hollow.

4. Clarifying Misconceptions

The chapter addresses misunderstandings, particularly the idea that renunciation is only for Hinayana practitioners. Some argue that:

- Bodhisattvas should not focus on samsara’s faults because their work lies within it.
- Meditating on samsara’s suffering might lead to seeking personal peace instead of helping others.

The text clarifies that:

- Bodhisattvas do meditate deeply on samsara’s miseries to cultivate compassion and resolve to help others.
- Their engagement with samsara is not due to attachment but out of compassion and wisdom, choosing to help sentient beings.

5. The Courage of Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattvas:

- Embrace the miseries of samsara with joy because it allows them to serve others.
- Are compared to soldiers wearing armour—they endure suffering with determination for the sake of others.
- Do not fear cyclic existence; instead, they willingly reenter it to guide others toward liberation.

6. The Interplay of Renunciation and Compassion

The chapter emphasises that genuine bodhisattvas:

- Develop an even greater disenchantment with samsara than Hinayana practitioners because they vividly see its faults and impact on all beings.

- Use this disenchantment to fuel their compassion, seeing all beings as interconnected and deserving of liberation.

7. Tantric Perspective

The thought of renunciation is indispensable in all Buddhist paths, including Vajrayana. The tantric mandala's cemetery symbolises death, impermanence, and renunciation, signifying that one must fully understand samsara's nature before progressing.

8. Resolving Apparent Contradictions

While bodhisattvas find joy in cyclic existence, this joy stems from opportunities to benefit others, not from attachment. Their deep awareness of samsara's faults fuels their determination to help beings trapped within it.

Key Takeaways

- Renunciation is not a rejection of samsara out of fear but a profound understanding of its suffering and an aspiration to end it.
- True renunciation is transformative, spontaneous, and unshakable, forming the gateway to liberation.
- Bodhisattvas embrace samsara not due to attachment but out of compassion and altruistic intent to free others.
- Even the highest Mahayana and Vajrayana paths require renunciation as their foundation.

This chapter weaves a powerful narrative about the necessity of renunciation and its role in the Mahayana path, clarifying that renunciation and compassion are inseparable tools for transcending samsara while helping others.

Chapter 23. Ascertaining the Nature of the Path Leading to Liberation

Chapter 23 from *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment* focuses on the path leading to liberation from samsara (cyclic existence). It elaborates on the necessary attitudes, practices, and insights required for this journey.

1. Nature of Cyclic Existence

- **The Yogic Perspective:** Yogis see samsara as an endless ocean of suffering. Most beings, however, remain blind to this reality, distracted by fleeting pleasures.
- **Unstable Nature of Samsara:** Like the moon's reflection in water, samsara is unsteady and deceptive. Desirable objects are likened to the shadow of a coiled snake—dangerous despite their allure.
- **Nausea with Samsara:** Just as a child might tire of endless preparations of a disliked food, practitioners must develop deep aversion to samsara, seeing all experiences as inherently unsatisfactory.

2. Essential Attitude: Renunciation

- Renunciation arises from profound recognition of samsara's faults and impermanence.
- True renunciation is not superficial but a deep, heartfelt determination to end the cycle of birth and death.
- Nāgārjuna stresses the urgency of ending rebirth, even comparing it to extinguishing a fire on one's head.

3. Path to Liberation

The journey to liberation requires destroying samsara's two causes: **karma** and **afflictions**.

- **Afflictions (kleshas):** These are the primary roots of samsara, including ignorance, attachment, and aversion.
- **Karma without afflictions:** Like a dry seed, it cannot yield the fruits of samsaric rebirth.

To remove these causes, one must follow the **three trainings**:

- a) **Ethical Conduct (Śīla):** The foundation of all progress. Ethical discipline restrains the mind and creates the stability needed for further practices.
- b) **Concentration (Samādhi):** Develops a calm and focused mind, allowing for meditative equipoise.
- c) **Wisdom (Prajñā):** Direct insight into the nature of reality, cutting through ignorance, the root of afflictions.

These three trainings encompass the entire path to liberation and are essential for achieving nirvana.

4. The Value of Human Life

- Human life is uniquely suited for Dharma practice, endowed with eight freedoms (freedom from obstacles to practice) and ten endowments (favorable conditions for practice).

- Nāgārjuna highlights that without obstacles like being born in lower realms or in places without Dharma, practitioners must seize this rare opportunity to end samsara.

5. Ordained Life as an Ideal Path

- **Benefits of Ordination:** Renunciates avoid many distractions and hindrances faced by laypeople. With fewer worldly concerns, they can dedicate their lives fully to practice.
- **Disadvantages of Lay Life:** Lay practitioners are often entangled in material pursuits, familial obligations, and worldly conflicts, making Dharma practice more difficult.
- **Simplicity and Contentment:** Renunciates embody satisfaction with minimal needs, allowing them to focus entirely on liberation. Their example inspires others and generates merit.

6. The Three Trainings in Detail

a. Ethical Conduct

- Ethical discipline is like containing a wild elephant, setting boundaries for body, speech, and mind.
- It prevents harm and lays the groundwork for concentration and wisdom.

b. Concentration

- Concentration stabilises the mind, making it pliable and capable of deep meditation.
- It temporarily suppresses afflictions, creating the mental clarity needed for wisdom.

c. Wisdom

- Wisdom directly eliminates ignorance, the root cause of samsara.
- By seeing reality as it is—impermanent, dependent, and empty of inherent self—practitioners overcome attachment and aversion.

7. Interdependence of the Three Trainings

- Ethical conduct supports concentration by taming the mind and reducing distractions.
- Concentration supports wisdom by providing the stability necessary for insight.
- Wisdom completes the path by uprooting ignorance and achieving liberation.

The progression is sequential: without ethical conduct, there is no concentration; without concentration, wisdom cannot arise.

8. Aspiration for Liberation

- Aspiring for liberation involves a blend of urgency, renunciation, and wisdom.
- Renunciates aim not for material comforts but for freedom from the endless cycle of suffering.
- Nāgārjuna and other teachings stress the importance of seizing this rare human life to pursue the ultimate goal.

Key Takeaways

- Liberation from samsara is urgent and requires ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom.

- Human life is precious and offers the best opportunity for practice, but it must be used wisely.
- Renunciation is central to the path, whether one is a layperson or an ordained practitioner.
- The ultimate realisation involves seeing all phenomena as impermanent, interdependent, and empty of inherent existence, thereby cutting the root of suffering.

This chapter underscores the importance of disciplined practice and the urgency of pursuing liberation, offering both philosophical insights and practical guidance for the path.

Chapter 24: The Nature of the Three Trainings

This chapter elaborates on the *three trainings*—ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom—foundational elements on the Buddhist path that lead to liberation and enlightenment. It concentrates mainly on **Ethical Conduct**.

1. The Three Trainings and Their Interconnection

The three trainings build upon each other:

- a) **Ethical Conduct (Śīla)** forms the foundation for taming the mind.
- b) **Concentration (Samādhi)** stabilises the mind to engage in deep meditation.
- c) **Wisdom (Prajñā)** is the insight that eliminates ignorance, the root cause of samsara.

2. Ethical Conduct

Ethical conduct has six branches, which ensure a disciplined and virtuous life:

- a) **Refraining from the Ten Non-Virtues** and practicing the Ten Virtuous Actions.
- b) **Taking Vows of Liberation** as a commitment to virtuous behaviour.
- c) **Rituals** such as confession ceremonies and formal observances that reinforce discipline.
- d) **Maintaining a Pure Environment** by avoiding places or company that lead to harmful actions.
- e) **Viewing Small Infractions Seriously**, recognising their potential to grow into significant harm.
- f) **Studying and Practicing Teachings** on ethical conduct to deepen understanding.

The chapter highlights that maintaining pure ethical conduct is not optional but essential, whether as a layperson or an ordained practitioner. Ethical behaviour is both a safeguard against harm and the fertile ground for spiritual progress.

3. Concentration (The Four Blissful Abodes)

Concentration refers to meditative absorptions (dhyānas) that bring mental peace and stability:

- The four levels of concentration provide increasingly subtle experiences of bliss and tranquility.
- Mastery of concentration suppresses the mental afflictions temporarily, creating the calm necessary for insight.
- Without achieving at least one level of these absorptions, higher realisations on the Buddhist path are impossible.

4. Wisdom (The Four Noble Truths and Their Aspects)

Wisdom involves understanding and directly realising the Four Noble Truths, each with four aspects:

- 1) **The Truth of Suffering:** Impermanent, suffering, empty, selfless.
- 2) **The Truth of the Cause of Suffering:** Cause, origin, arising, condition.
- 3) **The Truth of Cessation:** Cessation, pacification, excellence, freedom.
- 4) **The Truth of the Path:** Path, correctness, achievement, deliverance.

Realising these aspects cuts the root of samsara, leading to liberation.

5. The Importance of Ethical Conduct

Ethical conduct is likened to:

- A foundation upon which all virtues are built.
- A bridge crossing samsara to liberation.
- A shield against the afflictions that perpetuate suffering.

The Buddha's teachings stress that even minor transgressions of vows can lead to severe karmic consequences. Thus, confession and purification are essential practices for repairing breaches in conduct.

6. Combatting the Afflictions (Your Inner Enemies)

The chapter identifies six primary afflictions—attachment, hostility, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views—and provides methods to counter them:

- **Mindfulness** and **introspective awareness** act as sentinels guarding against afflictions.
- **Antidotes** such as meditating on impermanence, love, or emptiness help weaken and eventually uproot these mental poisons.

7. Ethical Conduct in Tantric Practice

In tantra, ethical conduct remains foundational. Practitioners must:

- Uphold vows of individual liberation and bodhisattva vows.
- Observe tantric vows with added diligence, as they provide the basis for spiritual attainments.

8. Practical Advice and Inspiration

The chapter concludes with reflections from great masters like Atiśa and Kadampa geshe:

- The root of progress lies in ethical conduct and the daily battle against afflictions.
- Practicing discipline in degenerate times brings even greater merit.
- A steadfast commitment to vows and ethical purity safeguards one's path to enlightenment.

Key Takeaways

- The three trainings—ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom—are indispensable and interdependent.
- Ethical conduct forms the basis for mental and spiritual progress, without which higher practices falter.
- Vigilance against afflictions ensures that one's practice remains undisturbed and effective.
- Even in challenging times, maintaining ethical discipline can yield profound spiritual benefits.

This chapter emphasises the foundational role of ethical conduct in achieving lasting inner peace and freedom from samsara. The teachings serve as a practical guide to aligning behaviour with Dharma principles.