Golden Light Sutra Study Series
Chapter 5 • Purification of Karmic Obscurations

Root text: Golden Light Sutra, Chapter 5 — Purification of Karmic Obscurations
Translation: Dharma Publishing, 1984 (revised 2000) · Study guide: Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Ethics of Purification, 1984
Transcribed for personal and public use in Dharma

Confession is an honest acknowledgment and sincere regret for harm caused through body, speech or mind. It is made in the presence of the field of merit (Buddhas, bodhisattvas, etc to provide guidance and safety)—not to a divine judge who can erase karma, but as a truthful recognition of our actions and their consequences. Confession opens the door to purification, ethical stability, application of remedies, a realistic resolve not to repeat the harm, and appropriate reparation where possible.
It is therefore not merely saying, "I have done wrong; forgive me"; others may forgive us personally, but no external being can absolve our karma—the causes of purification must be created through our own change of mind and conduct.

Emptiness makes confession and purification possible because neither the person, the harmful action nor its karmic effects exist as fixed, independent realities. Karma ripens in dependent relations, and therefore can be weakened through confession, restraint, reparation, virtue, compassion and wisdom—can change the karmic trajectory. Emptiness does not mean that the action never happened or has no consequences: conventionally, karma ripens and harm is real.
It means that neither our identity nor our karma is permanently set, so genuine transformation is possible.

1. Orientation

- Place in the textual tradition
  - Distinctive to the longer Golden Light traditions
  - Absent from the 21-chapter recension
  - Not the 21-chapter Chapter 5, The Source of Lotuses
  - Closely related to the Independent sutra Putting an End to Karmic Obscurations
  - Differences in framing and translation remain important
- Character of the chapter
  - Analytical
  - Ethical
  - Confessional
  - Mahayana
  - Concerned with Dharma preservation
  - Illuminated by dependent arising and emptiness
- Central questions
  - What is a karmic obscuration?
  - How does it obstruct practice?
  - How can it be purified?
  - Who purifies what?
  - How can karma function if all is empty?
- Core message
  Karmic obscurations are powerful but not permanent; they can be weakened through confession, restraint, virtue, bodhicitta, and wisdom—our karmic inheritance supporting conditions.

2. What Is Karmic Obscuration?

- Not a material substance
  - Not stored as a physical stain
  - Not an unchanging moral essence
  - Not imposed by a creator
  - It is a dependent continuum of potentials and effects
- Obstructive effects
  - Painful experiences
  - Strengthened afflictive habits
  - Dulled moral sensitivity
  - Difficulty creating virtue
  - Unfavourable circumstances
  - Obstacles to concentration
  - Obstacles to insight
  - Separation from teachers and Dharma
  - Fear, remorse, confusion, and discouragement
  - Reinforcement of self-centred perception
- Two dimensions
  - Consequential
    - Produces experiences and circumstances
  - Conditioning
    - Shapes the mind brought to experience
- Obstacles across the path
  - Not meeting Dharma
  - Meeting it without interest
  - Interest without sustained practice
  - Practice obstructed by powerful habits
  - Loss of favourable conditions later
- Diagnostic questions
  - What repeatedly pulls me away from Dharma?
  - What makes virtue feel difficult?
  - Which affliction distorts my interpretation most?
  - What conditions reinforce it?

3. Karma Is Not Fate

- Historical fact
  - The action occurred
  - Its effects on others matter
  - It cannot be made never to have happened
- Karmic trajectory
  - Potential continues dependently
  - Ripening requires conditions
  - Later intentions and actions alter conditions
  - Tendencies can weaken or strengthen
- New helpful causal factors
  - Regret
  - Restraint
  - Confession
  - Refuge
  - Bodhicitta
  - Virtuous action
  - Hearing and reciting Dharma
  - Meditation
  - Wisdom
  - Dedication
- Possible effects of purification
  - A heavy karma may be weakened
  - Duration may shorten
  - Intensity may lessen
  - Ripening may become manageable
  - Tendency to repeat may diminish
  - Some potential may be fully purified
- Avoid certainty claims
  - Ordinary practitioners cannot measure invisible purification precisely
  - Dramatic experiences are not reliable proof
  - Action and conduct - not just good thoughts and good intentions
  - Look for transformed conduct and mind

4. Especially Difficult Obscurations

Three practices that purify especially difficult karmic obscurations: Refuge, Vajra Mind, and Vajrasattva mantra

- Obstacle to encountering Dharma
  - No access to teaching
  - No contact with qualified guides
  - Circumstances hostile to practice
- Obstacle of hostility or lack of faith
  - Meet Dharma but reject it reflexively
  - Distort liberating teachings
  - Discourage others from practice
- Obstacle to creating virtue
  - Chronic distraction
  - Discouragement
  - Strong contrary habits
  - Lack of conscientiousness
- Obstacle of unfavourable state or rebirth
  - Little freedom or opportunity
  - Overwhelming suffering
  - Mental states incompatible with reflection
  - Distance from Dharma conditions
- Practical response
  - Rejoice that Dharma is presently available
  - Use access now
  - Create causes to meet Dharma again
  - Help make teachings available to others
  - Avoid judging those without present receptivity

5. Hearing, Retaining, and Preserving the Sutra

- Forms of engagement
  - Hear
  - Read
  - Study and reflection
  - Recite
  - Remember
  - Retain
  - Explain appropriately
  - Copy and preserve
  - Support transmission
  - Put teaching into conduct
- How hearing changes causes
  The power of hearing sacred words is valued either in magic or in ordinary information transfer. Buddhism locates it in ethics, intention, wholesome attention, faith, bodhicitta, and wisdom.
  - Contact with liberating truth
  - Recollection of Buddha
  - Wholesome mental impressions
  - Increased moral attention
  - Motivation to abandon harm
  - Motivation to cultivate virtue
  - Connection with Mahayana
  - Future conditions for understanding
- Lama Zopa practice lens
  - Listening directs life toward enlightenment
  - Reading becomes a source of merit
  - Recitation can be dedicated for many beings
  - Motivation determines spiritual scope
  - Let words lead to changed conduct
- Avoid mechanical thinking
  - Words alone are not a licence to continue harm
  - Attention and intention matter
  - Ethics and repair belong with recitation
  - Traditional benefits may exceed currently observable mechanisms

6. Repeated Confession

- Three times by day and three times by night
  - Traditional rhythm of repeated recollection
  - Counters forgetfulness
  - Makes moral awareness continuous
  - Interrupts accumulation of harmful patterns
  - Renews refuge and bodhicitta
- Contemporary adaptations
  - Morning, midday, and evening
  - Brief review after major periods
  - One full and several short sessions
  - Regularity over unsustainable intensity
  - Return without guilt after interruption
- Morning
  - Refuge and bodhicitta
  - Recall one pattern to guard
  - Read a selected passage
  - Make a time-bound resolve
- Midday
  - Pause and recollect motivation
  - Review speech and intention
  - Correct course immediately
  - Rejoice in virtue already done
- Evening
  - Review without defensiveness
  - Confess harmful actions
  - Rejoice in beneficial actions
  - Renew restraint
  - Dedicate

7. Threefold Ethical Transformation

Three practices that purify karmic obscurations: 1. Refrain from harm; 2. Gather virtue; 3. Benefit beings. Increasingly subtle and powerful, yet always working together.

1. Refrain from harm
   - Restraint
   - Mindfulness
   - Introspection
   - Guard body and speech
   - Avoid known triggers
   - Stop concealment
   - Protect others from repetition
2. Gather virtue
   - Generosity
   - Ethical discipline
   - Patience
   - Joyful effort
   - Concentration
   - Wisdom
   - Study and reflection
   - Devotion and service
3. Benefit beings
   - Direct assistance
   - Emotional support
   - Protection
   - Teaching when qualified and appropriate
   - Creating access to Dharma
   - Dedication of work and practice
- Purification as development
  - Remove obstructive conditions
  - Establish supportive conditions
  - Become more useful to beings

8. Moral Repair

- Principle
  - Canonical confession addresses the mindstream
  - Interpersonal harm may also require worldly repair
  - Private ritual must not become avoidance
- Possible forms
  - Apology
  - Repayment
  - Return of property
  - Correction of false information
  - Changed behaviour
  - Acceptance of appropriate consequences
  - Protection from further harm
  - Indirect restitution
- Wise discernment
  - Will contact help or reopen harm?
  - Is apology centred on the harmed person or my relief?
  - Can restitution occur without renewed intrusion?
  - What boundary prevents repetition?
  - Would guidance from a teacher or professional help?
- Common errors
  - Demanding forgiveness
  - Explaining away responsibility
  - Contacting someone against their safety or wishes
  - Substituting words for behavioural change

9. Karma and Emptiness

Conventionally powerful, not ultimately fixed. Karma ripens in dependent relations, so habits, actions, relapse, and purification do not exist independently or fixedly.

- Apparent dilemma
  - If karma truly exists, it seems fixed
  - If all is empty, karma seems meaningless
  - Madhyamaka rejects both extremes
- Conventional functioning karma
  - Motivation conditions action
  - Action affects others
  - Action shapes habits
  - Habits shape future choices
  - Causes give results when conditions gatherripen
- Ultimate emptiness
  - Action depends on causes
  - Action depends on conditions
  - Action depends on parts and phases
  - Action depends on agent and object
  - Action depends on designation
  - No independent core is findable
- Dependent arising & emptiness
  - Whatever arises dependently is empty (- not inherent)
  - Because empty, it can function dependently
  - Because conditions change, trajectories change
  - Emptiness supports ethics rather than negating it
- Opposing causes
  - Virtue counters nonvirtue
  - Wisdom counters ignorance
  - Confession counters concealment
  - Compassion counters self-cherishing
  - Restraint counters repetition

10. Emptiness of the Person

- Solid appearance
  - I am the bad person who did that
  - Past action appears to define a permanent self
  - Memory fuses with identity
- Dependent person
  - Depends on body
  - Depends on moments of mind
  - Depends on aggregates
  - Depends on prior causes and habits
  - Depends on circumstances and relationships
  - Depends on conceptual designation
- Causal continuity
  - Present person is connected to past actor
  - Present person is not unchanged
  - Responsibility remains
  - Permanent guilt is unnecessary
  - Ethics and knowledge can cause change
- Two extremes
  - Eternalism: I am permanently that person
  - Nihilism: that was not me, so no responsibility
  - Middle way: continuity without an unchanging self
- Search for the "I"
  - Is it the body?
  - Is it a feeling?
  - Is it a memory?
  - Is it the action?
  - Is it separate from all these?
  - Recognise unfindability without denying convention

11. Emptiness of Action and Purification

- Action as **process**
  - Trigger appears
  - Attention focuses
  - Affliction intensifies
  - Intention forms
  - Body or speech acts
  - Action completes
  - Reactions follow
  - Habit is reinforced
  - The complete sequence is called "the action"
- Purification as **process**
  - Karma to be purified
  - Recognition and regret
  - Refuge and bodhicitta
  - Remedy and merit
  - Restraint and repair
  - Wisdom
  - Change in the mindstream
  - "Purification" is the name given to this whole process of transformation
- No substance model
  - No solid sin washed away by a solid purification
  - Ritual is not mechanical
  - Blessing, intention, merit, ethics, and wisdom form a causal network
- Practical conclusion
  - The action matters
  - The identity is not fixed
  - The trajectory can change
  - The remedy must **become** conduct

12. Bodhicitta, Merit, and Aspiration

- Limited motivation
  - Avoid my own suffering
  - A valid beginning
  - Not yet the full Mahayana scope
- Mahayana motivation
  - Remove what prevents benefiting others
  - Purify obstacles to omniscience
  - Develop every capacity needed by beings
  - Seek complete enlightenment for all
- Merit
  - Positive potential of virtue
  - Supports favourable circumstances
  - Supports receptivity to Dharma
  - Supports concentration and insight
  - Supports capacity to benefit
  - Not a cosmic bank balance
- Complementary functions
  - Purification clears obstacles
  - Merit creates supporting conditions
  - Wisdom removes ignorance
  - Bodhicitta directs all toward enlightenment
  - Dedication stabilises purpose
- Hierarchy of aspirations
  - Immediate wellbeing and safety
  - Favourable future rebirths
  - Continued access to teachers and Dharma
  - Liberation from samsara
  - Direct realisation of emptiness
  - Complete buddhahood for all beings

13. Preservation of Dharma

- Textual preservation
  - Protect manuscripts and translations
  - Support accurate publication
  - Maintain access for future students
- Living transmission
  - Receive oral transmission
  - Study with qualified teachers
  - Ask questions respectfully
  - Preserve context and lineage
- Ethical preservation
  - Refrain from harm
  - Cultivate compassion
  - Meditate and apply
  - Support teachers and communities
  - Embody the teaching
- Internal preservation
  Each practitioner becomes a place where Dharma can be preserved and lived.
  - Remember
  - Reflect
  - Practise (change conduct)
  - Transmit responsibly
- Personal contribution
  - Maintain study notes
  - Support translations
  - Practise what is understood
  - Avoid presenting inference as lineage instruction
  - Share resources within competence

14. Collective Karma and World Conditions

- Traditional scope
  - War
  - Famine
  - Flood, fire, earthquake
  - Disease
  - Environmental disturbance
  - Welfare of lands and communities
- Levels of benefit
  - Reader's mind becomes less harmful
  - Compassionate motivation increases
  - Virtuous karmic conditions are created
  - Prayer and dedication embrace many beings
  - Practice inspires beneficial action
  - Communities organised around virtue become more resilient
  - Connections with Dharma are established
  - Traditional causality may exceed immediate observation
- Avoid two extremes
  - Not: recitation mechanically controls every event
  - Not: recitation affects only private mood
  - Hold confidence with epistemic (knowledge based) humility
  - Join prayer with ethical and practical action
- Applied dedication
  - For peacemakers and decision-makers
  - For victims and displaced people
  - For those creating violence
  - For carers, health workers and first responders
  - For environmental healing
  - For wise collective choices

15. Lama Zopa Rinpoche Practice Lens

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's practice lens: Refuge, Vajra Mind, and Vajrasattva mantra. Ordinary practitioners cannot measure invisible purification precisely; look instead for transformed conduct and mind.

- Motivation
  - Precious human rebirth
  - Death and impermanence
  - Karma and future lives
  - Renunciation of samsara
  - Enlightenment for every sentient being
- Power of engagement
  - Hear attentively
  - Read with refuge
  - Recite with bodhicitta
  - Rejoice in the opportunity
  - Dedicate vastly
- Holy objects and merit
  - Power of the object
  - Power of motivation
  - Small actions can carry vast scope
  - Merit supports realisation
- Practical criterion
  - Less attraction to nonvirtue
  - Stronger refuge
  - More compassion
  - Greater readiness to practise
  - More useful action for others

16. Guided Practice Sequence

- Motivation
  - My observations limit how I benefit beings
  - I read to purify obstacles to enlightenment
  - I include every being within this purpose
- Recognition
  - Choose one recurring pattern
  - Identify trigger
  - Identify mistaken appearance
  - Identify affliction
  - Identify action and result
  - Identify habit reinforced
- Confession
  - Acknowledge without justification
  - Recognise dependent causes
  - Regret harm and future results
  - Avoid constructing a fixed bad self
- Emptiness reflection
  - Search for the inherently existing person
  - Search for the inherently existing action
  - Search for the inherently existing obscuration
  - Recognise conventional existence and ultimate unfindability
  - Return to responsibility and hope
- Remedy
  - Read attentively
  - Generate refuge and bodhicitta
  - Perform an opposing virtue
  - Make appropriate repair
  - Resolve realistic restraint
- Dedication
  - Those affected by similar karma
  - Those harmed by me
  - Those who have harmed me
  - In past, forgotten lives
  - Purification of collective causes of suffering
  - Flourishing of Dharma
  - Enlightenment of all beings

17. Pattern-to-Antidote Laboratory

- Anger
  - Mistaken appearance: wholly undesirable enemy
  - Antidote: patience and dependent arising
  - Action: pause, protect, speak timely without hatred
- Harsh speech
  - Mistaken aim: relief through hurting
  - Antidote: gentle truthful speech
  - Action: apologise and practise a deliberate pause
- Attachment
  - Mistaken appearance: object as source of complete happiness
  - Antidote: impermanence and balanced appreciation
  - Action: simplify and give
- Jealousy
  - Mistaken appearance: another's success diminishes mine
  - Antidote: rejoicing
  - Action: praise virtue sincerely
- Pride
  - Mistaken appearance: independent superior self
  - Antidote: dependence on others and causes
  - Action: listen, learn, and express gratitude
- Indifference
  - Mistaken appearance: others' suffering is unrelated to me
  - Antidote: interdependence and compassion
  - Action: one concrete service
- Discouragement
  - Mistaken appearance: pattern is permanent
  - Antidote: emptiness and gradual causality
  - Action: make one small sustainable commitment

18. Contemplation Questions

- What do I mean by karmic obscuration?
  A karmic obscuration is the obstructive influence of past actions and the habits they have established. It may appear as suffering, repeated harmful patterns, difficulty creating virtue, difficulty in insight, difficulty developing concentration and wisdom, difficulty maintaining practice even in an unchangeable identity.
- Which habit obstructs Dharma most strongly?
  It may be anger, attachment, resentment, pride, jealousy, distraction, discouragement or indifference. Choose one recurring pattern that keeps repeatedly presents one from studying, reflecting, meditating, and acting with compassion. Avoid vague identity; one specific pattern rather than a complete inventory is enough generally.
- Do I secretly treat karma as fate?
  I treat karma as fate when I think that past actions make me permanently unable to change. Karma is cause and effect, not predestination. Habits are strong, but they are not identity. Present intentions and actions introduce new causes.
  Confession uses the historical actions, but it can alter the continuing influence.
- Which conditions allow my pattern to ripen?
  External conditions may include particular people, places, objects, moods, or times. Repetition, justification and lack of mindfulness strengthen the pattern.
  Recognising the conditions allows one to interrupt the sequence before it becomes harmful action.
- How does dependent arising make purification possible?
  Karma, habits and obscurations depend upon causes and conditions. They are not fixed nor existing independently.
  Because they depend on conditions, change, then strength or effects can also change.
  Regret, restraint, virtue, compassion and wisdom are causes that can weaken karma.
  If karma obscurations were fixed, purification would be impossible.
- Can I accept responsibility without a permanently guilty self?
  I can acknowledge that the action occurred, that I was involved, that others were affected, and that consequences arose.
  I can also see that the person who acted was dependent upon changing causes, conditions, body and mind.
  I am continuous with that person, but I am not an unchanging self permanently defined by the action.
  Responsibility can be kept without making Permanent guilt rule. "I am never change."
- What repair should accompany confession?
  Repair may include stopping the behaviour, apology, restitution, protection from harm, repairing what was taken, making restitution or accepting appropriate consequences.
  The most convincing repair is sustained change in conduct.
  Confession is not always easy. It should not expose another person to further harm or pressure to forgive.
  Where direct repair is unsuitable, I can practise indirect repair: offer restitution and confession to the relevant world.
- What virtue directly opposes the action?
  Killing or harming → protecting life
  Taking what is not given → generosity and respect for others' property
  Sexual misconduct → responsibility, fidelity and non-harm
  Lying → truthful speech
  Divisive speech → reconciliation & harmony
  Harsh speech → gentle, respectful speech
  Unprofitable speech → timely and meaningful speech
  Covetousness → contentment & generosity
  Harmful intent → compassion and patience
  Wrong view → study, reflection and confidence in cause and effect
- Is my motivation personal relief or usefulness to beings?
  Personal relief is a valid beginning, but Mahayana realisation goes further.
  I want to be free from suffering or guilt, but my refuge practice proceeds as from helping others, not only from fear.
  The highest motivation is to attain complete enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, and I can begin with my present concern and consciously expand it to include others.
- How can the Dharma remain alive in my conduct?
  Dharma remains alive when study changes how I think, feel, and act.
  Careless study reinforces harmful behaviours; cultivating virtue, meditating and treating others compassionately.
- How do merit and wisdom complement purification?
  Purification weakens obstructive karma and habits.
  Merit establishes supportive conditions for practice, protection, and future opportunities.
  Wisdom recognises the empty and dependent nature of karma and purification, so practice avoids underestimating ignorance or its roots.
  Merit without wisdom cannot completely remove ignorance; wisdom without merit lacks supports and compassionate motivation.
  Both are needed for Buddhist complete enlightenment.
- What can I do to preserve access to Dharma?
  Study and practise authentic teachings.
  Support translations, teachers, practitioners, monasteries, Dharma centres and publishers.
  Preserve texts and make reliable translations available.
  Help create welcoming conditions in which others can hear and practise.
  Avoid misrepresenting teachings and presenting inference as lineage instruction.
  Place the teachings on responsibly through ethical conduct, accurate explanation and sincere practice.
  Offer causes to meet the Dharma again in future lives.

19. Memory Spine

Compact list of key terms to extend my repair lexicon

- Obscuration = obstructive karmic potential and conditioning
  Karma is not a stored material mass noticing what prevents clear understanding or Dharma practice—habits, conditions, and patterns that obstruct insight, distraction preventing meditation, or pride making us unteachable to others.
- Karma is dependent, not fate
- Hearing Dharma introduces new causes
- Repeated confession counters forgetfulness
- Ethics = refrain + gather virtue + benefit beings
- Repair joins ritual with responsibility
- Agent, action, and purification are empty
- Empty means dependently functional, not nonexistent
- Merit supports; wisdom uproots; bodhicitta directs
- Preserve Dharma textually, orally, ethically, internally
- Chapter movement: obscuration → wisdom → transformed action

20. Connections and Extension Points

- ← Map 1 • Master Overview
- ← Map 2 • Chapter 4 • Devotional face of purification
- → Map 4 • Lama Zopa Rinpoche Framework
- → Map 5 • Practice and Lamrim Connections
- Add Jhado Rinpoche transmission notes here
  - Definition of obscuration
  - Four difficult obscurations
  - Practice instructions
  - Oral explanation of emptiness
  - Personal reflections
- Add canonical references here
  - 31-chapter paragraph or page
  - Toh 219 parallel
  - Terminology and translation notes

Visual Key

Colours

- Gold — Sutra text, transmission and preservation
- Red — Karma, obscuration, confession and purification
- Orange — Bodhicitta, merit and aspiration
- White/Silver — Dependent arising, emptiness and wisdom
- Purple — Lama Zopa Rinpoche's practice framework
- Green — Meditation, ethical application and daily practice
- Blue — Orientation, context and supporting explanation
- World Blue — Collective karma and conditions in the world

Content Symbols

- Teaching, claim or imagery arising from the Golden Light Sutra
- Dharma — Core Buddhist doctrine or principle
- Bodhicitta — Compassion, love or the Mahayana motivation
- Lama Zopa — A practice emphasis drawn from Lama Zopa Rinpoche's approach
- Lamrim — Connection with the graduated path to enlightenment
- Collective — Communities, countries, environment or collective karma

Study Symbols

- Practice — Meditation, recitation or practical exercise
- Analysis — A point for close discrimination or analytical meditation
- Insight — An interpretive connection that clarifies the teaching
- Remember — A central point or concise summary worth retaining
- Caution — A common misunderstanding, extreme or possible misuse
- Contemplate — A question for personal reflection or discussion

Navigation Symbols

- Previous map — Return to an earlier map in the series
- Related map — Continue to a related detailed map
- References — Sources, textual parallels or extension material
- Visual Key — Explanation of the map's symbols and colours
- Ordinary supporting node without a special category