

## **The Defects and Dangers of Samsara** *by Maitreyi*

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### **Samsara and nirvana; separate selfhood leading to dissatisfaction and grasping**

My talk today is on the defects of saṃsāra. It's the last of the mind-turning reflections, and the second of the last pair of mind-turning reflections. The law of karma and the defects of saṃsāra work together to help us overcome clinging to future pleasures and encourage us towards the greater happiness of freedom. I thought we could just check in with ourselves and ask how much of what has gone through our mind today is about looking forward to future pleasures, and how much about the planting of the seeds of skilful action. I know for myself I've been feeling quite tired, because I've been up late writing this talk, and I've been thinking a lot about a nice bath, and bed, and a good book to read!

A defect is a lack or a deficiency, and I think it's important that we clarify this. We're not saying that saṃsāra is evil or horrible, but we're saying that it doesn't give us what we most deeply need, and that it is permeated by all kinds of suffering, as well as giving us pleasure. When we talk about something being defective, then it needs correcting.

Saṃsāra is not a place that we go. It's easy to fall into this way of speaking, as if it's a place we find ourselves in, that we loosely equate with 'the world', and there's another place called nirvana that we might get to if we're very good or we work very hard at our practice. At the same time we're not sure that we want to go there, because it does seem a bit much or it's a bit lonely or somehow featureless. Saṃsāra and nirvana are not somewhere that we go. It's something that we do. We 'samsarise'. Literally, it means to go round, or to spin.

There are various images associated with it which have this circular or cyclical nature or character. It is like an ill-fitting chariot wheel. It's the wheel of life with the six realms, and the outer circle of becoming or re-becoming. It is like water in a water wheel in which we circle helplessly. It's like bees buzzing round and round a pot. It's like the turning of a potter's wheel. A circle is endless, or it ends in itself. A cycle is recurrent, repetitive. It returns to the beginning. Nothing new comes out of it.

We create this saṃsāra in which we go round and round. We create it initially by what we come with. We're hard-wired, as Ratnadharini put it in her talk, with the four *ātmakleśas*, that sense of ourselves as centre of the universe, and the subject of every experience. There's no blame in this; it's just how things are from the perspective of how we are. It's part of the human condition to experience the world as subject and object, and it's part of our precious human birth that we have a self-reflexive consciousness and an

ability to discriminate which allows us to explore and question that experience.

So far so good, it would seem. But already there is an underlying tension. Saṃsāra is a condition in which our minds are not functioning in accordance with reality. We believe in a separate self. We believe in the importance of that self. We are determined to protect and defend that self. At the same time, on some deeper level we know this not to be the case. Our experiences confirm it and yet contradict it. For instance, other people also think they are the centre of the world. They are wrong, of course. We can't all be the most important person, but that is their experience. Within it all there's a sense of incompleteness, a lack of wholeness. An unease and an insecurity accompany our experience. That unease causes us to want to become more secure, more substantial, so we feel the need to acquire things, to bolster up that sense of self. Then we think we own these things, which might be material objects, other people, skills, opinions, experiences.

*First, conceiving an 'I', we cling to an ego.  
Then, conceiving a 'mine', we cling to a material world.  
Like water in a water wheel helplessly we circle.  
I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings.*

Candrakīrti

But the unease and the insecurity persist. Having feared we might lose ourselves in some way or other, the situation has been compounded. We now fear we might lose our possessions, our standing in the world, our points of view, as well as fearing the loss of self. Again there is no blame. Our craving for security and substantiality arise out of ignorance. It's a very human response. And it causes suffering.

Saṃsāra is cyclical because through our actions based on ignorance we feed that ignorance. Seeing objects in the world as 'mine', we compound that view of a separate sense of self, increasing that sense of alienation and insecurity which then reaches out to draw more towards it. It's not only a cycle, but it's a vicious circle. Helplessly we circle, digging ourselves deeper into that ignorant view.

### **The three lakshanas of conditioned existence - dukkha (suffering); anitya (impermanence); anatman (emptiness of essential being); blame**

Another way of describing the defects of saṃsāra is that it is characterised by the three marks or lakṣaṇas of conditioned existence: the unsatisfactory or painful (*duḥkha*), the impermanent (*anitya*) and the emptiness of self or essential being (*anātman*). The connection of *duḥkha* and *anitya* is obvious: that things are impermanent is often a cause of suffering. *Anātman* is less obviously connected, but emptiness of self means that we are not in control. We are a process, not an entity. We too arise day by day, moment by moment, in dependence on conditions. There is no self that is in control of those conditions. We can only have some influence as a part of those conditions.

There is suffering and there is no blame. I think it is very important to see that we tend to equate these two states, suffering and blame, and very important that we can distinguish them. I think equating blame and guilt with suffering is probably the result of Christian conditioning in our culture. While I was brought up an atheist, I was still horrified as a child by the idea that Christ died for our sins. While we are in a culture of guilt or blame, whether self or other blame, it will cloud our ability to understand suffering and its causes.

### **Three forms of suffering; eight kinds of suffering; six kinds of suffering; Conze's view of suffering and pleasure; the wheel of life; experiences of suffering in our lives**

There are many forms of suffering in saṃsāra. Traditionally there are three lists. To begin with and, probably most encompassingly, there are three kinds of duḥkha. There's the suffering of pain, of unpleasant experiences, the unsatisfactory (*duḥkha duḥkha*); there's the suffering of change and impermanence, and there's the existential suffering: that insecurity, lack of wholeness and lack of fulfilment. These three sum it up really, but they have been expanded out considerably, which brings it home more to us.

There are the eight kinds of suffering. There's the suffering of birth, which is traumatic for the child and painful for the mother. There's the suffering of sickness, which we all know about to some degree. There's the suffering of ageing, especially old age, loss of mobility and faculties, loss of memory and independence. There's the suffering of death, our own death and that of others. There's being separated from those who we love, which sometimes happens quite outside our control. There's being with what and whom we dislike. There's not to have what we desire, and having what we don't desire. Then there are also the six kinds of suffering: an uncertain lifespan, indefinite rebirth, repeated conception, fluctuations of loss and gain, the fact that we are alone at birth and alone at death. But this isn't all.

There's also the suffering underlying some kinds of pleasure, which Conze has enumerated. There's the fact that our pleasure may involve suffering for others. We may buy new clothes that are produced in sweat shops, in dire conditions. We're afraid of losing that which gives us pleasure. Conze says that's particularly so for wealthy people who struggle with guilt about the amount of money that they own and their fear of losing it. There's the fact that that which brings pleasure through the senses, the body, also equally brings pain. And that pleasures which derive from conditioned things cannot satisfy the longings of the human heart, which is the existential suffering of the three kinds of duḥkha.

Sometimes lists don't quite do it for us, so it's also brought to mind more imaginatively in the images of the wheel of life, the suffering of the six realms: the realm of the animals which is brutish, focussed on food, sex and sleep; the hungry ghosts always longing, never able to satisfy themselves; the gods blissfully oblivious and complacent, until their

lotuses begin to rot; the hell beings subject to intense physical and mental pains, anger and hatred; the asuras, obsessed with jealousy and competitiveness; the human realm where there's pleasure and pain, but happiness is temporary, and there's also pride and conceit.

We don't need either models or lists to know about suffering - we just need the experience of our own lives: the illness and physical pain which goes with having a body; the mental pain of depression and fear which goes with having a mind; the sense of incompleteness; things change; people change; people leave us and people die; nothing is solid and substantial and nothing can be fully relied upon. We want the world to be substantial and secure and it isn't, and this causes us suffering. This is our experience from a relatively fortunate existence in a relatively stable society. If we think of the sufferings of other people, in wars, famine, captivity, poverty, the reflections seem endless.

### **The effect of reflecting on suffering; the Buddha's response after gaining Enlightenment**

What is the effect of such reflections? We can easily feel overwhelmed. I can see that, looking at you. If we remember 'no blame, no guilt', then what arises with our reflections? Maybe sadness, empathy, compassion.

*When you realise suffering for what it is, as the Buddha did, then you will be drawn into discovering its causes.*

The Dalai Lama

*One thing only do I teach: suffering and the cessation of suffering.*

The Buddha

The Buddha realized that suffering is a fact of the human condition, caused by craving, which in turn is caused by ignorance; an ignorance which sets up the way we experience the world. He saw how difficult it is for us to penetrate that ignorance because of the desire and attachment it gives rise to. Not long after his Enlightenment experience, he's considering whether to teach the Dharma. It's a passage that I've always found very moving. He says:

*The Law that I have attained to is profound and hard to see, hard to discover. It is the most peaceful and superior goal of all, not attainable by mere reasoning, subtle, for the wise to experience. But this generation relies on attachment, relishes attachment, delights in attachment. It is hard for such a generation to see this truth, that is to say, conditionality, dependent arising. If I taught the Law, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troubling for*

*me.*

I always like the way he seems to take himself into account at the end of that passage! I want to look a bit closer at where we might be at in all of this. Certainly we are in a state of ignorance, conditioned by the ātma-kleśas.

### **Trying to make samsara work; conditioning and how we hear the dharma**

At the same time we have some sense of what might be going on. We know to some extent that happiness doesn't come through possessing things. We are not consumed by acquiring wealth and fame. We have some understanding of how suffering arises, and we don't expect to avoid it altogether. If nothing else, we have to die. So rather than craving and grasping material objects, or pursuing the perfect relationship, we have a more sophisticated approach. We try to fix saṁsāra. We try to organise and plan our lives so we have the right balance of pleasure over pain, to fix our own experience of saṁsāra so it is palatable and has the right ingredients, some of which will be opportunities to practise the Dharma. This can take subtler and subtler forms so that we can find ourselves using the Dharma as another way of fixing saṁsāra. I'm just going to give you an example from my own experience. Some time ago, I realised I was feeling somewhat intolerant of people, who happened to be other Order members, who were acting in ways that didn't accord with the precepts, that is, those precepts that I would not find it difficult to keep. At some point in all of this, I recognised that intolerance was not itself in fact a skilful mental state and is in fact a breach of the first precept. So I was struck by this and thought I needed to explore it more fully. What was this all about for me? In one way it made sense. If we all acted in accord with the precepts, the world would be a better place, at least that Triratna corner of the world that I spend a lot of my time in, so that would be better for me! I would certainly have a more pleasant experience. Behind this is my own conditioning, my socialist conditioning. I've grown up with a strong message that the meaning of life is to make the world a better place. Again, this is subtle because on the face of it, it resonates with the Dharma: there is a desire to alleviate suffering. But at the same time it's limited. I'm still trying to fix saṁsāra and to fix my own experience of saṁsāra, and in so doing I was going for refuge to ethics, albeit in a subtle way, rather than going for refuge to compassion, a true refuge, and having a compassionate response to unskilfulness.

It's not surprising that I did this, because the longer I practise, the more aware I am of the degree to which my own conditioning affects not only the way I practise the Dharma, but affects how I hear the Dharma, what filters it comes through. I was talking about this to Bhante recently, and he said towards the end of our discussion, "*The important thing is that you see how your conditioning affects you. That's already the beginning of change.*"

I was fortunate in this case to see through my fix before too long. When we don't, then there's frustration, disappointment and maybe anger. We feel that we've failed, we feel inadequate and we undermine ourselves, or we become even more determined to try

another lifestyle, another job. We become frenetic in our efforts to keep all the balls in the air, to cover our backs, to be one jump ahead. Or we blame the situation, the people we've been involved with. If those situations, those people have been the repository for our ideals, especially our spiritual ideals, then we can feel let down to the point of betrayal. I think sometimes this happens for people in relation to the Order and the Movement.

### **James Hillman on betrayal; experiencing our own suffering**

There's a very good article by James Hillman on the subject of betrayal, and I've read it on a number of occasions in my life and each time I've found more depth, psychological and spiritual truth in it. He writes about the situation of primal trust evoked in the myth of the Garden of Eden and existing in relationship between infant and parent. He describes it as a fundamental belief that the ground underfoot is really there, and one will be contained in perfection by another who will never let one down.

He starts the essay by telling a Jewish story of a father teaching his son to have more courage by jumping down the stairs. As he jumps the father catches him and each time he jumps from a higher stair. But at one point the father steps back and the boy falls on the floor. As he picks himself up crying, the father says to him, "*Never trust a Jew. Even if it is your own father*"

The story is shocking on one level, and it's ironic on another. Hillman questions it more deeply. Why does the father betray the son who trusts him? In the Garden of Eden, something other was needed for man than God himself. Eve had to be created out of man, which then led to a betrayal of primal trust by God. It's important not to get into gender issues here, or we miss the point. Eden was over and life began. It's a many-layered essay, but the thrust of it is that betrayal of this primal trust is necessary for maturation. The story – and please remember it's a story told for a purpose

– is the boy's initiation into adult tragedy. Hillman says, "*If one can give oneself, assured that one will come out intact, what has been given? Dad, or God, will catch you at the bottom of the stairs.*" Broken trust can also be a breakthrough into a new level of consciousness.

Hillman also spells out the reactions to betrayal, what he calls the sterile choices, which prevent or delay this maturation. The first is revenge, which is an obvious and simple one. When I read this I always remember an experience of a friend of mine a long time ago whose husband went off with another woman. In the night she got on her bike and cycled over to the house where he was with this other woman, and threw a whole lot of eggs at the window. In a way, that's quite a clean act of revenge, but at the same time it's not quite as clean as it sounds. They certainly ended up with a dirty window!

After revenge comes denial. We deny the value of other people, the person, the group, the teaching. If we don't stop there, then we come to cynicism as a reaction to betrayal. *"Love is a cheat. Causes are for saps. Organisations are traps. Hierarchies are evil."* And personally, we say to ourselves, *"Keep sharp. Go it alone. I'm all right, Jack."*

Broken idealism results in a tough philosophy of cynicism. Hillman says that most damaging of all in these reactions to betrayal is self-betrayal, in which one's own ideals are rendered into dust. We stop honouring our true sense of ourselves. We rubbish our own sensitivities, values and aspirations. What is needed, he says, for maturation, is to take on one's own suffering, experience that, and be how and what one is.

I can't do his thesis justice in this talk, but it has many resonances for me with the spiritual life. Life betrays us, lets us down, pulls the rug from under our feet, disappoints our expectations. We can choose to respond in different ways. We can try to make a better job of it, work harder, improve ourselves, that is, we can try to fix saṃsāra, which actually is impossible in the long term. We can fall into despair and despondency and just think, "What's the point?" which is nihilism. We can look for rewards in some future heaven realm, which is eternalism. We can experience and recognise the suffering inherent in saṃsāra. We can practise to understand its causes and so stop creating it. We can follow the Dharma.

### **Pema Chodron on experiencing suffering**

For this last to happen we need to allow ourselves to experience our own suffering and that of others, without horrified anxiety, without trying to fix it or put it right in an unhelpful way, and at the same time without identifying with it, either because we're experiencing it or through guilt at what others are experiencing, and without blame towards ourselves or others. No one person can be the cause of our suffering.

It's a tall order. But it's what our practice needs to be about quite a lot of the time. It's staying in the gap with all those emotions of insecurity, embarrassment, shame, frustration, grief, all through the spectrum of extreme distress and pain. Pema Chodron writes a lot about this whole area of practice. She calls the ability to be with one's suffering to 'be in the gap', the 'place of the spiritual warrior'. It's not a new idea, or new terminology, but I find it a very helpful one: that in the experience where one might be feeling inadequate, confused, uncomfortable and out of control, by responding with attentive awareness without identifying, one is at the same time a warrior in the work of the spiritual life.

In her book, *'When Things Fall Apart'*, she writes about a state which in Tibetan is described as Ye Tang Che. Apparently it's difficult to translate, but the nearest to come to it are descriptions like, 'totally exhausted', 'completely hopeless', 'totally fed up'.

*Believing in a solid, separate self, continuing to seek pleasure and avoid pain, thinking that someone out there is to blame for our pain, one has to get totally fed up with these ways of thinking.*

Pema Chodron

It's an emotion that comes with attention to that suffering, that sense that there is no ground under our feet. It's a realization that to seek for lasting security is futile. To think that we can finally get it together is just not realistic.

### **Becoming disentangled from samsara; compassion arising from observing suffering**

At this point our energy can really turn in the direction of the true refuges. At this point we have the real possibility to get off the wheel, to get out of saṃsāra, by stopping creating it for ourselves, by stopping *samsarizing*. We have the momentum to begin to see things as they really are and, from this vantage point on the spiral path, it will be possible to see the wheel, saṃsāra, as duḥkha, anitya, anātman: unsatisfactory, impermanent and empty of self. Then we can become altogether dis-illusioned, which leads naturally to disentanglement and dis-passion. We are no longer caught up in craving, grasping and becoming.

It's important to emphasize that what comes with this renunciation is the freedom of disentanglement and the calm and tranquillity of dispassion which flows out into love and compassion for all beings.

*Like water in a water wheel, helplessly we circle,  
I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings.*

Candrakīrti is identifying with the helpless circling, as well as the perspective that can see clearly the sufferings of saṃsāra, out of which arises compassion. I feel a strong response to this last line: *I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings*. Being still caught up in the wheel I can be aware of a need for compassion for myself and for others, but I haven't yet seen clearly enough for that compassion to well up spontaneously. But I can bow down to it, pay homage to it, wherever it manifests: in reality, in symbolic form, or in mythic imagination. I can honour and hold trust with it, without fear of disappointment.

The second two mind turning reflections work together, in that the recognition that the sufferings of saṃsāra lead to a renunciation of cyclic existence: the *nissaraṇa*, the not going for refuge to saṃsāra. Instead we want to create the karmic conditions that give rise to insight, and reflecting on the suffering of sentient beings engenders compassion, the desire, not only to free ourselves, but to free all beings, the arising of the Bodhicitta.