

The Three Principles of the Path

by Lama Tsong Khapa

I bow down to the holy lamas

I will explain as well as I can
The essential meaning of all the Conqueror's scriptures,
The path praised by the excellent Conqueror Children,
The port for the fortunate wishing liberation.

Whoever are not attached to the pleasures of transient existence,
Whoever strive to make leisure and fortune worthwhile,
Whoever are inclined to the path pleasing the Conqueror Buddha,
Those fortunate ones should listen with a clear mind.

Without a complete intention definitely to leave cyclic existence,
There is no way to stop seeking pleasurable effects in the ocean of existence.
Also, craving cyclic existence thoroughly binds the embodied.
Therefore, in the beginning, an intention to leave cyclic existence should be sought.

Leisure and fortune are difficult to find
And life has no duration.
Through familiarity with this,
Emphasis on the appearances of this life is reversed.

If you think again and again
About actions and their inevitable effects
And the sufferings of cyclic existence,
Emphasis on the appearances
Of future lives will be reversed.

If, having meditated thus, you do not generate admiration
Even for an instant for the prosperity of cyclic existence
And if an attitude seeking liberation arises day and night,
Then the intention definitely to leave cyclic existence
And if an attitude seeking liberation arises day and night,
Then the intention definitely to leave cyclic existence has been generated.

Also, if this intention definitely to leave cyclic existence
Is not conjoined with generation of a complete aspiration to highest enlightenment,
It does not become a cause of the marvelous bliss of unsurpassed enlightenment.
Thus, the intelligent should generate the supreme altruistic aspiration to become
enlightened.

[All ordinary beings] are carried by the continuum of the four powerful currents,
Are tied with the tight bonds of actions difficult to oppose,
Have entered into the iron cage of apprehending self [inherent existence],
Are completely beclouded with the thick darkness of ignorance,
Are born into cyclic existence limitlessly,
And in their births are tortured ceaselessly by the three sufferings.¹

Thinking thus of the condition of mothers who have come to such a state,
Generate the supreme altruistic intention to become enlightened.
If you do not have the wisdom realizing the way things are,
Even though you have developed the thought definitely to leave cyclic existence
As well as the altruistic intention, the root of cyclic existence cannot be cut.
Therefore work at the means of realizing dependent-arising.

Whoever, seeing the cause and effect of all phenomena
Of cyclic existence and nirvana as infallible,
Thoroughly destroys the mode of misapprehension of these objects [as inherently existent]
Has entered on a path pleasing to Buddha.

As long as the two, realization of appearances—the infallibility of dependent-arising—
And realization of emptiness—the non-assertion [of inherent existence]
Seem to be separate, there is still no realization
Of the thought of Shakyamuni Buddha.

When [the two realizations exist] simultaneously without alternation
And when, from only seeing dependent-arising as infallible,
Definite knowledge destroys the mode of apprehension [of the conception of
inherent existence],
Then the analysis of the view [of emptiness] is complete.

Further, the extreme of [inherent] existence is excluded [by knowledge of the nature] of
appearances [existing only as nominal designations],
And the extreme of [total] non-existence is excluded [by knowledge of the nature] of
emptiness [as the absence of inherent existence and not the absence of
nominal existence].
If within emptiness the way of the appearance of cause and effect is known,
You will not be captivated by extreme views.

When you have realized thus just as they are
The essentials of the three principal aspects of the path,
Resort to solitude and generate the power of effort.
Accomplish quickly your final aim, my child.²

Endnotes

¹The suffering of mental and physical pain, the suffering of change, and the suffering of pervasive conditioning.

²Tsongkhapa is addressing Tsakophönpho, the person to whom he wrote this epistolary poem.

Colophon:

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