



**Samsara and Nirvana:
Two Sides of the Same Hand**

AT THE
TIBETAN MEDITATION CENTER
FREDERICK, MARYLAND
2010 SPRING RETREAT

KHENCHEN KONCHOG GYALTSHEN

Namo Guru Bhye!

I bow down to the lamas of unequaled kindness
whose compassionate hands pluck the migrators
from their wanderings throughout limitless samsara and
set them down in the land of enlightened bliss.

All the happiness and suffering of samsara and nirvana
arises from the appearance-emptiness non-dual nature;
to refresh my recollection of the Dharma,
and that of others as well,
I have written these words, relying on the Conqueror's
teachings.

Even though all these phenomena (*dharmas*) are naturally
pure –
free of arising, free of abiding, free of ceasing –
the Teacher, skilled in means, taught all the Dharma
so that we may realize authentically this reality nature.

The glorious Chandrakirti spoke of this with these words:
The Teacher taught that all dharmas are
pacified from beginningless time, are free of arising, and
are naturally and wholly transcendent of suffering;
therefore, they have always been unborn.”

Samsara and nirvana are actually
of the same mode of abiding; and as such
there is not the smallest distinction between them in the
'samsara-nirvana equal-ness'.

Samsara is mind with its conceptions;
nirvana, nonconceptual freedom from action and actor –
so samsara and nirvana are two sides of the same hand,
mind-as-it-is: self-arisen, unchanging, and spontaneous.

All sentient beings who wander the three planes of samsara
wrapped tightly in the myriad and adventitious afflictive
emotions
possess the luminous and unfabricated buddha-nature,
like a seed in the husk, like gold in the muck.

Confusion is samsara's aspect; its
characteristic, unceasing suffering;
nirvana is confusion purified and awakened –
our suffering has no established basis.

What is samsaric confusion?

(1) Innate dharmadhatu, the basis of confusion

All dharmas have the characteristic of space,
beyond any limiting existence / non-existence elaboration;
at the same time, as various dharma-instances,
clouds of holder-and-held obscure (*confuse*) the expanse.

(2) Wavering of fundamental non-knowing (ma-rigpa), the cause of confusion

Failing to recognize (*ma-rigpa*) the innate wisdom
among the disarray of habitual thought, our
tangled mess of afflictive emotions
continues to wander in samsara.

Buddha, Nagarjuna, and Jigten Sumgön all taught
“It is the body that cycles through samsara;”
our propensities of karmas, afflictions, and sufferings
cycle through samsara in dependence upon a body.

The countless types of mental afflictions,
desire-attachment, aversion-hatred, and ignorance,
pride, jealousy, and all the rest, are the
creators of our samsaric existence.

Some of their negative work is
suffering and unhappiness,
restlessness and muddled thought –
making untoward both this life and the next.

The afflictions create the sufferings of becoming, birth,
and the rest¹,
corrupt our happiness and virtue, obstruct our liberation,
discourage and exhaust us, cause us to squander our
leisure and endowment, and lead us to the lower realms.

The afflictions wake up and stabilize the
dormant propensity for grasping-as-real ignorance,
pervert our observations, and reinforce each other,
and so continue without interruption.

The afflictions cause prosperity’s decline in both
existence and peace, and are objects of criticism for
sublime beings;
for all these reasons, it is clear that there is
immeasurable fault in this collection of mental afflictions.

Because the afflictions have no sickness and death
samsara will be without beginning or end
until concurrent shamata-vipashana
cuts them off at the root.

(3) No beginning, the timeframe of confusion

Self-expressivity arises unceasingly from the
all-basis equal-ness dharmadhatu; this is
patterned by the confusion of fundamental non-knowing and
ingrained as pernicious grasping-as-real.

Until the clouds of conceptual thought, profused since
beginningless time
in the free-of-arising-and-ceasing sky of mind-as-it-is,
are scattered by the wind of wisdom, we will continue to
experience our own self-made suffering.

(4) Self-fixation, the entity of confusion

Self-awareness, unrecognized, grasping as ‘self;’
self-appearance, misunderstood, grasped as ‘objects’ –
O, how emotionally afflicted are we sentient beings,
trapped in the wheel of samsara by this dualism!

Holding unclean to be clean, impermanent to be permanent,
suffering to be happiness, and the selfless to possess
self-ness –
these four perverted mindsets anchor us in the
artificial and temporary cyclic existence that is samsara.

(5) In what way is it confused?

When mind-as-it-is is not realized to be free of elaboration, the resulting object-design is outer and inner, container and contained;
all confusion of attachment and aversion, holder and held, arises from fixation on this 'self and other'.

(6) The result of being thus confused

The afflictions are both cause and condition for the arising of all karma; from that karma manifests the six realms of samsara, states oppressed by the three sufferings.

Thus, this variegated wheel of becoming does not come from nothing, without cause and condition, but arises from the confusion-wheel of one's own mind, and so is the object to be realized by the wheel of wisdom.

Some of the time from beginningless time through today we have enjoyed the glory of the gods; some of the time, we have experienced the blazing fires of hell; but these experiences of happiness and suffering are no more than a dream to us now.

All manner of attractive things are possible with modern science and technology, but trying to obtain happiness from them is like trying to quench our thirst with mirage-water.

While wanting happiness, we experience only suffering, and we will not find release from this abysmal suffering

until we have abandoned our karma and afflictions; we each must do our own investigation into this.

When we attain unsurpassable enlightenment, we will find the nature of confusion to be none other than wisdom, and all that will remain of suffering will be its name –
this is the way to annihilate confusion.

(7) Examples of this confusion

During sleep and dream, we are burned by fire, carried away by floods, and the like; we either experience the happiness and suffering, or wrap ourselves in a protective cocoon.

Nothing appearing to our senses has ever been real, it is experience of a dream-state; likewise it is the hope and fear involved with ignorance, grasping-as-real, and attachment-aversion that produces our state of samsaric confusion.

All these dharma-instances are in fact reflections of our habitual tendencies and are illusory, like a bubble or a dew-drop; the moon reflected on water has no nature of moon, but dependent as it is on causes and conditions, appears as if by magic.

How is this confusion purified?

(1) The method with which to eliminate confusion

Any fortunate one who desires release from the great inescapable prison of cyclic existence needs to use the following method, the liberation-path that cuts off confusion through the scripture and realization of the sublime Dharma.

Impermanence

For all appearances, these composite interdependencies of causes and conditions, all birth is followed by death, all meeting by parting, all accumulation by exhaustion, and all youth by dissipation; do not be attached to this life – contemplate its impermanence.

Appearances of the past are like a dream, not here now; those of the future are like the horn of a rabbit, not here now; the momentary ‘now’ is like a ripple on a lake – hold in your heart the quintessential, sublime dharma.

Suffering

In the three miserable migrations of hell-being, hungry ghost, and animal, beings are powerless to prevent their enslavement and killing; their suffering is like waves of fire, never-ending – O my! Wise one, generate compassion for them.

Tossed violently by the waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death in the ocean of samsara with no bottom or shore, desiring happiness but craving the causes of suffering – O, how weary are the sentient beings who have no protector!

Causality

None of us can prevent the results of preceding causes and conditions, they are infallible for us all; furthermore, there is moment-cycle causality, the arising of variegated samsara-nirvana as the self-expression of virtue and non-virtue.

In the absence of cause, the result is turtle’s fur; all possible happiness and suffering arises from virtuous and non-virtuous causes and conditions. This is the mode of abiding of all phenomena; intelligent one, pay close attention to causality.

Refuge

To cut off confusion, take refuge from the bottom of your heart in the perfected Buddha, the one who knows, directly and precisely, all dharmas, gross, subtle, and hidden; in the sublime Dharma of scripture and realization; and in the Sangha of aryas.

Dharmakaya, co-emergent luminosity; sublime Dharma, free of production, cessation, and elaboration;

and the Sangha of aryas, beyond coming and going –
embodying them all is the Ultimate refuge: one’s own
empty, luminous mind.

Teacher

Compassionate hands holding a hook of loving-kindness,
a face of bodhicitta emblazoned with the major
and minor marks,
matured from a youth devoted to scripture and realization,
and skilled in means – respectfully adhere to this kind
of spiritual master.

Three trainings

In a wide field of renunciation,
clear away the rocks and weeds of non-virtue,
plant potent seeds of the ten virtues, and
ripen the fruit of the three trainings.

Moral conduct is bountiful when desire-attachment
has been dispelled;
samadhi is happy body-mind after one is free of anger;
insight-wisdom arises when delusion has been defeated –
cherish the three trainings, the foundation of the
Conqueror’s Teaching.

Bodhicitta

Clouds of loving-kindness suffuse the mind’s sky and their
misty rain of compassion falls at just the right time; the
bodhicitta harvest fills up the store-house,
dispelling the ignorance-famine of the limitless migrators.

No matter how much influence, magnificence, wealth,
and renown
one has in the world, know that these are impermanent and
fall away quickly; and so, without attachment to them,
habituate bodhicitta, which is of benefit to oneself
and all others.

Following the flight path of all the conquerors of
the three times,
the jumbo-jet of relative and ultimate bodhicitta
soars through the sky on the wings of the two accumulations
and lands smoothly, with no delays, at the four-kayas
airport.

Tong-len (giving-taking)

With a positive attitude of loving-kindness and compassion,
I *give* to the down-trodden
sentient beings of the six realms all my happiness and
roots of virtue, without reservation.

With a natural manner of brave heart-mind,
I *take* into my mind-stream every one of the
qualities of abandonment and realization of all the
Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the three times.

In samsara, from beginningless time through today, the
sole cause bringing suffering is always my own
self-fixation / fundamental non-knowing;
I *give* this away, right now, without a second thought.

Knowing that all sentient beings of the three realms have
been my mother,
I recall their kindness, wish to repay their kindness, and
connect to them with love;
I generate compassion for them, then the mindset to attain
enlightenment for their sake –
I *take* all these mind-trainings into the center of my heart.

Without clinging or attachment, I *give* my entire
bounty of resources and roots of virtue to these kind
mothers;
and in an authentic manner – like an illusion, like a mirage –
I *take* on all their karma, afflictions, and suffering.

Negative conditions are spiritual teachers;
spirits and demons are emanations of conquerors;
sickness is a broom sweeping away defilements and
obscurations –
all sufferings are dharmata's waves.

Purification

Purify without remainder in the presence of the Buddha
any type of fault or downfall, natural or imposed,
committed by body, speech, or mind under the control of
the three poisons,
using the four powers of remorse, resolve, antidote,
and reliance.

In the sky of mind-as-it-is, an expanse free of center
or edge,
clouds of adventitious conceptual thought condense;

from these the confusion of duality arises, and then various
karmas begin to accumulate –
purify these in the transparent, non-referential experience
of dharmata.

Paramitas

Generosity, moral conduct, and patience,
perseverance, meditative concentration, and wisdom –
with these six transcendent actions, the highway of the
conquerors of the three times, realize the two-fold
selflessness.

Generosity is the all-desires wish-granting jewel;
moral conduct, the stairway to temporary higher status
and liberation;
patience is the beautiful and resilient mighty Mount Meru;
perseverance, hands scooping up the jewels of enlightened
qualities.

Meditative concentration is a fine mansion where one may
rest from the afflictions;
wisdom, a bright lamp dispelling the gloom of the two
obscurations;
supreme method is a wise man filling up his treasury with
the two accumulations;
aspiration, a wish-granting tree that completes the two
benefits.

Supreme strength is a warrior victorious over the four
maras;
primordial wisdom, an ambrosial medicine that realizes the
nature of mental afflictions.

Riding the thoroughbred horse of the ‘thirty seven factors in accord with enlightenment.’²

The capitol city, Dharmakaya, is in reach – how wonderful!
end of bodhicitta section

Yidam

After the practice of the primordially-established deity has wholly purified the stains of impure confusion, the universal purity of the union of the generation and completion stages is perfectly completed with the enlightened qualities of separation and maturation – the ten strengths and the rest³.

Purify the mental afflictions, the direct cause of suffering, with practice of the generation-completion method-wisdom divine form, but take care: if the afflictions gain control, birth as a divine-form spirit or demon may result.

Kyobpa Rinchen Päl has said:

The Buddha teaches that
‘Deities who experience desire-attachment are hungry ghosts;
deities who experience hatred-aversion are hell-beings;
and deities who experience delusion are animals;
a poisoned deity is non-virtuous, and
from it suffering comes’; and so
keep close watch on the deity.

To follow these words, one’s own mind must be one’s witness,
ensuring that the practice of bodhicitta, yidam deity, and the rest remains a method with which to eliminate the mental afflictions.

Guru yoga

Adhere to an archetypal lama, a lamp for migrators; one with a glorious treasury of benevolent blessings, and boundless, inexhaustible, melodious, vast and profound teachings on the three baskets of sutra and the four classes of tantra.

Utmost respect and devotion for a four-kayas-entity Vajradhara-lama, a bodhicitta-manifested illusory-kaya, an unexcelled leader of the protector-less migrators, is how the treasure of dharmata is discovered.

Mahamudra

Resting in the uncontrived state of the luminous, free of coming-or-going, innate character is the supreme meditation;
conduct free of acceptance and rejection is marvelous;
the result of these two devoid of hope and fear is the mahamudra.

The unarising nature of the mind is dharmakaya; its unstopped self-luster, various nirmanakayas; its union of luminosity and emptiness, sambhogakaya; and the three kayas, inseparable – mind-as-it-is, mahamudra.

Dedication

Under the gaze of the buddhas and bodhisattvas of all times
and directions,
dedicate your entire collection of virtue, both that innate
and that accumulated in the three times,
for the unsurpassable enlightenment of all your mother
sentient beings – enemy, friend, and the rest –
the supreme dedication.

Summary of the five-fold path

This profound five-fold path, the essence of sutra
and mantra,
is the purification of the five poisons, the annihilation of
the five demons,
the possession of the five wisdoms, the manifestation of
the five buddhas, and the
spontaneous establishment of the five marvelous activities.⁴

This graduated path, complete and unmistaken,
is the method-path by which to eliminate confusion;
fortunate ones who desire release from the land of samsara
need to know that there is no second door to peace.

(2) An example of eliminated confusion, waking from sleep

Our various positive and negative dream experiences,
such as anxiety and terror from enemies and victimizers
and enjoyment of glorious divine palaces,
are real to us when they are happening,
but are gone when we awake, neither real nor unreal.

Our heads are left spinning at this confusion within
confusion,
but all the various outer phenomena are just the same –
other than merely appearing, they are not actually there.

The *Samadhi-Raja Sutra* states it in this way:

A young woman in a dream gives birth to a son
only to watch him die; she is happy
when he is born and unhappy when he dies –
know that every single phenomenon is just like this.

All this current world of appearance
appears real to a confused mind, but when
fundamental awareness rests in the sphere of dharmata,
there is not even a speck of anything, real or fake.

Because everyone – oneself and others – die, we are not
real,
and death itself is not real, but like an illusion;
because the material world is destroyed by fire and water,
it is also unreal,
and the four elements themselves are unreal,
interdependently.

(3) The cause-and-condition dependency of the method to eliminate confusion

Confusion is dispelled when the cause that abides in the
basic character, buddha nature, meets the condition of a
qualified lama's instruction, taken into a disciple's heart –
similar to what happens when ice is exposed to heat.

Make every effort to put into practice the instructions of a benevolent spiritual teacher, skilled in means.

Dharma Lord Rinchen Päl has taught:

‘Phantom men ford mirage-rivers’,
‘Sky-lotuses are sipped from by dream-bees’,
‘Barren women’s sons sing the gandharva’s songs’; and
‘The Ultimate may be realized in the midst of busy activity’ –

These are the sayings of childish ones devoid of experience and realization.

When our minds, stainless and virtuous,
melt into the sublime Dharma,
the forest of great bliss flourishes
on the non-dual mountain;
undistracted, mindful deer graze here,
consuming the grass and water of bliss, clarity, and
non-conceptuality –
Seeking solitude? This is the place.
I, the yogin, will keep to this mountain retreat.

(4) When confusion may be reversed

We of the six realms with a good body-support of leisure and endowment,
who are also possessed of faith, will renounce the samsaric state;
we will then have an opportunity to wear the armor of perseverance in the sublime Dharma,
and free ourselves from the ocean of suffering.

Leisure and endowment are difficult to find;
recognizing the importance of this precious life, be smart
and strive for the ease of freedom,
with supreme bodhicitta, relative and absolute,
and without distraction to matters of this life alone.

(5) What remains after confusion has been eliminated

Our mind’s stainless mode of abiding manifests with the unification of awareness and emptiness; this innate, ordinary awareness is what is called ‘confusion dawning as wisdom’.

Unstoppable mere-dawning self-luster is the basis of interdependence;
non-establishment of any existence or non-existence is emptiness;
unified, they do not abide as one or separate – self-disposition, free of directionality, the all-pervasive basis.

(6) The opposite of confusion

The omniscient wisdom that realizes the mode of abiding comprehends in the dharmata-sphere dharma-instances in all their complexity;
integrated body-mind has no fixation on either one, no clinging-attachment to the body nor to awareness-emptiness mind-as-it-is.

The omniscient wisdom that unifies the two truths has no attachment to retinue or relatives
and no aversion to any enemy or victimizer;
all are equal in the dharma expanse – how wonderful!

(7) *The result of reversed confusion*

Riding the horse of unexcelled bodhicitta
encouraged by the whip of undistracted mindfulness
gallop across the plain of the ten grounds and five paths
and arrive easily to the jewel-island of the three kayas.

Firm and deep are the wish-granting tree's roots of
three trainings;
its branches and leaves of two-fold bodhicitta flourish
infinitely;
blooming beautifully are its flowers of unified
generation-completion;
and its fine fruits are three kayas of benefit for migrators.

All-pervasive, unrivaled, luminous mahamudra, the
mode of abiding of our own non-arising mind, that called
'Confusion dawning as wisdom', and the enlightened
qualities
of separation and maturation – all parts, wholly completed.

In a single atom are all atoms of the universe;
all atoms of the universe are pervaded by a single atom –
know one object of knowledge and be expert in them all;
know them all and understand the one.

Dharmakaya: the two obscurations are purified to sky-like,
so it is *pure*;
all elaborations of self and non-self are pacified, so it has
entity;
its dharmadhatu has no fluctuation, so it is *permanent*;
and its mental-body is purified of gross and subtle latent
tendencies, so it is *at ease*.

Emanating naturally, without wavering from the sphere of
all-in-one-taste, the various rupakayas train every being
pure and impure; and their enlightened activities,
every possible object of knowledge, are as boundless
as the sky.

Until every drop of the ocean of existence is dried up
limitless activities of enlightened body, speech, and mind
will reach to every sentient being non-conceptually
and spontaneously, like the sun, the clouds, the earth,
and the water.

And so, regarding the mind's mode of abiding:
whoever has not realized it cycles endlessly in samsara;
whoever has realized it is liberated to nirvana; therefore,
in the practice of the nature of mind, be diligent!

Even though the mode-of-abiding nature of samsara-nirvana
is inseparable,
interdependent causality is what dominates on the relative
level,
and so I composed this brief text in reliance on a pure
teaching-tradition,
in a way appropriate to various beings' mental states.

I am not well trained in academic subjects and have
little mastery of these profound points,
and so my mind remains confused;
therefore, in the presence of the wise bodhisattvas,
I confess whatever mistakes I may have made.

Into the mandala of unexcelled bodhicitta, I bring all my accumulation of virtue, including that of this work, so that I may swiftly attain the state of Vajradhara and engage beneficially with the infinite migrators.

Perceiving the stainless and precious, unsurpassable and sublime Dharma of the Teacher to be the source of all relative and ultimate benefit and happiness, I have spent many long years, with pure altruistic intention, obtaining whatever of it I have been able in the far-flung countries of this world. Unfortunately, these days both my body and mind are sometimes overpowered by a strong exhaustion that does not respond much to medicine or treatment, and so I recently took some time to rest and recover in the American city of Madison. While there, in early spring of 2009, with an altruistic mind hoping to benefit those who seek the meaning of the Dharma, and contemplating how the demarcation between samsara and nirvana is delineated by virtue and non-virtue, I, Khenchen Könchog Gyaltshe, composed this text, entitled Samsara and Nirvana, Two Sides of the Same Hand (literally: The Wheel of Wisdom: Samsara and Nirvana, Front and Back of the Hand), in dependence upon Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön's profound Dharma and skilled teachings – may it bring about infinite benefit for the Teaching and for all the migrators!

Sarva kalayan bavantu – may all be virtuous!

Translated from the Tibetan by Khenchen Könchog Gyaltshe Rinpoche and Terence Barrett during the 2009 Spring Retreat at the Tibetan Meditation Center, Ratnashri Dharmachakra, while outside the rains fell and the flowers bloomed, and inside the precious, sublime Dharma was taught, received, and practiced well. May all mistakes of this work be purified in the expanse of dharmata; and may its merit and wisdom speed all migrators on to attainment of the non-abiding nirvana.

Notes

1. The Twelve Links of Interdependent Arising

- 1) fundamental non-knowing
- 2) formatives (samskaras)
- 3) consciousness
- 4) name and form
- 5) six sources (ayatanas)
- 6) contact
- 7) feeling
- 8) craving
- 9) grasping
- 10) becoming
- 11) birth
- 12) old age and death

2. The Thirty Seven Factors in Accord with Enlightenment

Four applications of mindfulness

- 1) the close placement of mindfulness of body
- 2) the close placement of mindfulness of feelings

- 3) the close placement of mindfulness of mind
- 4) the close placement of mindfulness of dharmas

Four authentic abandonments

- 5) to authentically preserve the roots of virtue that have been produced
- 6) to authentically produce the roots of virtue that have not been produced
- 7) to abandon the non-virtuous dharmas that have been produced
- 8) to not generate henceforth the non-virtuous dharmas that have not been produced

Four legs of miracles

- 9) the leg of miracle concerning motivation
- 10) the leg of miracle concerning intention
- 11) the leg of miracle concerning perseverance
- 12) the leg of miracle concerning analysis

Five faculties

- 13) [Skt. shraddha] faith
- 14) [Skt. viryam] perseverance
- 15) [Skt. smptih] mindfulness
- 16) [Skt. samadhih] samadhi
- 17) [Skt. prajña] wisdom

Five powers

- 18) faith
- 19) perseverance
- 20) mindfulness
- 21) samadhi
- 22) wisdom

Seven limbs of enlightenment

- 23) the enlightenment limb of authentic mindfulness
- 24) the enlightenment limb of authentic discrimination of dharmas;
- 25) the enlightenment limb of authentic perseverance
- 26) the enlightenment limb of authentic joy
- 27) the enlightenment limb of authentic pliancy
- 28) the enlightenment limb of authentic samadhi
- 29) the enlightenment limb of authentic equanimity

Eight branches of the eightfold noble path

- 30) right view
- 31) right thought
- 32) right speech
- 33) right action
- 34) right livelihood
- 35) right conceptual effort
- 36) right mindfulness
- 37) right samadhi

The enumerations in notes 1 and 2 were adapted from those listed in The Illuminator Tibetan-English Encyclopaedic Dictionary (Tibetan Computer Company).

3. The *enlightened qualities of separation* are the ten strengths, the four fearlessnesses, and the eighteen unmingled dharmas. The *enlightened qualities of maturation* are the thirty two major marks and the eighty minor marks.

4. See table on next page.

