



Dependent Origination

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



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<https://sakyatradition.org>

Email : info@sakyatradition.org

Wechat ID : sakyatradition

Weibo : sakyatradition

IG: the_sakya_tradition

Facebook: TheSakya

Soundcloud: the-sakya-tradition

[https://www.youtube.com/c/ 萨迦传承](https://www.youtube.com/c/萨迦传承) TheSakyaTradition

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By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



Dependent Origination

The results that we ordinary beings obtain depend on their causes and conditions. However, this does not mean our lives are predestined—this is the unique characteristic of Buddhism.

By understanding the doctrine of dependent origination, we can face situations in life calmly, and be more mindful about the actions of our physical, speech and mind, living life in the right way. Furthermore, attaining liberation and buddhahood are its ultimate benefits.

In this teaching, His Holiness deciphers the profundity of dependent origination in a clear manner. Studying and contemplating this teaching repeatedly and then putting it into practice will enable us to reap both the temporary and ultimate results.



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Introduction

The Buddha taught that all phenomena arise through dependent origination. The word for this in Sanskrit is *pratītya-samutpāda*. Sometimes in English it is also called *dependent arising*. In Tibetan, we call it *tendrel*. The doctrine of dependent origination teaches that all phenomena arise on the basis of causes and conditions; when the causes and conditions cease, the phenomena also cease.

The Buddha said that those who know *tendrel*, or dependent origination, know the Dharma, and those who know the Dharma know the Buddha. Without understanding dependent origination, one cannot understand the Dharma or the Buddha.

The great Ācārya Nāgārjuna wrote many praises of the Buddha for many qualities, but the most important reason to praise him, according to Nāgārjuna, is because the Buddha taught *tendrel*. For this, Nāgārjuna calls him “the most excellent being in the universe.” Nāgārjuna devoted a text to *tendrel*

called *Pratītya-samutpāda-hṛdaya-kārika* (*Verses on the Heart of Dependent Origination*).

The Buddha also taught loving-kindness, compassion, and nonviolence. These practices alone, while necessary, are not enough to gain liberation from saṃsāra or reach the state of enlightenment. For this, the Buddha taught his disciples tendrel.

The Buddha himself taught tendrel. Sutras on tendrel are in the Kangyur, the Tibetan collection of the teachings of the Buddha. It is said that only the Buddha Shakyamuni (Skt. Śākyamuni), among all teachers in the world, taught the doctrine of tendrel, and therefore we should keep it in our minds.

Tendrel

Two Goals and Two Kinds of Tendrel

There are two goals to be achieved: the temporary goal and the ultimate goal. To achieve the temporary goal, or temporal happiness, we need to know the Dharma that teaches us to abandon harmful actions. To accomplish the ultimate goal, or buddhahood, we need to follow the threefold training (Skt. *trīśikṣā*). This consists of moral conduct (*śīla*), samādhi, and wisdom (*prajñā*). Out of these three, the most important is wisdom.

Reaching both goals depends on knowing tendrel, or dependent origination. Only by understanding dependent origination can we master the Dharma that accomplishes both the temporary and ultimate results.

There are two kinds of tendrel. One is *tendrel of cause and effect*. In this kind of tendrel, phenomena arise because of the

causes and conditions upon which they depend. The Buddhist understand of karma depends on this way of understanding *tendrel*. The other is *tendrel of dependent relations*, where the emphasis is on *inter*-dependence. As an example of this, we can say that there is a right because there is a left, or there is a self because there is an other. It was Nāgārjuna who elaborated this when he used *tendrel* to explain the Madhyamaka view of emptiness. If we want to understand the Madhyamaka view or philosophy, then we need to understand *tendrel*.

Impermanence

All phenomena arise through the mere collection of the right causes and conditions. If these come together, the result will arise. This happens irrespective of our intentions. All these causes, conditions, and results can exist because of impermanence. If there is no impermanence, then there is no *tendrel* of causes and conditions. It is only because of impermanence that things can change, and if there is no possibility of any change, then there are no new things to arise and no effects would be possible.

Example of Dharma Study

Our Dharma knowledge and our Dharma practice depend only on ourselves—on our motivation and our actions. If we study

with diligence, we will gain knowledge of the Dharma. If we gain knowledge of the Dharma, we will be able to practice the Dharma well. If others study the Dharma diligently, this cannot be the cause for us gaining knowledge. If others have the right motivation, this cannot be a cause for our own practice. But if we make the effort, if we have diligence, then we can acquire knowledge. The great Ācārya Candrakīrti, in his text called the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, said, “All the qualities of knowledge follow from diligence.” We must study because it is the cause of acquiring knowledge. As always, without the cause, there will not be the effect. This is one example of *tendrel*.

There is also a cause-and-effect relationship between our knowledge and our practice. To practice properly, we must have knowledge of how to practice. In the teachings, it says that having an intention or wish to meditate without hearing or studying the teachings on meditation is like a handicapped person that wants to climb a rocky mountain. Without knowing how to meditate, how could someone do proper meditation? We can say knowledge functions as a condition for good Dharma practice. We have already said that knowledge is the effect of study. Here, knowledge is in a causal relationship to good Dharma practice. In the same way, the same person can be a father in relation to his son and a son in relation to his father.

One person can be in multiple relations to other people. It is the same with causes and effects.

Tendrel and Karma

Everything that we experience arises from our karma. Karma is based on the relationship between cause and effect. This is to say that it is based on tendrel. Often, when we talk about karma in English, we mean that we cannot choose the present circumstance because it is our karma. But *karma* in Sanskrit simply means “action.” We have the ability to choose our actions. When we put our knowledge of the Dharma into real practice, we are choosing our actions—choosing virtuous actions. And we must put what learn into practice, otherwise it is only abstract knowledge.

By changing our actions this way, we will eventually be able to attain liberation and enlightenment. The process I have described shows how tendrel works. It is a series of causal relationships: increasing Dharma knowledge causes more Dharma actions; these will produce the outcomes of Dharma actions, which are liberation and enlightenment.

In Tibetan, we call good actions and good results positive tendrel. There is also negative tendrel: if you perform bad actions, you get bad results. Negative tendrel in Tibetan can also

be called *tendrel of delusion*, and positive tendrel can be called *tendrel of liberation*.

Generally speaking, then, there is a positive tendrel and negative tendrel. The two are distinct, just like planting a barley seed will produce barley while planting a wheat seed will produce wheat. You cannot plant a barley seed and expect to have a crop of wheat. It is the same with our actions. If you have loving-kindness towards others and compassion for all beings, you will get the result, which is happiness. If you perform negative actions—by becoming angry with others, for example—this will result in suffering. You cannot mix positive and negative tendrel: If you want to achieve happiness by showing anger to someone, it is impossible to do so. It is the wrong method; it is the wrong seed. Anger will always lead to suffering.

Sometimes in the world, people think it is useful to show anger because they think it can solve problems. But regardless of how it looks, and regardless of the temporary situation, the result of anger will definitely be suffering, whether it comes today, tomorrow, years from now, or in the next life. In the worldly field, good actions are not necessarily admired by the majority, and vice versa. We cannot say that if the majority does something then it is a good action. The main thing is to perform actions that benefit others. Good and bad actions, from

the perspective of Dharma, are not the same thing as actions condoned or forbidden by the law. The law condones the killing of millions and millions of animals for human consumption, for example. Although this is allowed by governments around the world, it is not a good action. We have to learn to judge by ourselves if an action is good or bad, and understanding tendrel will help us. If we know tendrel, we will have much better understanding of the law of karma.

In a sutra, the Buddha said, “Actions will not ripen upon others or upon objects. They will ripen upon the mental continuum of the one who has performed them.” Buddhahood is the ultimate result, or goal, and it depends on having the right cause and conditions. It is possible to become a buddha because of tendrel. If we bring together the causes and conditions of buddhahood, we will definitely become buddhas.

Other Aspects of Tendrel

In the West, we are told that we are “independent,” but if we think carefully about this, nothing is independent. We are all dependent on each other and on the environment, and we cannot survive without depending on others. The food that we eat depends on the labor of farmers, workers, grocery sellers, and so forth. The houses that we live in depend on builders,

laborers, and so forth. The clothes that we wear depend on textile producers and a whole chain of distribution. One person cannot make everything they need for themselves. If we recognize this kind of tendrel, then we will have greater respect and more humane feelings towards farmers, builders, laborers—everyone involved in producing the things that we consume.

Another example of tendrel can be found in the natural world when we understand it as an *ecosystem* in which the various parts are all connected. For example, in the winter, there was a big snowfall near the frozen river. As the weather warmed up, the snow melted, providing water that encouraged the growth of flowers and trees, grasses, and other plants. These, in turn, sustain the lives of many animals. The example of nature demonstrates tendrel.



The Wheel of Existence

Twelve Links

Tendrel can be either gross or subtle. The latter is difficult to understand without high realization, but the tendrel of delusion can be explained through the twelve links of dependent origination.

The twelve links are:

- Ignorance, or unawareness (Tib. *marigpa*)
- formation
- consciousness
- name and form
- six senses
- contact
- sensation
- craving
- grasping
- becoming

- rebirth
- aging and death

The twelve links and the six realms of saṃsāra are represented visually in the *wheel of existence*. It is called the wheel existence because it turns and turns without beginning or end. Because of these twelve links we are in saṃsāra, the cycle of existence, repeating the cycle of birth, death, birth, death.

Each link in the chain depends on the previous link. The last link—aging and death—depends on birth, the eleventh link. The chain of causality can be traced all the way to the first link, unawareness. Therefore, if we negate the first link, there will be no second link, and if there is no second link, there will be no third link, and so on. The tendrel of liberation means breaking the chain of the twelve links.

Breaking the Chain by Eliminating Unawareness

Remember that the root defilement is ignorance, from which the other defilements arise. Through our Dharma practice, we deplete the defilements; we abandon nonvirtuous actions, knowing that they result in suffering. Then, we cultivate positive qualities on the basis of renunciation, such as infinite loving-kindness and compassion, and wishing and engaging bodhicitta. As we progress on the path, we gain deeper and

deeper understanding of the ultimate truth. This process is the tendrel of liberation.

When we realize the ultimate truth directly, from our own wisdom, at that moment we will attain the first *bhūmi*. This is the path of seeing. At that time, the defilements are completely eradicated from the mental continuum and we gain liberation from *saṃsāra*.

In the Madhyamaka school, all compounded and non-compounded things are tendrel. In other words, there is a tendrel for all these phenomena—both compounded and un-compounded things. The detailed explanation can be found in the Madhyamaka texts. The Madhayamaka view was, in fact, taught by the Buddha, but the meaning was further illuminated by the highly realized beings, Nāgārjuna and his followers. As previously mentioned, there are two kinds of tendrel mentioned in the Madhyamaka: the tendrel of cause and effect and the tendrel of interdependence. All phenomena are covered by one of these two kinds of tendrel.

Conclusion

Tendrel is the basis of our belief in karma and the basis for our Dharma practice. To practice the Dharma correctly, to remove our sufferings and to attain liberation and eventually buddhahood, we must recognize that all phenomena arise through tendrel. Phenomena are not independent or inherently existent. They are impermanent; all compounded phenomena arise through causes and conditions.

Whenever we suffer because someone has harmed us, we should remember that we have received the harmful action because we committed misdeeds in the past. This does not mean that we should never make efforts to defend ourselves. If we can, we should do that. But we should also recognize that even if, outwardly, it looks like our suffering is caused by others, the real cause of our suffering is our own karma, or our own past actions.

Therefore, instead of blaming others, we should blame our past actions and generate regret for our wrongdoing. Then, we should strive never to do the same thing again in the future. We should avoid giving similar harm to others, too. In short, we should change our own minds.

If we have no karma that can ripen into suffering, then we will not receive harm, even when others are trying to harm us. For example, when Buddha Shakyamuni (Skt. Śākyamuni) was engaged in meditation under the Bodhi tree, many Māras, or demons, tried to disturb him. They tried to harm him by throwing sharp weapons. However, at that time, Shakyamuni had no past action left to ripen into the experience of suffering through others' harmful intentions and acts. This is why he did not receive any harm. Then, through his power of loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom, all of the sharp weapons that were thrown at him were transformed into flowers.

If we understand tendrel, if we think again and again on tendrel, then we will not want to perform negative actions. We will want to do good actions to achieve happiness, and this means, above all, doing Dharma practice.

Finally, understanding tendrel will help us understand the view. The ultimate truth is free from all extremes. To understand the

view, we should know that there is an ultimate truth because there is a relative truth. Without relative truth, there is no ultimate truth. In other words, relative truth and ultimate truth are like right and left, which is, as I said, the tendrel of interdependence. Attaining liberation from the whole of saṃsāra, removing all suffering completely, and attaining buddhahood are the benefits of meditation on tendrel.



- His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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