



Practical Dependent Origination

INTRODUCTION

An important quality of the teaching of the Buddha is that it is true to the nature of how things arise and how they cease; it teaches that everything that arises comes from a cause. The teachings of the Buddha are able to describe the actual causes that give rise to our present state of affairs, as well as the effects that come from how we respond and interact with the world around us in this present state.

The Buddha taught for the purpose of cultivating an understanding of cause and effect on a practical level – as to the causes of our present state, what consequences will come from our present actions, and what actions are likely to come from our present state of mind. This is the Buddha’s teaching on dependent origination (paticca-sammupada), which says that all of our happiness and suffering – all of the difficulties and upsets, stress and dissatisfaction that we meet with in the world as well as all of the peace, happiness, and well-being – has a cause. The teaching of the paticca-sammupada is able to describe this cause. The teaching of dependent origination is the perfect method for us to understand and overcome the causes of suffering and thereby become free from all of suffering and stress that might come in the future.

The Buddha’s teaching on dependent origination is best seen as a practical teaching. Often when people approach the teachings of the Buddha they will consider it from an intellectual point of view, trying to understand it logically, to think of examples by which they can understand and accept the teachings. Often this results in adapting the teaching in order to assimilate it into their own view and understanding of reality. This is not the most proper or beneficial approach to the Buddha’s teaching, especially his teaching on cause and effect, because it is something that can be seen and understood in our experience of reality through the practice of meditation.

When we undertake the practice of meditation or even while living our daily lives, we will encounter difficulties and problems – situations that give rise to wanting and desire or aversions and dislikes, that give rise to conceit, attachment, delusion, jealousy, envy and so on. These situations allow us to see the nature of reality in terms of cause and effect, that if this arises, that will follow, and when this doesn’t arise – if one is able to give up the

behaviour that is causing the problem – then the problem has no chance of arising. The teaching on dependent origination says that reality truly functions according to scientific laws both physically and mentally; that the problems of life do not arise by chance, magic, or supernatural means, but rather according to strict laws of cause and effect that can be used both to create and to remove suffering.

The teaching on dependent origination is not, however, a fatalistic teaching. It doesn't say that everything is strictly governed by a cause; in that sense, it is not making an ultimate claim about an impersonal universal framework outside of individual experience. It is simply stating the precise relationship between the intentions of an individual and their result for that individual. It says that we are in control of our own destiny to the extent of being able to choose our actions in this moment, but not so far as choosing what the outcome of those actions will be. It teaches that every type of mental intention has a corresponding impact on our lives, just as every physical action has a corresponding impact on the physical world.

Once we understand the relationship between actions and their results – between suffering and unwholesome states and between happiness and wholesome states – our minds will naturally incline towards the development of those actions and mind states that lead to happiness, since we do not want to suffer. The problem is not that we want to hurt ourselves; intrinsically all beings are ever seeking for that which is pleasant, that which is peaceful, that which is a cause for happiness. The problem is that we don't understand the nature of cause and effect. We perform certain acts and create certain mind states thinking that they will lead to our benefit, when in fact they are only for our detriment – a cause for more suffering.

Simply because of our lack of understanding, our ignorance and delusion, we create states that are contradictory to our purpose; we want to be happy but we instead cause ourselves suffering, which is certainly a sign of ignorance. This is how the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination begins. The first statement in the teaching is "avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā" – ignorance creates formations. It is due to ignorance that our mind gives rise to all of its intentions of finding happiness in what is unsatisfying. Because of ignorance, it conceives, gives rise to ideas, intentions and views, hoping to achieve some sort of lasting happiness through its machinations.

If we understood that these mental formations were a cause for suffering, we wouldn't give rise to them. If we didn't have our natural ignorance, if we understood that certain activities were unable to bring true happiness – for example cultivating a stable materialistic life, with a nice car, a luxurious house, a good job, and other pleasant entities – then we wouldn't strive towards them and the intention wouldn't arise to seek them out. If we understood reality as it is, we wouldn't in fact cling to anything, since no arisen phenomenon can bring true happiness.

If we understood cause and effect perfectly, we wouldn't even give rise to those ethical acts that create pleasant circumstances, such as having good friends, good food, a good society and so on. We would be content and at peace with ourselves, acting only as was most appropriate at every moment without any desire for the attainment of any state whatsoever. We wouldn't strive for anything in the world, because we would understand that striving to attain or obtain can only build up a concept of me, mine, or I, and a cause only for more suffering and dissatisfaction.

This fundamental aspect of dependent origination is an incredibly powerful teaching, because we would normally think that without intention there could be no happiness; without intention no good could come from

our life. The ultimate truth, however, is that reality is what it is, it arises and ceases, comes and goes, and there is no one thing in the world that can truly make you happy and at peace; nothing that you can create that won't be destroyed; nothing that you can build up that won't fall apart. There's nothing that can truly make you happy or satisfy you. If you can't find happiness and peace as you are – as reality is – then you'll inevitably fall into suffering and disappointment when things change and go against your wishes.

Once we understand reality, we will never have any wishes or any hopes or any desires, because we will be truly happy; we will never want for anything. We will never hope or wish for anything, because we will be content in spite of any suffering or loss we might encounter. This is really the key to the Buddha's teaching – not to create something new that is inevitably going to fall apart and disappear, but to be content no matter what comes, whatever should arise. The key principle in Buddhism is that understanding sets you free. It's not about attaining or creating anything, it's about simply understanding things as they are, as this is what will truly set you free.

This is why insight meditation, wherein one contemplates reality for what it is, is so crucial. By simply observing reality as it is, you change your whole way of looking at it; to the extent that objective observation frees you from the cycle of craving, seeking, obtaining, and losing, it changes your whole way of being. Many people begin to practice meditation thinking that they will attain, create, or experience something special that will not fall apart, disappear, or bring dissatisfaction; as a result they become bored with the meditation when it fails to bring such an experience. This is an important point to understand, that the meditation is not for building up, it's for letting go; it's not for taking on, it's for giving up; it's not for expecting, it's for accepting; it's not for striving, it's for being at peace and at harmony with things as they are – simply put, it's for understanding.

So when we practice meditation, for example watching the breath – the stomach when it rises and falls, or watching our feet move when we walk, or watching any part of reality, we try to simply understand the reality of the experience for what it is. Whether we're walking, standing, sitting or lying down, when we have pain and aches in the body, when we are thinking, or when emotions arise – liking, disliking, etc., we simply remind ourselves of the experience as it is. When walking, we remind ourselves, "walking". When sitting, "sitting". When we feel pain, we remind ourselves, "pain, pain". When we are thinking, "thinking". Liking is just "liking". Disliking, sadness, fear, worry, stress, doubt, confusion, etc. are just "disliking", "sadness", "fear", etc.

When we can simply see reality for what it is in this way, we accomplish the highest goal of the Buddha's teaching. We don't have to create anything. We don't have to change anything. We don't have to change our body. We don't have to get rid of aches and pains. We don't have to get rid of the thoughts in the mind. All we must do is simply remind ourselves: it is what it is – "This is movement in the body", "this is pain", "this is thought", "this is emotion", creating clear awareness of the phenomenon as it is – this is what frees us from suffering.

PART ONE: LIFE-TO-LIFE OVERVIEW

That ignorance leads to formations is the core of the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination. It's actually a good summary of the entire teaching, because that's really how it works. Ignorance gives rise to formations, and because we are ignorant about them, thinking that somehow they will satisfy us, we develop a habit of forming opinions, partialities, addictions and aversions, and so the cycle of creation never ends. The rest of the teaching is for the purpose of explaining in detail about how the cycle works so that we can understand how to practice to

break free from it.

It is formations that give rise to life itself. Formations give rise to becoming and birth. When we pass away from one life, we create a new life. We cling to our partialities and develop the entire existence we see in front of us, with a brain and a body and a world around. We create this, and countless existences like it, over and over again. How it works is explained in the second teaching: that formations give rise to consciousness. The Buddha explained that our mental formations, our volition and intentions, give rise to conscious awareness in this life. This is the second link in the cycle. So at the moment of conception, there arises a consciousness and from that moment on the law of cause and effect works incessantly. This is how the cycle continues in brief – that our ignorance leads us to create mental formations like volition, partiality, judgment, addiction, etc., then, because of mental formations, kamma-born consciousness arises which creates a new existence in line with those formations.

These two sections comprise the first part of the teaching, which can be considered a summary of the entire teaching. The rest of the teaching serve to explain the process in greater detail: the second section details the arising of objective experience, the third explains how our defilements (starting with ignorance) lead us to subjectivity, and the fourth section describes the suffering that comes from subjectivity.

PART TWO: OBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

In looking at an entire lifetime, we must start with the first moment of conception, where new consciousness arises based on the last life. Throughout our whole life, it is consciousness that is most important. In the Buddha's teaching, the mind is the most important factor in development and deterioration of a being. When we consider the above teaching on how ignorance leads to formations, this should be easy to understand. The ignorant mind is the cause of all of our problems, in this life and every life to come.

How does the process work? The mind – consciousness – gives rise to our experience of reality. We experience the physical and mental reality around us according to our state of mind. So this conscious mind is said to give rise to the mental-physical reality we experience from one moment to the next. For instance, when we practice meditation, we experience the stomach, rising and falling. When we breathe, when the stomach rises, when the stomach falls, there is the physical and the mental aspects of the experience. The rising is physical and the knowing of the rising is mental. When we walk, there's the foot moving, which is physical, and the mind knowing it, which is mental. When we feel pain, there's the physical experience and there's the mind that knows it and doesn't like it and decides that it is unpleasant. And so on.

The whole of our lives thus revolve around these two realities, the mind and the resulting mental-physical experience of objects by the mind. This process is not really a problem in and of itself; obviously we cannot avoid experience, and there's no suffering that comes from it directly. Practically speaking, suffering doesn't come from the objects of experience; it comes, as stated, from our misunderstanding of the experience.

Once there arises the mental-physical matrix, there will arise the six senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking – which are the base for physical and mental experience. Mundane consciousness always arises either at the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body or the mind. When seeing, the eye and the light touching it are physical and the mind that is aware of the experience is mental; when hearing, the sound and the ear are physical and the knowing of the sound is mental. Each of the six senses serves as a base for mental-

physical experience of reality.

Because of the six senses, there arises contact between the mental and the physical, which is the next link in the chain of dependent origination. When the mind seeks out the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, or even thoughts, there is contact between the mind and its object; without the six senses, there is no meeting of the two, so the Buddha explained that the six senses lead to contact. Then, once there is contact, there arises feeling, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; without the mind coming in contact with the senses, feeling cannot arise, so the Buddha explained that feeling arises based on contact.

These five aspects of reality – consciousness, mental-physical experience, the senses, contact, and feeling – are the neutral aspects of reality. Life would be without suffering if our minds were able to stop at feeling and just experience everything as it is. For this reason, these five are the most important aspects of reality for us to investigate. Once we come to understand them clearly, to see them for what they are, we won't resort to further complication, which is where we fall into trouble.

When we practice meditation our goal is simply: knowing when we feel pain, knowing when we feel happy, knowing when we see, knowing when we hear, etc. When we see something we try to know it as seeing, so we say to ourselves “seeing, seeing”. When we hear something we try to know it as hearing, so we say to ourselves “hearing, hearing”. When we feel pain we try to know it as pain, so we say to ourselves “pain, pain”, just reminding ourselves it's only pain, nothing more, nothing less, without giving rise to any projections or judgements about it. This is in line with how the Buddha taught Bahiya, whom the Buddha said was the quickest of his students to attain arahantship.

Bahiya was a man who had been shipwrecked and lost all of his possessions including his clothes. With nothing to cover his body but a piece of wood, he stood by the side of the road and begged for alms. As time went on, people began to think he must be an arahant because of his apparent disdain for ordinary clothing and made regular offerings to him as a result. Some people brought him clothing as an offering but he refused, realizing that accepting clothing would endanger his reputation as a holy man. Eventually, he began to believe himself to be holy as well, falling prey to the undeserved admiration and gifts.

In the end, however, his past goodness saved him when a brahma god who had been a fellow monk with him in the time of a previous Buddha came to admonish him, telling him directly that he was neither an arahant nor practising to become an arahant and that he should go to find the Buddha to teach him the correct path. Immediately, he gave up his occupation and travelled for an entire night to where the Buddha was staying. When he arrived, however, he was told that the Buddha had gone on alms into the city. Rushing out of the monastery, he found the Buddha still walking on the road to the city, and fell down at his feet asking for a brief instruction that would allow him to become an arahant.

The Buddha, seeing that he was still too excited to appreciate such a teaching, put him off three times, telling him it wasn't an appropriate time, since he was on alms. Bahiya pleaded with the Buddha that neither his own life nor the life of the Buddha was certain, and that he was in dire need of a refuge before it was too late. Seeing that Bahiya had lost his excitement during this exchange, the Buddha taught him the brief training that is found in the Bahiya Sutta:

‘ditthe ditthamattam bhavissati, sute sutamattam bhavissati, mute mutamattam bhavissati, viññāte

viññātamattaṃ bhavissatī'ti.

'in what is seen, there will be only what is seen; in what is heard, there will be only what is heard, in what is sensed, there will be only what is sensed, in what is thought, there will be only what is thought.'

The Buddha explained that to the extent that Bahiya could train himself in this simple teaching, "tato tvam, bāhiya, na tena" – "to that extent, Bahiya, there will arise no 'you' because of that," which means that there would be no misinterpretation of the experience as "me", "mine", etc. To the extent, the Buddha continued, that there arises no self, "tato tvam, bāhiya, na tattha" – "to that extent, Bahiya, there will arise no 'you' in regards to that object." To that extent, the Buddha concluded, "nevidha na huraṃ na ubhayamantarena. esevanto dukkhassa" – "There will be neither here nor there or anything in between. This indeed is the end of suffering."

This teaching is perhaps the most simple yet infinitely profound teaching of the Buddha that we have; it is quite simple to practice but very difficult to understand without practising it. Without seeing that the objects of reality are simply mind and body arising and ceasing at every moment, it is impossible to understand the meaning of this teaching. Once we can see this basic fact of reality, that there really is no self or soul or underlying physical or mental substratum to reality, only then will we understand what is meant by "neither here nor there nor in between," since only then will we give up all mental formations of judgement, partiality, identification, etc.

PART THREE: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

No problem would arise for us if we were able to limit our experience to simply knowing the objects of experience for what they are as taught in the Bahiya Sutta. The problem is that as long as we do not understand reality, based on our ignorance, we can't help but give rise to some sort of mental formation, identification, etc., and therefore partiality. It is this partiality that the Buddha singled out as the problem that arises from ignorance. If we see something clearly for what it is, it won't be possible for us to like or dislike it.

This is a difficult point to understand, but it is the simple truth that can be seen by anyone who undertakes the practice prescribed by the Buddha to Bahiya as quoted above. Because we are so mired in greed, anger, and delusion, we think of partiality as an appreciation of some intrinsic quality inherent in the objects of experience. Due to our inability to see experience as it is and to see the objects of experience as simply arising and ceasing without any other inherent positive or negative qualities, we give rise to all sorts of theories and views about reality, which inevitably involve partiality, craving, seeking, obtaining, and finally disappointment and dissatisfaction.

When we see something, for example, we normally conceive of it as either good or bad, beautiful or ugly, me, mine, etc., based on deep-set partiality that has developed out of our ignorance. When we hear a sound, we recognize it as either pleasant or unpleasant sound, the voice of a friend or enemy, melodious or grating, and so on. Once this partiality arises, it will lead to intention in regards to the phenomenon, either to cultivate or suppress it.

This is how all of addiction works. For meditators who have suffered from substance addiction, or addiction to any kind of stimulus whatsoever, they will find that the mind goes through all of these stages during the addiction process, cycling through the different aspects of experience, the causes and effects. Sometimes they will be aware of the physical or mental object of desire – the sight, the sound, the sensation, the thought, etc.

Sometimes they will be aware of the pleasant or unpleasant feelings associated with wanting, obtaining, or not obtaining. Sometimes they will be aware of craving or aversion. By breaking experience up into its parts like this and seeing each part for what it is – not me, not mine, not good, not bad – we can break the cycle of addiction at every moment and eventually reprogram the habits of the mind.

When we watch our experience carefully and develop moment to moment clear awareness, this is the cultivation of wisdom. When we see something, the truth is that it's only seeing; it's neither good nor bad. There's no phenomenon that is intrinsically good or bad, after all; it's simply because of our misunderstanding and the expectations it brings – expecting certain sights, sounds, or experiences to bring pleasure or displeasure – that we give rise to craving.

Craving is divided into three types by the Buddha – craving for sensuality, craving for being, and craving for non-being. Craving for sensuality is the desire to see, hear, smell, taste and feel pleasant experiences. Craving for being is the desire for something to arise and craving for non-being is the desire for something to cease. Altogether, they simply mean wanting – wanting to obtain an experience in the case of those recognized as bringing pleasure and wanting to avoid or suppress an experience in the case of those recognized as bringing suffering.

Because of our ignorant conceptions, conceiving experience as more than simply what it is, we will inevitably put value judgements on it. When we see someone, we immediately give rise to some preconceived notion in regards to them – getting angry and upset because we don't like them or attracted and pleased because we do. Because we aren't able to see the person as simply a collection of momentary experiences, we give rise to craving, and this is what gets us into trouble, because this is how addiction works.

If addiction didn't cause trouble, we wouldn't have to look for a way out of it. The truth of reality, though, is that our cravings drag us into a cycle of addiction from which it is very difficult to break free. This is according to the next link in the teaching, that craving leads to clinging. Craving wouldn't be a problem if it didn't lead to addiction, a habitual clinging to the object out of desire or aversion. People who haven't studied the Buddha's teaching, whether they be Buddhists or non-Buddhists have a very hard time seeing the danger inherent in craving. They generally think that their likes and dislikes are what make them who they are; this is exactly the problem, that we cultivate some conception of self, of "I", of "what I like and dislike", when actually there is no "I", when actually we're creating our personalities as we go along. Out of ignorance, we mistake the addictions cultivated through habitual craving as a self, and so it is ignorance that continues the cycle here as well.

In order to justify our cravings, we say, "I like this, I like that," as though this were adequate justification for the craving. Self-affirmation is the connection between craving and addiction. At the time when we crave something, we think, "yes, that's something I like, this is my preference," and this strengthens and solidifies the craving into a habit. So, there comes to be addiction where we cling to the object, and are unable to let it go. We may become so unable to bear its absence that we will actually cause great suffering for ourselves and others if we don't get it. This is the great danger inherent in simply liking something: that we are not static creatures. We are dynamic, and everything we do and think affects our nature. Craving gives rise to clinging; you can't stop it simply by force of will. You can't simply wish for liking to stay as just liking or craving without giving rise to clinging.

PART FOUR: SUFFERING

Clinging gives rise to becoming, which refers to the creative process – creating circumstances wherein we can manifest what we want and avoid what we do not. Becoming means cultivating and building up – often building up a huge ego or identification with reality as “who I am”: “my status in life, my stable reality, my home, my car, my family” and so on. Based on the cultivation of clinging, we build up our whole reality. The answer to why beings are so diverse – why some are rich while some are poor, some are healthy while some are sick, etc. – is based very much on the paths we have chosen from life to life. Our families, our careers, our personalities, our religious and political affiliations and views all stem from the ways we’ve directed our minds and what we’ve clung to and identified with. All of who we are now comes under the heading of becoming, and it arises mainly because of our habits and partialities.

Finally, due to becoming there arises all of our suffering, all of our stress, all of our dissatisfaction. Our creating, our conceiving, our seeking after experience, gives rise to birth, old age, sickness and death. It gives rise to this contrived existence as a human, an animal, or some other existence. We create existence for ourselves, and it is this existence that gives rise to pain, sickness, conflict, and suffering – the war, famine, poverty, and so on that exist in the world. All this can be seen to arise due to mistaken understanding of the objects of experience and the subsequent craving, clinging, and creating – the idea that somehow the objects of mundane experience can bring true peace and happiness. This is the essence of the Buddha’s teaching, summarized by the four noble truths, that craving leads to suffering. The teaching on dependent origination extrapolates on the four noble truths, pointing out that ignorance is the root cause of craving, and gives the details on the workings of the process as explained above.

SUMMARY

The core of dependent origination is that ignorance leads to mental formations; due to ignorance, objective experience is followed by subjective reaction, addiction, and identification, which in turn bring suffering both in this life and in future lives. This is the essence of the Buddha’s enlightenment, and the essence of what he taught over the next forty-five years before passing away into complete freedom from suffering.

The Buddha’s realization on the night of his enlightenment was that reality works in terms of cause and effect. It was not a theoretical realization. He saw reality working from moment to moment and it was due to this realization that he became enlightened. He saw that it is truly out of ignorance that we give rise to karmic intention – even the intention to help ourselves or others, to do good things for ourselves or others, to create a life that is supposedly going to make us happy.

Even giving rise to good intentions is due to ignorance. If we understood reality for what it was, we wouldn’t see any need to create anything. We would be content and comfortable and happy and at peace no matter what the nature of our experience. Our experience of reality would simply be the conscious experience of physical and mental phenomena at the six senses; it would stop at contact and feeling. We would feel both pleasure and pain but we wouldn’t attach to them as good or bad. Anything that we experienced would simply be what it is. We would see it clearly for what it is, not placing any judgement on it other than as an arisen phenomenon that comes to be and then ceases.

If we understood reality perfectly as it is, we would live our lives in the way that many of us truly think that we

live our lives already. Most beings assume they live their lives in a very natural, very normal manner. Some even claim that they experience great peace and happiness in their “normal” lives. Only when one takes up close observation of the moment-to-moment experience, will one see that ordinary life is actually filled with much suffering as a result of craving and clinging, and that ordinary life is not really natural or normal at all.

Ordinary experience of reality is only tangential. Without mindfulness, we tend to experience the objects of experience for a single moment, then race off into forming ideas and concepts, judgments and identifications with the object. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, or think something, immediately our delusion leads us into craving, which leads clinging, creating, and ultimately conflict and suffering – not getting what we want, getting what we don’t want, being dissatisfied and disappointed, experiencing sorrow, lamentation and despair, and so on.

The teaching on dependent origination is an incredibly important teaching for people with a genuine desire to become free from suffering. The understanding of the process of cause and effect and the breaking of the cycle of addiction is really the essence of the meditation practice; we practice meditation in order to cure our minds of suffering, and so it is the hope that those reading this will take the time to understand and put this teaching into practice. Please don’t be satisfied simply by intellectual understanding of the Buddha’s teaching; take the time and effort to put it to good use in your own life. I wish for this teaching to be of benefit to all of you and that, through your practice of the Buddha’s teaching, you are able to find true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering.

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