

Dependent Origination

In the Buddha's teachings, the second noble truth is not a theory about what happens to somebody else, but is a process which is going on over and over again in our own lives—through all our days, and countless times every single day. This process in Pali is called *pañicca-samuppāda*, sometimes translated as "dependent origination" or "co-dependent origination" or "causal interdependence."

The process of dependent origination is sometimes said to be the heart or the essence of all Buddhist teaching. What is described in the process is the way in which suffering can arise in our lives, and the way in which it can end. That second part is actually quite important.

Pañicca-samuppāda is said to be the heart of right view or right understanding. It is an understanding that is also the beginning of the eight-fold path, or an understanding that gives rise to a life of wisdom and freedom. The Buddha went on to say that when a noble disciple fully sees the arising and cessation of the world, he or she is said to be endowed with perfect view, with perfect vision—to have attained the true dharma, to possess the knowledge and skill, to have entered the stream of the dharma, to be a noble disciple replete with purifying understanding—one who is at the very door of the deathless. So, this is a challenge for us.

What the *pañicca-samuppāda* actually describes is a vision of life or an understanding in which we see the way everything is interconnected—that there is nothing separate, nothing standing alone. Everything effects everything else. We are part of this system. We are part of this process of dependent origination—causal relationships effected by everything that happens around us and, in turn, effecting the kind of world that we all live in inwardly and outwardly.

It is also important to understand that freedom is not found separate from this process. It is not a question of transcending this process to find some other dimension; freedom is found in this very process of which we are a part. And part of that process of understanding what it means to be free depends on understanding inter-connectedness, and using this very process, this very grist of our life, for awakening.

Doctrinally, there are two ways in which this process of *pañicca-samuppāda* is approached. In one view it is held to be something taking place over three lifetimes, and this view goes into the issues of rebirth and karma. My own approach today is the second view, which I think is really very vital and alive, which looks at *pañicca-samuppāda* as a way of understanding what happens in our own world, inwardly and outwardly, on a moment-to-moment level. It's about what happens in our heart, what happens in our consciousness, and how the kind of world we experience and live in is actually created every moment.

To me, the significance of this whole description is that if we understand the way our world is created, we also then become a conscious participant in that creation. It describes a process that is occurring over and over again very rapidly within our consciousness. By this time in the day, you have probably all gone throughout countless cycles of dependent origination already. Perhaps you had a moment of despair about what you had for breakfast or what happened on the drive out here, a mind-storm about something that happened yesterday, some sort of anticipation about what might happen today—countless moments that you have gone through where you have experienced an inner world arising: I like this; I don't like this; the world is like this; this is how it happened; I feel this; I think that.

Already this early in the day, we could track down countless cycles of this process of *pañicca-samuppāda*—when we've been elated, when we've been sad, when we've been self-conscious, fearful—we've been spinning the wheel. And, it is important to understand this as a wheel, as a process. It is not something static or fixed, not something that stays the same. You need to visualize this as something alive and moving, and we'll get into how that happens.

The basic principle of dependent origination is simplicity itself. The Buddha described it by saying:

When there is this, that is.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.

When all of these cycles of feeling, thought, bodily sensation, all of these cycles of mind and body, action, and movement, are taking place upon a foundation of ignorance—that's called *samsara*. That sense of wandering in confusion or blindly from one state of experience to another, one state of reaction to another, one state of contraction to another, without knowing what's going on, is called *samsara*.

It's also helpful, I think, to see that this process of dependent origination happens not only within our individual consciousness, but also on a much bigger scale and on more collective levels—social, political, cultural. Through shared opinions, shared views, shared perceptions or reactions, groups or communities of people can spin the same wheel over extended periods of time. Examples of collective wheel spinning are racism or sexism, or the hierarchy between humans and nature, political systems that conflict, wars—the whole thing where communities or groups of people share in the same delusions. So understanding dependent origination can be transforming not only at an individual level, but it's an understanding about inter-connectedness that can be truly transforming on a global or universal level. It helps to undo delusion, and it helps to undo the sense of contractedness and the sense of separateness.

In classical presentations, this process of dependent origination is comprised of twelve links. It is important to understand that this is not a linear, progressive, or sequential presentation. It's a process always in motion and not static at all. It's also not deterministic. I also don't think that one link determines the arising of the next link. But rather that the presence of certain factors or certain of these links together provide the conditions in which the other links can manifest, and this is going to become clearer as we use some analogies to describe how this interaction works.

It's a little bit like a snowstorm—the coming together of a certain temperature, a certain amount of precipitation, a certain amount of wind co-creating a snow storm. Or it's like the writing of a book: one needs an idea, one needs pen, one needs paper, one needs the ability to write. It's not necessarily true that first I must have this and then I must have this in a certain sequential order, but rather that the coming together of certain causes and conditions allows this particular phenomena or this particular experience to be born.

It is also helpful to consider some of the effects of understanding *pañicca-samuppāda*. One of the effects is that it helps us to understand that neither our inner world, nor our outer world is a series of aimless accidents. Things don't just happen. There is a combination of causes and conditions that is necessary for things to happen. This is really important in terms of our inner experience. It is not unusual to have the experience of ending up somewhere, and not knowing how we got there. And feeling quite powerless because of the confusion present in that situation. Understanding how things come together, how they interact, actually removes that sense of powerlessness or that sense of being a victim of life or helplessness. Because if we understand how things come together, we can also begin to understand the way out, how to find another way of being, and realize that life is not random chaos.

Another effect of understanding causes and conditions means accepting the possibility of change. And with acceptance comes another understanding—that with wisdom, we have the capacity to create beneficial and wholesome conditions for beneficial and wholesome results. And that's the path—an understanding that we have the capacity to make choices in our lives that lead toward happiness, that lead toward freedom and well being, rather than feeling we're just pushed by the power of confusion or by the power of our own misunderstanding. This understanding helps to ease a sense of separateness and isolation, and it reduces delusion.

A convenient place to start in order to gain some familiarity with the process of dependent origination is often with the first link of ignorance. This is not necessarily to say that ignorance is the first cause of everything but it's a convenient starting place:

With ignorance as a causal condition, there are formations of volitional impulses. With the formations as a causal condition, there is the arising of consciousness.

With consciousness as a condition, there is the arising of body and mind (*nāma-rupa*). With body and mind as a condition, there is the arising of the six sense doors. (In Buddhist teaching, the mind is also one of the sense doors as well as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.) With the six sense doors as a condition, there is the arising of contact. With contact as a condition, there is the arising of feeling. With feeling as a condition, there is the arising of craving. With craving as a condition, there's the arising of clinging. With clinging as a condition, there's the arising of birth. And, with birth as a condition, there's the arising of aging and death. That describes the links.

This process, when reversed, is also described as a process of release or freedom. With the abandonment of ignorance, there is the cessation of karmic formations. With the cessation of karmic formations, there is the falling away of consciousness, and so on.

Ignorance (*avijjā*)

Ignorance is used in Buddhist teachings in a very different way than it is used in our culture. It's not an insult, or an absence of knowledge—it doesn't mean we're dumb. Nonetheless ignorance can be deeply rooted in the consciousness. It may be very invisible to us, and yet it can be exerting its influence in all the ways we think, perceive, and respond. Ignorance is often described as a kind of blindness, of not being conscious in our lives of what is moving us on a moment-to-moment level. Sometimes it is described as perceiving the unsatisfactory to be satisfactory, or as believing the impermanent to be permanent—this is not an unusual experience. Ignorance is sometimes taking that which is not beautiful to be beautiful, as a cause of attachment. Sometimes it is defined as believing in an idea of self to be an enduring and solid entity in our lives when there is no such thing to be found. Or as not seeing things as they actually are, but seeing life, seeing ourselves, seeing other people through a veil of beliefs, opinions, likes, dislikes, projections, clinging, attachments, et cetera, et cetera. Ignorance flavors what kind of speech, thoughts, or actions we actually engage in.

Formations (*sankhāra*)

Ignorance is the causal condition or climate which allows for the arising of certain kinds of *sankhāras*—volitional impulses or karmic formations. In a general sense we're all formations; we're all *sankhāras*. Everything that is born and created out of conditions is a formation. Dependent origination gets a little more specific: it talks about intentional actions as body formations, intentional speech as both body and mind formations, and thoughts or states of mind as mental formations. As such it is describing the organization or shaping of our thinking process in accordance with accumulated habits, preferences, opinions. *Sankhāras* lend a certain fuel to the spinning of the wheel. Within a given cycle, they interact and form more and more of themselves.

There is also a constant interaction of the inner and outer, through which the whole cycle keeps getting perpetuated. Some of the formations arise spontaneously in the moment, and some are ways of seeing or ways of reacting that have been built up throughout our whole life. Due to their repetitive use, these *sankhāras* become somewhat locked or invested in our personality structures, and stay close to the surface as more automatic or habitual ways of response. However, it is important to understand that each *sankhāra* is actually new in every moment. They arise through contact, through certain kinds of stimulation. We tend to think of them as habitual or ever-present because of how we grasp them as something solid. But in our encounter with them in the present moment, they are not presented to us as history or as something that is there forever.

Consciousness (*vinnana*)

Formations condition the arising of consciousness. Consciousness is used in the sense of the awareness of all the sensations that enter through the sense doors. So there is the consciousness of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. At any given time, one or the other of these sense door consciousnesses dominates our experience. Consciousness also describes the basic climate of the mind at any particular moment—the way it is actually shaped or flavored. So any particular moment might be aversive or dull or greedy, for example, though without interest or intention some of these flavorings of consciousness may not be noticed. Consciousness is also interactive: not only is it shaped by formations and by ignorance, it is also shaping everything going on around us—regardless of whether we pay attention to it or not.

Name and Form (*nāma-rupa*)

Consciousness gives rise to *nāma-rupa*, which is sometimes translated as mind and body, but that's a little too simplistic. *Rupa*, or body, describes not only our own body but all other bodies and all forms of materiality. *Nāma*, or mind, describes the feelings, the perceptions, the intentions, the contact, and the kind of attention we give to what appears in the field of our awareness. So *nāma* describes the whole movement of mind in all its components in relationship to materiality. This is how it works: there's an arising of *rupa*, and then *nāma* creates concepts or attitudes about it. The kind of relationship we have with any material form, including our own body, is shaped by what's going on in the mind, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. So the shape of the mind and our body, this *nāma-rupa*, is always changing, always moving, never staying the same. Consciousness, body, and mind are always interdependent, with consciousness leading the body and the mind to function in a certain way. If a consciousness has arisen flavored by anger or by greed, by depression, by anxiety—or whatever—it provides the conditions for the body and mind to organize itself in a particular way.

All of the events that have taken place so far in these links of ignorance, karma formations, consciousness, and mind/body—these are actually the most important steps in the generation of karma. These volitional impulses—what is happening in the body and the mind—are actually the generation of karma.

Six-Senses (*sal-āyatana*)

We go on from body and mind to the six sense doors or the six sense spheres, for it is the psycho-physical organism that provides us the capacity to see, hear, smell, taste touch and think. One of the deeper understandings we can have is to acknowledge that the mind is one of the sense-spheres. The thoughts, images and perceptions that arise and pass away in the mind are not so essentially different from the sounds or bodily sensations that come and go in the realm of the senses. We may sometimes have the impression that mind is constant or always "on duty," but a little bit of a deeper exploration of what happens within the mind actually shatters that perception.

Contact (*phassa*)

When the sense doors are functioning, contact arises. Contact is this meeting between the sense door and the sense information—I ring the bell, hearing arises. You smell something cooking in the kitchen, the smell arises through the nose sense door. The arising always involves the coming together of the sense door, the sense object and consciousness—the three elements together constitute contact. The Buddha once said that with contact the world arises, and with the cessation of contact there is the cessation of the world. This statement acknowledges the extent to which we create our world of experience by selectively highlighting the data of the senses. Each moment of contact involves isolating an impression out of the vast stream of impressions that are present for us in every moment as we sit here. Contact is what happens when something jumps out of that background and becomes the foreground. When we are paying attention to it, there's a meeting of the sense object and consciousness and the sense door. That is contact.

Feeling (*vedanā*)

Contact is the foundation or the condition for the arising of feeling. In speaking about feeling here we are not speaking about the more complex emotions such as anger or jealousy or fear or anxiety, but the very fundamental level of feeling impact that is the basis not only of all emotions but of all mind states and responses. We are speaking about the pleasant feeling that arises in connection with what is coming through any of the sense doors; or the unpleasant feeling, or those feelings that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This doesn't mean they are "neutral," in the sense of a kind of nothingness.

Some feelings are certainly there, but they don't really make a strong enough impression to evoke a pleasant or

painful feeling response in us. Actually the impressions and sensations and experiences that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant are some of the more interesting data received by our system.

It is important to acknowledge that the links of contact, of sense doors and feeling that we have been talking about are neither wholesome nor unwholesome in and of themselves; but they become the catalyst of what happens next. The sense doors, the feelings and the contact are the forerunners of how we actually react or respond and how we begin to weave a personal story out of events or impressions that all of us experience at all times. Therefore contact, feeling and sense doors are pretty important places to pay attention.

Craving (*tanha*)

Where does craving come from? From our relationship to feeling; feeling is the condition for craving. This craving is sometimes translated as "unquenchable thirst," or a kind of appetite that can never be satisfied. Craving begins to be that movement of desire to seek out and sustain the pleasurable contacts with sense objects and to avoid the unpleasant or to make them end. It's the craving of having and getting, the craving to be or to become someone or something, and the craving to get rid of or to make something end.

Pleasant feelings or impressions are hijacked by the underlying tendency for craving; and unpleasant feelings are hijacked by aversion. And when a feeling is felt as neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it is also hijacked, in this case by the deluded tendency to dismiss it from our consciousness and say it doesn't matter. Our sense of self finds it very hard to have an identity with any impression or sensation which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

It is at the point where craving arises in response to pleasant or unpleasant feeling that our responses become very complex, and we run into a world of struggle. When we crave for something, we in a way delegate authority to an object or to an experience or to a person, and at the same time we are depriving ourselves of that authority. As a result, our sense of well being, our sense of contentment or freedom, comes to be dependent upon what we get or don't get. You all know that kind of restlessness of appetite—there's never enough; just one more thing is needed; one more experience, one more mind state, one more object, one more emotion, and then I'll be happy.

What we don't always see through when we are in the midst of ignorance is that the way such promise is projected, externalized, or objectified, is actually something which always leaves us with a sense of frustration. We are dealing here with a very basic hunger, and we allow our world to be organized according to this hunger by projecting the power to please or threaten onto other things.

But the important thing to remember is that craving is also a kind of moment-to-moment experience; it arises and it passes.

Clinging (*upādāna*)

Craving and clinging (also called grasping) are very close together. Craving has a certain momentum, a certain one-way direction, and when it becomes intense, it becomes clinging. Now, one way that craving becomes clinging is that very fixed positions are taken; things become good or bad; they become worthy or unworthy; they become valuable or valueless. And the world is organized into friends and enemies, into opponents and allies according to what we are attached to or what we grasp or get hold of. That sense of becoming fixed reinforces and solidifies the values that we project onto experience or objects. But it also reinforces belief systems and opinions, and the faculty of grasping holds on to images of self. "I am like this." "I need this." "I need to get rid of this," and so on. And, often, many things in this world are evaluated according to their perceived potential to satisfy our desires. What all this does is actually make us very busy. Think about the situations when you really want something, how much activity starts to be generated in terms of thinking and plotting and planning and strategizing: you know, the fastest route to get there from here, the most direct route to make this happen.

Traditionally, clinging is often broken down into four different ways in which we can make ourselves suffer. There is the clinging to sensuality or sense objects. The other side of clinging to sense objects is clinging to views, theories, opinions, beliefs, philosophies—they become part of ourselves. Another form that grasping takes is clinging to certain rules—the belief that if I do this, I get this. Or one says, "this is my path. This is going to take me from here to there." The last of the forms of clinging Buddha talked about was clinging to the notion of "I am"—the craving to be someone, and the craving not to be someone, dependent on clinging to an idea and an ideal of self. This notion of self is perhaps the most delusionary force in our lives.

Becoming (*bhava*)

Clinging is followed by becoming or arising—the entire process of fixing or positioning the sense of self in a particular state of experience. Any time we think in self-referential terms, "I am," "I am angry," "I am loving," "I am greedy," "I know," "I'm this kind of person," and so on, an entire complex of behavior is generated to serve craving and clinging. I see something over there that I've projected as "this is going to make me really happy if I get this," and I organize my behavior, my actions, my attention in order to find union with that. This is the process of becoming—becoming someone or something other than what is.

Birth (*jāti*)

Birth, the next link in the chain of dependent origination, is the moment of arrival. We think "I think I got it!" "I found it (the union with this image or role or identity or sensation or object)," "I am now this"—the emergence of an identity, a sense of self that rests upon identifying with a state of experience or mode of conduct, the doer, the thinker, the seer, the knower, the experiencer, the sufferer—this is what birth is. And there is a resulting sense of that birth, of one who enjoys, one who suffers, one who occupies, one who has all the responsibility of that birth.

Aging and Death (*jarā-marana*)

Birth is followed by death in which there is the sense of loss, change, the passing away of that state of experience. "I used to be happy;" "I used to be successful;" "I was content in the last moment," and so on. The passing away of that state of experience, the feeling of being deprived or separated from the identity, "I used to be..." is the moment of death. In that moment of death, we sense a loss of good meditation experience, the good emotional experience. We say it's gone. And associated with that sense is the pain and the grief, the despair of our loss.

These different factors interact to create certain kinds of experiences in our lives. What is important to remember is that none of this is predetermined. Just like the climate for snow, the presence of certain of these links is going to allow other experiences to happen. Not that they must happen, or definitely will happen, but they allow for certain experiences to happen. This may sound like bad news in the beginning, but we get to the good news later.

The second noble truth of dependent origination describes a process that happens every single moment of our lives. But clearly there is a distinction between a process and a path, and it is an absolutely critical distinction. One doesn't actually want to continue in life just as a spectator, watching the same process happening over and over and over again—a spectator of our own disasters. Awareness is actually something a bit more than simply seeing a process take place. In choosing to be aware, we make a leap which is really about an application of a path in our lives, otherwise mere seeing of the process becomes circular and we continue to circle around. The path is what actually takes us out into a different process.

Now, the third noble truth [the cessation of suffering] is not a value judgment in itself; it is simply a portrayal of the way in which it is possible to step off a sense of being bound to this wheel of *samsara* or to the links of dependent origination. It is significant to remember that it doesn't have to be any one link that we step off or that there is only one place where we can get out of this maze. In fact, we can step out of the maze and into something else at any of the links.

The well-known Thai meditation master Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu describes the path out of suffering as "the radiant wheel." It is also called the wheel of understanding or the wheel of awakening, in which the fuel of greed, anger, and delusion which give us the feeling of being bound to the wheel of *samsara*, is replaced by the fuel of wise reflection, ethics, and faith.

One portrayal of the alternate wheel is that wise reflection, ethics, and faith lead to gladness of heart and mind, the absence of dwelling in contractedness and proliferation. The gladness is in itself a condition for rapture, a falling in love with awareness. The rapture is a condition for calmness and calmness is a condition for happiness. Happiness is a condition for concentration; concentration is a condition for insight; insight is a condition for disenchantment or letting go, and letting go is a condition for equanimity, the capacity to separate the sense of self from states of experience so that an experience can be just an experience rather than be flavored by an "I am"-ness of a self. And equanimity in itself is a condition for liberation and the end of suffering.

© Christina Feldman

Source: This article, originally published in *Insight Journal*, has been excerpted from a program offered by Christina Feldman at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (149 Lockwood Road, Barre, Massachusetts 01005) in 1998. Website: www.bcbsdharma.org/

Insight Journal is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)