Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:33

Tonight I'd like to talk about the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination.

This teaching is one of the most fundamental and most challenging—in a way, most difficult to understand—of the Buddha's teachings. It's basically a detailed exposition of the second noble truth, the second noble truth being that the cause of suffering is craving. The exposition of dependent origination goes into great depth about how craving leads to suffering, describing a whole set of causes and conditions that lead us into suffering.

Sometimes this teaching is called the Buddha's middle teaching. I think we're most familiar with the middle way, the middle path that the Buddha taught. The middle teaching is not so much a practice but an understanding, a description of the way things are for us usually in the world. The middle path, by contrast, is the set of practices that implement a way leading to an understanding of the middle teaching.

So I'm going to reread a sutta that I read part of the other day:

"This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality, upon the idea of existence and the idea of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of existence in regard to the world. 'All exists,' Kaccāna—this is one extreme. 'All does not exist'—this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle.

"With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be. With volitional formations as condition, consciousness. With consciousness as condition, name and form. With name and form as condition, the six sense bases. With the six sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feeling. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, existence. With existence as condition, birth. With birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."

So he teaches this as a middle teaching between the understandings of existence and non-existence. Things don't exist in the way we normally think of them existing, but there is a chain of conditions that leads to a kind of stream. And if we think of things as not existing, that's also not correct, because there is this stream.

This teaching of dependent origination is a complex teaching, as you may have heard from that long list—twelve links in this chain that he described. And I will go through them tonight, so buckle your seat

belts.

The complexity of this teaching was underscored by Ānanda in an interchange with the Buddha. One day Ānanda came to the Buddha and said something along the lines of, "This teaching on dependent origination seems so clear to me." And the Buddha said something like, "Say not so, Ānanda. This teaching on dependent origination is very profound. It seems profound, and it is profound. One who understands dependent origination understands the entirety of my teaching."

So essentially, a penetrative understanding of this teaching is equated with full liberation. We probably won't understand it entirely tonight—but there's always a possibility. There's one sutta that I love to contemplate where there was a discussion between a monk and another group of monks. They were talking about a topic, and in the course of that discussion, which was basically a Dhamma talk, both the person who was speaking and the whole group of listeners became fully enlightened. So there's hope for all of us tonight.

I hope to make this talk both clear and practical, because this teaching can be kind of obscure at times. But there are some ways that in my own practice I have seen this to be very useful.

On the practical side, just to begin: why talk about this? Why go through this very detailed description? Well, partly it is a very clear causal description of how suffering comes to be. And because it describes how suffering comes to be as a chain of causes and conditions, and describes it in a very impersonal way, we can begin to understand our own suffering as being an impersonal phenomenon—not something that is particularly due to who I am, but just because of the fact of being alive. We can see the impersonal nature of this unfolding process of suffering through understanding a little bit about this teaching.

We can also understand that through this description of the causes of suffering, when we understand how suffering is caused, we may be able to connect with choices that will lead us out of this chain. In understanding the causes of suffering, we can make skillful choices that will help to unravel this chain.

So I'll go through these twelve links again. Ignorance is typically the first link—ignorance leading to mental formations.

Mental formations conditioning consciousness. Consciousness conditioning name and form—mentality and materiality is another translation of that; *nāma-rūpa* is the Pali. Name and form conditioning the six sense bases. The six sense bases conditioning contact. Contact conditions feeling. Feeling conditions craving. Craving conditions clinging. Clinging conditions becoming. Becoming conditions birth. Birth conditions aging and death—and thus the entire mass of suffering.

Now, a couple of things to point out about this. One is that this is generally taught as a cyclic chain. It's not a one-way path; it actually loops back on itself. So suffering is understood to in turn further condition more ignorance, leading through the cycle again.

The other thing is that it is a causal chain. The typical way we think about causality is that A causes B—B happens because of A. And that is one of the kinds of causality described in the Abhidhamma, the text on Buddhist psychology. I believe in the Abhidhamma there are something like twenty-four different kinds of causality described with respect to this chain. I'm just going to mention three of them, and I'll try to point to these a little bit as I go through the more detailed description of the elements of the chain.

There's the one I just mentioned, what we might call inducement—that because of something, something else happens. A causes B. Another one is what we might call mutual conditioning, where A conditions B and B conditions A. It's a back-and-forth relationship. The most obvious example of this kind of conditioning is the chicken and the egg. You have a chicken, and because of the chicken, the chicken can produce the egg, and then from the egg comes a chicken. So it's mutual conditioning. You're not going to have the chicken without the egg, and you're not going to have the egg without the chicken.

And then there is what is called arising together—two things arising simultaneously. Co-arising, it is sometimes called. This may be two things being caused by something else, but you're not going to have those two things apart from each other. One of the standard examples of this in the texts, at least in my understanding, is that when there is some kind of contact with the sense bases, there is an arising of a moment of consciousness that contains feeling and perception. Feeling and perception arise together. There's not one without the other, and there's not really a sense that feeling causes perception or perception causes feeling. They arise together. This is co-arising.

I think the fact that there are all these different kinds of conditionings is part of what makes this teaching so complex. I'm not going to try to go into all of the complexities; I'm going to try to keep it basically pretty straightforward tonight.

The classical teaching on this chain breaks it into three lives. Basically, there are conditions from a previous life that led into how we are in this life, and the conditions in this life will in turn impact how we are in the next life. In this form, the first two links—ignorance and mental formations—are understood to be part of a past life. Then the middle links of the chain, from consciousness through to becoming, are understood to be in this life. And everything that happens in this life is said to then lead into birth, aging, and death in the next life.

Now, it's obvious that this is a pedagogical tool, because in the previous life we have birth and aging and death; in this life we have birth and aging and death. We don't have to wait until our next life to have birth and aging and death. So it's obvious that this is a pedagogical tool—though the literal phrasing of the links does support this kind of multiple-life interpretation.

The terms used do support this multiple-life interpretation—birth does seem to indicate the birth of a body, aging and death the physical aging and death of the body. But the suttas also support an understanding of this process of dependent origination, this full cycle, as describing moment-to-moment experience.

In this case, the term for birth, *jāti*, is understood to be the birth into an identity, the birth into a state of selfing, basically. And the term for aging and death is understood to be the decay, the cessation of that state of being—the aging and cessation of moment-to-moment experience.

As an aside, I found something very interesting regarding these interpretations. I had heard the multiple-life model as the primary way of teaching this many, many times, with the understanding that the moment-to-moment interpretation was also possible. But I had understood that moment-to-moment reading as a more modern interpretation, something laid on top of the suttas rather than actually present in the Pali Canon.

Then I read an article by Venerable Payutto, who actually pointed out that in the Abhidhamma, which is part of the Pali Canon, there are two descriptions given of dependent origination. One is this multiple-life model of understanding how causes in a past life impact us in this present life, and how causes in this present life impact us in a future life. The other teaching is about moment-to-moment arising.

In the Abhidhamma texts, there are only five pages devoted to the multiple-life model. And there are seventy-two pages devoted to the moment-to-moment model.

In the commentarial tradition that followed the suttas and the Pali Canon, this emphasis is reversed. In the commentaries, the multiple-life model receives much more attention, and the moment-to-moment model receives much less. Our Theravāda tradition draws heavily on the commentaries, so it makes sense to me now that this multiple-life understanding is what I was mostly taught. But the moment-to-moment teaching is there. It's in the Pali Canon.

This second view—that dependent origination describes a moment-to-moment arising of experience—is one that I have personally understood, at least in parts. It has meaning for me. There's a clarity to it that helps illuminate my moment-to-moment unfolding of experience. I don't have any personal experience of previous lives or any intimations of future lives, so that teaching makes it more difficult for me to connect with dependent origination.

I'm going to approach this teaching this evening from the moment-to-moment understanding. I'll talk about it as a process that describes the moment-to-moment unfolding of suffering in our lives.

I'm going to do this in a slightly unconventional way. Typically, people begin talks on dependent origination by starting with the first link in the chain, ignorance. But I'm not going to do that. I'm going to start somewhere in the middle, where I think it's actually a little easier to understand.

Basically, we have a mind and a body. We're conscious, and we have this body and mental processes going on. Because of that, we experience input from the six sense bases. These six sense bases are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body or touch sense organ, and the mind. We receive sense impressions through these six sense bases.

Through these sense bases, through contact with things in the world—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch—we experience contact. This is the next link in the chain. So we have consciousness, mind and matter, the six sense bases, and because of the six sense bases, we have contact. We experience contact.

This is all relatively straightforward. It's just biology at this point. There's contact with the sense base. Based on that contact, each sense impression in all the sense doors has a flavor to it. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the feeling tone of experience. So based on contact, conditioned by contact, feeling arises.

Based on this feeling tone—and we've talked about much of this in various talks—based on this feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, if something is pleasant, we like it. We want it. We want more of it. If something is unpleasant, we don't like it. We want to get rid of it. If something is neutral, we often don't connect to it or notice it at all.

So based on this feeling tone, there is wanting—wanting more of the pleasant, wanting less of the unpleasant, perhaps not wanting to connect to the neutral. We're kind of like a simple machine that tries to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant.

We usually act on this process of wanting automatically. Something pleasant arises, there's liking, there's wanting, and we move out to get it, to grab it, to hold onto it. We take some kind of action to grasp that object. This is clinging. Craving leads to clinging.

Once an object is clung to, our intentions and actions rally to serve that clinging—to produce or control things, to maintain the sense that we have control over what we have clung to. These intentions and actions that operate in the service of clinging are what we call becoming. We actually like becoming. We like feeling like we know where we're headed. We like feeling like we have some sense of control, like we know something.

Following on from becoming—the intention toward control, the doing around our clinging—birth arises. This is birth into some kind of identity. Things become "me" or "mine." This might take an obvious form: "This is my thing, this is my shawl." Or it might be something more subtle, like "I'm the kind of person who likes to walk in the woods." Birth is where there's a sense of identity, a sense of one separate from another. When there's self, there's other.

This chain of dependent origination can be understood not only as a description of how suffering is created, but also as a description of the process of identification, the process of selfing that we've explored in past weeks. From here, once there is this birth, the Buddha says that suffering is inevitable. Having taken birth into an identity, there is the inevitable falling apart of that identity—evidence that we don't have the control over that identity that it feels it should have.

Let me offer a couple of examples to give you more of a flavor for these links in the chain. The first example concerns sense pleasure. There's contact with a sense object—say, the sight of a beautiful flower.

There's contact with the eye, and then a feeling of pleasure arises based on that contact. Based on that feeling of pleasure, wanting forms—this desire to have this pleasant thing. Then comes clinging, the actual taking possession.

There's sometimes a question about the distinction between craving and clinging. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator of the Pali Canon, offers a helpful description. He talks about craving as the movement of a thief reaching out to take something, and clinging as the moment he has grabbed it. They lead from one to another along a continuum, from craving to clinging. So clinging is actually taking possession of the thing we want.

Becoming comprises the intentions and actions designed to control things according to that clinging—to keep the thing protected or safe. Birth is the clear sense of identification or possessiveness: "This flower is mine." It's feeling that one owns or controls or possesses that thing. And then aging and death: one who possesses something must ultimately be separated from it, whether through the loss of the thing or through the death of oneself. All accumulation ends in dispersal. This is one of the teachings around impermanence. Whenever one has something, there will inevitably be separation from it.

So there's suffering in this. If there's attachment to having, there's going to be suffering in the loss. There's also suffering in the fear of loss. The suffering we experience is in direct proportion to the intensity of attachment, the intensity of clinging, and the intensity of identification—that feeling of "I am the one who has this thing."

That's one example. Now another, somewhat more complex, is what we might call a life-state example. This is actually more along the lines of how we typically suffer, because we largely suffer over things that we think we are. We do sometimes suffer over loss of possessions, but I think we really suffer more over some kind of identity that we hold.

"I'm the kind of person who doesn't make mistakes." When we hold such an identity and then make a mistake, there's a conflict with reality, and we really suffer from that.

Let me go through an example of this as well. The contact with the sense door is with the mind—some kind of an idea of being, perhaps an idea of being a good yogi. There's the contact, that contact with the sense door. And then there's some kind of feeling around that. This is probably fairly complex, actually, but for the sake of this example, let's just say that the idea of being a good yogi creates a pleasant feeling. There may be a kind of fantasy around being a good yogi that creates a pleasant feeling tone.

The craving is the desire to have that fantasy, that idea of that pleasurable state, become a reality. The clinging here is around a fixed attitude. It's an intensification of that desire—the desire to become a good yogi becomes intensified to the point where it becomes a fixed attitude: "I need to become a good yogi. I need this to be happy. I will accomplish this." The clinging has more of an intensification to it.

From those fixed attitudes, those beliefs, patterns of behavior arise that serve that belief. We are in the

process of becoming at this point. When those intentions arise to serve those beliefs—the intentions to behave in a certain way in the meditation hall, the intention to follow the schedule, the intention to sit long, whatever it is—those intentions are the process of becoming.

Birth is the sense of taking the identity of that belief. One has the feeling that one is a good yogi. Perhaps everything confirms this. You can sit longer than anybody else, or you eat slower than anybody else, and you walk more slowly and open the doors more carefully. Everything is confirming to you that you are a good yogi. This is the birth. There's this distinct feeling of self that has arisen around this pattern.

Aging and death: whenever there is a sense of a self occupying a position, sooner or later there will be something that happens that deprives that self of that position. There's a sitting where you find you can't stay mindful for two seconds together. This runs counter to the identification, to that birth into that identity, and there is suffering. In my experience, there now becomes some kind of belief: "Oh, I'm not a good yogi." And this is very painful, because what I wanted was to be a good yogi.

Now I'd like to go back to those parts of the chain that I haven't gotten to yet—the ones at the beginning: ignorance, mental formations, and consciousness. But first I want to make the point that because this chain is cyclic, it is understood that suffering leads to ignorance. In fact, the Buddha has a famous quote that suffering either leads to bewilderment or to search:

"And what is the result of suffering? There are some cases in which a person overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, grieves, mourns, laments, beats her breast, becomes bewildered. Or when overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, comes to search outside: 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?' I tell you that suffering results either in bewilderment or in search."

So this suffering leads to ignorance. A main definition of ignorance is not understanding the Four Noble Truths—that's one of the main definitions in the texts. One who does not understand the Four Noble Truths, his mind, her mind is clouded with ignorance. Ignorance means that we don't understand suffering. We don't understand what leads to suffering. In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to our happiness. We think that having what we want will lead to our happiness. But as you have seen, I think, in your own experience, actually having what we want doesn't go very far. It actually just takes us deeper into this cycle of suffering.

Deeper into this cycle of dissatisfaction, we begin to see that actually having what we want doesn't go very far.

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is that suffering is not understood. What causes suffering is not understood. If suffering is met with wisdom and understanding instead of ignorance, this chain leads in a completely different direction. It actually leads out of the chain of suffering and into a chain of liberation. This is one of the places where we can really bring our attention. Understanding suffering with wisdom begins to break this cycle. But mostly we don't meet suffering with wisdom, and

ignorance results.

So the next link: with ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be. Based on ignorance, based on this not understanding suffering, intentions and actions are formed about how we choose things, decide things, do things, behave. These intentions around how we are going to engage in the world—this is mental formation. Mental formations are essentially the habits and patterns that lead us forward in this cycle. We often take the most obvious step to get rid of our unpleasant sensations and to hold on to our pleasant sensations, moving us into this chain of pleasant leading to wanting leading to clinging. This is ignorance leading into mental formation. Because of ignorance, we intend and act in ways that run in line with ignorance, that run counter to wisdom.

With mental formations as a condition, consciousness comes to be. We can think of these habits and patterns, our choices, our intentions, as conditioning the nature of our consciousness and what we experience. For example, if you have a habitual pattern of responding with anger, if there's a habitual inclination towards anger, then that becomes a kind of filter in our consciousness. We tend to pick things out of the environment that confirm or support that anger. We have an orientation towards a pattern. Mental formations are basically an orientation in our minds, and because of that orientation, our consciousness picks certain things out of our environment and doesn't pick other things. Certain things come to consciousness, other things do not come to consciousness, because of those mental formations.

We've talked about this in past weeks, about how filters have us choosing certain experiences out. We filter things in and out of our experience. There's one amazing study some of you may have heard about that really highlights this ability of the mind to filter experience. People were asked to view a short video clip of people passing a basketball to each other. They were told to count the number of times the basketball passed between various people on the team. That was their task while watching this video. The vast majority of people could count the number of passes, but they neglected to see that during the course of this video, a person in a large gorilla suit came out, walked onto the basketball court, danced around for a while, and then walked off. When they were asked about this, they said they hadn't seen it. In fact, they didn't believe it when they were told that it had happened. They didn't believe the gorilla was in the video. This is an example of how a perception can filter in and out experience. Our mental formations, what we are intending to see and do, impacts what we experience, impacts our consciousness.

So consciousness leading to name and form, or mentality-materiality. This is sometimes a confusing term—mind and matter, different translations render it differently. Basically, the materiality part refers to the processes of our body. The mentality part refers to most of the processes of our mind: the process of perception, the process of feeling, the process of mental formations. One very clear definition I've seen is that mentality-materiality is the four aggregates excluding the aggregate of consciousness. We've talked about the aggregates several times—the five aggregates of consciousness, feeling, perception, mental formations, and form, or body. These two links, consciousness and mentality-materiality, are the entirety of the five aggregates: mentality-materiality being those four—feeling, perception, mental formations, and

body—with consciousness being separate.

Now this link is interesting because there is an understanding that these two are mutually conditioning each other. I mentioned the chicken and the egg before. In one sutta, the Buddha described that he saw consciousness conditions mind and matter. When he went back, trying to go further back, he thought, "Well, what conditions that?" Mind and matter conditions consciousness, and consciousness conditions mind and matter. It goes back and forth.

Based on the state of our consciousness—for example, if our consciousness is flavored by anger—then our body may respond, may become tense. We tend to perceive things as unpleasant. We experience things as unpleasant. So at this point we're back where we started: we have a mind and a body. And because we have a mind and a body, there's contact, feeling...

craving—and you can see how, with a mind that is already flavored by ignorance, with mental formations inclined to screen certain things out and certain things in, how this pattern of unfolding conditions will tend to lead us through this cycle over and over again. It's a pretty potent cycle. It tends to reinforce itself.

But it can be broken apart. It can be unraveled with mindfulness.

This chain describes conditions that support and lead to suffering. If the conditions are changed, we can change the course of our minds. And the main way to change the conditions is through mindfulness, understanding, and wisdom. Attention to understanding any of these twelve links will support its unraveling.

So this is good news. Anywhere you are in your experience, wherever you wake up, whatever moment of experience you are waking up into—if you're connecting to it in that moment with mindfulness and non-judgmental awareness, you're working to unravel this chain. You're working to understand the craving, if that's what you've woken up into, or perhaps the feeling of an identification, a strong sense of identity around a beingness of something. You wake up there, you bring the mindfulness there, and it begins to unravel this chain.

There are some particularly weak links to this chain that the Buddha highlighted. I've already mentioned one of them, but I'll come back to it. Two main weak links: the link between suffering and ignorance, and the link between feeling and craving.

As I mentioned before, many of us come to spiritual practice through meeting suffering. And the Buddha said that suffering leads to bewilderment or to search. If that search is lucky enough to hear a liberative teaching, there is the possibility that instead of leading from suffering to ignorance, suffering met with an understanding of a liberative path—instead of leading to ignorance—suffering will lead to faith. Faith that there's a way out of this, that there's a teaching that proclaims a way to work with suffering to become free of it.

And then there's another chain, called the transcendent dependent origination, which takes us from faith to gladness, to rapture, to tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation. In the same kind of causal chain that this chain of suffering leads us step by step into suffering over and over again, this chain leads us step by step to freedom.

The work at this link from suffering is to understand it, to bring mindfulness to it. The first noble truth says suffering should be understood. This has been a huge part of our practice here in these weeks and months—understanding our suffering, not judging it, but understanding how it comes to be in our present moment experience. You've all seen this. You've all seen, even in small ways, how understanding suffering leads to a release from that suffering. It may simply be a small movement of mindfulness that can hold suffering and not be reactive. And in that non-reactivity is a clue, a hint of freedom.

The other link I'd like to mention is the link between feeling and craving. The Buddha emphasized this in many places in the suttas, that paying attention to feeling is a very powerful practice. Part of the reason it's so powerful is because it's the link before which we leap into reactivity. Feeling leads to craving, but that link is relatively weak.

Some of the links, like contact leading to feeling, that's a strong link. I hear that it's possible to see between them. I don't think I've seen that. But I have clearly seen the feeling to craving link and seen that a modicum of mindfulness at feeling just short-circuits that movement to craving entirely. When we can clearly recognize, "Oh, this is a pleasant experience, this is an unpleasant experience," the craving may be completely abandoned. It may not arise at all. This is an extremely powerful practice.

There's a sutta that addresses this. This isn't exactly another chain, but it is a list. I'll read it. This is from the Anguttara Nikāya: "All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings."

This part maps onto those first links of dependent origination in a rough way. Basically we've got contact and feeling as clear places where they link together. Things are rooted in desire, come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. And then it goes in a different direction—kind of like the link from suffering to faith goes in a different direction at that link in the chain.

It says: the foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and Nibbana is their culmination.

This isn't a causal list like dependent origination, but it does point to the link at feeling being mastered by mindfulness and concentration—the moment-to-moment mindfulness of the flow of our experience, the concentration that results from that. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. Clearly seeing and knowing our experience moment to moment, wherever we are in that chain, is the path towards the dismantling of that chain.

The other thing I appreciate about this sutta is that it refers to all things. All things have liberation as their

essence. All things merge in the deathless. All things culminate in Nibbana with mindfulness and concentration. This is all things the Buddha is talking about. The touch of a doorknob, the state of anger—all things culminate in liberation if we attend to them with concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom. It does not matter what we bring our attention to. It doesn't matter where in that chain of suffering we've woken up. It does not matter.

Mindfulness and concentration, combined with a little bit of understanding of how this process works, can lead us out of this chain of suffering to the end of suffering.

All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and Nibbana is their culmination.

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