The Cycle of Suffering: Paṭicca Samuppāda

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:39

Tonight I'd like to talk about the teaching of dependent origination. This teaching is fundamental, foundational to the Buddhist teaching, and it is also an extremely complex teaching. I think of dependent origination, which is a chain of twelve links that describe the causes and conditions that lead to suffering, as a detailed exposition of the second noble truth. It goes into great depth about how suffering comes to be in our experience.

Sometimes dependent origination is called the middle teaching—distinct from what we usually think of as the middle path or middle way. The middle teaching, at least in my understanding, is not a practice but rather a description of how suffering is created in our experience. The middle path is a set of practices that help us to understand and see this teaching in our moment-to-moment experience.

I'll read you a quote from a sutta that talks about how this is a middle teaching, from the Saṃyutta Nikāya:

"This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and upon the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion 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 notion 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, the middle teaching. With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be. With volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. 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, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."

What the Buddha is pointing to here is that largely we think about things in terms of either existing or not existing. He's pointing to this teaching of dependent origination as a counter to that, a middle way between those two extremes. When we see that the origin of experience is in this causal chain—that it's simply a product of causes and conditions creating experience—the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to us. And when we see that the cessation of these very same conditions is just a causal process, the notion of existence doesn't really fit for us either. So this teaching is between these two extremes of existence and non-existence. There is a chain of conditions that leads to a kind of stream, but it's not existence in the way that we think it is. It's not a thing existing; it's a process—a conditioned process of things coming

together and falling apart.

This teaching is complex, with twelve links in the chain of dependent origination, and I will cover them all this evening. This teaching has always been complex. There is an interchange between Ānanda and the Buddha that underscores this complexity. Ānanda comes to the Buddha and says, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear." And the Buddha says, "Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. This dependent origination is profound, and it appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, ruin, and the round of rebirth."

So the Buddha basically equates a penetrative understanding of this teaching with full liberation. We probably won't get there tonight, but there's one sutta that I really like to contemplate, both when giving Dharma talks and when hearing them. It's a story of a monk who's giving a Dharma talk about the five aggregates. He's not fully enlightened, but he's more awakened, more realized than the people he's giving the talk to. So he's explaining to them his understanding about the five aggregates, which they don't really understand very clearly at all. The sutta says that during the process of giving this Dharma talk and having a Dharma discussion—because it was actually a back-and-forth discussion—both all the people who were listening and the person who was giving the talk became fully enlightened. So there's hope for all of us tonight.

I hope to make this talk both clear and practical. This teaching can seem obscure, sometimes almost irrelevant—why do I need to know this? I have actually found it helpful in my own practice to have some understanding of this teaching, and so I'm going to offer it in a way that will hopefully give you some sense of its practicality, why understanding this is helpful, how this teaching can support our practice.

A couple of comments about that just to begin. I think one of the key ways this supports our practice is that it provides such a clear causal description of how suffering is created. This is an impersonal process that's described. It happens in all of our minds.

It's not just me or just you that experience this. It's an impersonal process. So it helps us, seeing this or hearing this teaching—at least for me—to resonate or connect with the impersonal nature of the arising of suffering.

The other aspect of this teaching that is helpful is because it does describe a set of causes and conditions that lead to suffering, and it points to suffering and the causes of suffering as happening in our mental processes. This chain describes a set of conditions leading from one to the other, tending from one to the other.

But as Guy said the other night when he spoke about a portion of this chain of dependent origination, it's not in lockstep once this thing gets started. It's not as if it's just dominoes. It can sometimes seem like

that—we can watch portions of this chain falling as though dominoes were stacked up against each other. But it is as if at some point, through clearly seeing particular aspects of this chain with wisdom, with mindfulness, that chain can be cut. Through seeing how the causes are created in our minds, choices that we make can begin to dismantle this process. Through understanding the causes of suffering, we see that when the causes are not arising, the suffering doesn't arise. And the choices that we make can help support the causes of suffering to not arise.

So the twelve links of dependent origination—I'll just state them right now and then go through them. Ignorance conditions mental formations, conditions consciousness, conditions mentality-materiality. The Pali word for this is namarupa, sometimes translated as name and form. Then name and form, mentality-materiality, conditions the six sense bases—our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Having the six sense bases conditions contact. Contact with the sense bases conditions feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Feeling conditions craving. Craving conditions clinging. Clinging conditions becoming. Becoming conditions birth. Birth conditions old age, sickness, and death—and as the Buddha says, the entire mass of suffering.

Before I go into the links, I want to just point out that this chain is often described not just as a one-way chain to suffering, but as a cycle. So the ending of this chain at suffering doesn't simply end with suffering; it actually loops back. Suffering tends to condition more ignorance—although it doesn't have to, and I'll get to that in a little while. So this cycle loops back on itself. Suffering tends to condition more ignorance, which then sends the cycle into another round.

The classical teaching on this topic, in the commentaries in particular, breaks this chain down into essentially three lives. In that teaching—and I see this potentially as partly a pedagogical way of understanding this cycle—ignorance and mental formations, which are the first two links in the chain, come from a previous life and condition the arising of consciousness in this life. So the chain of dependent origination broken into three lives has the previous life being ignorance and mental formations. Then the links from consciousness through mentality-materiality, six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming—all of that is in this life. And then that conditions our arising into the next life, into birth, and aging and death.

So the literal phrasing of the links, particularly birth, aging, and death, tends to support this notion of this chain being a description of how the round of suffering is carried from life to life. Part of the teaching here serves as a way of understanding a question frequently asked in the time of the Buddha: if there's no self, who gets reborn? His answer to that lies in this chain of dependent origination. It's just causes and conditions flowing.

So the suttas support this understanding of the chain of dependent origination as describing how suffering continues or propagates between lives. And they also support an understanding of the teaching as a description of how suffering is created moment to moment in this life.

If we even think about it, to break it into ignorance and mental formations in the previous life conditioning all of our consciousness, feeling, craving, and clinging in this life—we don't have to even think about a previous life to recognize ignorance happening here and now. It's not just ignorance from a previous life that's conditioning this life. It's ignorance here and now. It's ignorance in this moment that's conditioning the unfolding of our experience and our suffering. We also don't have to wait until the next life to be born and die.

So all of these links, even the ones said to be connected to the previous life, can be laid into this life. Likewise, the links said to be connected with the future life can be seen as overlaid into this life as well. In this case, the term birth is understood not as being born from your mother, but as the birth into an identity, the feeling of self. And the term aging and death can be understood to refer to the passing away, the cessation of moment-to-moment experience—how these identities that come into being pass away, how moment-to-moment experience just changes radically, arising and passing away, moment by moment.

So there are both interpretations: the three lives interpretation and the understanding of the chain of dependent origination as unfolding in moment-to-moment experience. Both can be understood from the suttas.

Now the second interpretation is the one that I connect with most. I don't have any knowledge or intimation of previous lives, so I cannot, in my direct experience, connect with that part of the chain as referring to previous lives. But I can connect with quite a bit, or at least portions—I have seen portions of this chain at work in my own experience. And this has been very meaningful to me, to actually witness this and see how it works. So this is how I'll speak about it tonight, from this perspective.

I'm going to start in kind of an unconventional way. The first link of the chain is ignorance, but I'm not going to start there. I'm going to start kind of in the middle, where Guy started the other night, because this is really the easiest place to begin to connect with what the Buddha is talking about. I actually found a sutta tonight when I was reviewing the suttas that the Buddha gave on dependent origination. There's one sutta where he too begins with: there's the eye and there's a sight and there's contact, and from that contact there's feeling. So in one discourse he actually began right with our physical experience. And that's where I'm going to begin tonight, just starting with our sense bases.

There's contact with those sense bases. So the first link I'm going to talk about is that we have these sense bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and our mind. Because of those sense bases, there is contact with experience. This arises because of those sense bases and because there is consciousness, which is a previous link. If the body was just lying there dead, there's not going to be this contact. But because there is life, because there is consciousness, there's contact with these sense bases. That's the second link tonight. Six sense bases condition contact.

Each one of those contacts with the sense bases produces a feeling to it, a flavor. It's got a flavor: pleasant,

unpleasant, or neutral. This is the vedana, the feeling tone of experience. We've talked about this quite a bit. Based on this feeling tone, in a really straightforward way, natural in a way, if it's pleasant, we like it, we want it. If it's unpleasant, we don't like it, we don't want it. If it's neutral, we may not notice it. But often what arises from here—and in this chain, this is the condition—this feeling tends to condition this wanting. We're kind of like a simple automatic machine that tries to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant in our experience. This is the wanting. This is the craving. Feeling conditions craving.

We usually automatically act on this craving. We take a kind of action to grab onto that thing. That's clinging. There's the wanting and the clinging. As Carol described the other night very beautifully, that distinction: the wanting, the craving, is described as being like the thief that's reaching out to get something. And the clinging is when the thief actually grabs it.

Once something is clung to, our intentions, our actions kind of rally in the service of that clinging—to control it, to make sure it stays in our possession in some way, or to make sure that whatever it is we're clinging to, we can continue to have. This is becoming. It's the entire process, the intentions and actions that are generated to serve the clinging. We like becoming. It actually feels good in a way to know where we're headed, how we'll get there, how we'll control things. So sometimes this becoming feeling can take a subtle form like "I'm in control, I know what I'm doing."

Following on from this becoming is birth into some kind of identity. Things become me or mine or "I am." This might take some obvious form like "this is my shawl," a kind of possessive aspect. Or it might take more of an identity form: "I am a kind of person who does things right."

One little side note about dependent origination, one thing that I find really helpful to reflect on: it describes how suffering comes to be, but it also describes how this process of selfing comes to be. This process of becoming and birth, this identification process, is the process of selfing. We can study the suffering, and by studying the suffering, we're studying the selfing. Or we can study this process of selfing, and we will be seeing how suffering is generated in our experience.

From this point of birth into an identity, suffering is inevitable, because anytime there is a birth into an identity, a birth of any sort, there will be aging and death.

There will be a dismantling of that identity. Whether that identity is a sense of possession—this is mine—the suffering might come from the obvious separation. Somebody picks this up and walks off with it. It's no longer mine, and I suffer because it was mine. I liked it. I enjoyed the feeling of it. And now it is no longer mine. So there can be suffering from that.

Or there can be suffering if you have an identity around being the one who does things right. There may be some evidence pointed out to you that you simply cannot ignore—that perhaps you don't always do things right. You made a mistake. And that shatters the notion of being the one who always does things right. There is a death of that identity.

So I've gone through those links rather briefly, and I'd like to give you some examples. I'm going to offer just one example since I have much more I'd like to cover. There's the obvious example I could give around sense pleasure—the clinging that happens around something pleasant to our senses and the possessiveness that arises. But I think more often, what happens in our suffering, the way this chain unfolds, involves clinging around an identity. And so I'll describe how that might unfold.

You might have a notion arise—the idea of being a good yogi comes into your mind. This is contact with the sense door. The idea arises in the mind. What does it mean to be a good yogi? A thought, a fantasy might appear about being a good yogi. You might, for example, envision telling your teacher about some profound insight. I've had this experience myself—this fantasy comes to mind. That's contact. The idea arises in the mind, we become aware of it. That's contact.

Then there's a feeling tone to that. The feeling tone around this particular idea or fantasy may be pleasant. Thinking about describing yourself having this great insight to your teacher feels pleasant as a fantasy. Then there may be the wanting for that fantasy to become reality. That's the craving. The clinging that results is a kind of intensification of that wanting—a fixation on the idea as being necessary. I think of the clinging in this case as a belief that being a good yogi is necessary for my happiness. So that belief comes into being. There's the wanting for the fantasy to become reality and the belief that it's necessary—the craving and the clinging.

The becoming aspect is the intentions that rally in the service of that belief—what we start to do, how we start to act in order to fulfill that belief. Perhaps we have these intentions around what we think we need to do to be a good yogi: sit for a long time in the hall, do really slow walking, or whatever your particular version might be. Some ideas about that. And then we begin to act them out. We begin to follow through on those intentions that are in the service of that belief. This is important. This is necessary. Here's what I need to do. That's becoming.

Then the birth is—and let's say for simplicity in this example—that these patterns of behavior actually lead to the feeling of being a good yogi. This is the birth into the identity, the distinct feeling of identity, the sense of "Ah, I am a good yogi." And perhaps there's evidence to confirm this. You see yourself walking more slowly than everybody else, or perhaps you're sitting later at night or getting up earliest in the morning—whatever it is, there's some kind of evidence to support this. So there's this distinct feeling of self here.

And then from this point, again, this distinct feeling of self is a construction of the mind, and it is impermanent. It will pass. Things will happen.

Now, it may be possible to hold onto that identity in an unbroken chain until you die. It's possible—unlikely, but possible. So your separation from that identity could happen at your death.

But most likely what's going to happen is that something will change in your experience. You'll have a

sitting or two where the mind is wandering all over the place. No longer does it seem like you're really able to be present and connected for the entire sitting—being a good yogi, really able to sit and not just sit for a long time but be completely mindful and present. And then along comes a sitting where you're sleepy or tired, or the mind just starts going back into fantasy or remembering your childhood.

The five hindrances come up, and this is now proof that you are not a good yogi. So that identity of being a good yogi dies a smashing death, and another identity is born: "I'm not a good yogi."

This is suffering. The actual loss is suffering. The threat of loss is suffering. The fear of loss is suffering. The suffering that we experience is in direct proportion to the amount of attachment we have to that experience—how strongly we were clinging to it.

A simple example demonstrates how the strength of attachment gives rise to different intensities of suffering. If you're sitting at the dining room table and you have a glass by your place, and you go away and come back and your glass is gone, there may be some irritation or annoyance that somebody cleared away your glass. That's a small kind of suffering. The attachment to these glasses is not that strong. We do have a subtle attachment—"This is my glass while I'm using it here at this meal"—but when somebody clears it away, there's just a kind of annoyance. "Oh, I need to go get another glass. Why did somebody clear it away? Didn't they see it was obviously my glass?" So there's a little bit of suffering that arises.

If you have brought your own personal insulated travel mug with you and it's sitting next to your plate, and you come back and it's gone, maybe a little bit more suffering arises. This points to the intensity of the clinging—more of a sense of ownership, a possession of your own personal property.

So that gives you a flavor for how this chain works. We've talked about a number of links in this chain. Now I'd like to go back to the beginning and review those first few that I haven't talked about yet.

But first, again, I want to point to the cyclic nature of this. Suffering conditions ignorance. The Buddha actually pointed to this directly in one teaching. He says: "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, and becomes bewildered. Or one overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, comes to search outside: 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?' I tell you, monks, that suffering results in either bewilderment or search."

So suffering often leads to this confusion, this bewilderment side of things, which is related to ignorance. Suffering leads to ignorance. The main definition of ignorance given in the suttas is not understanding the Four Noble Truths. So ignorance means we don't understand suffering. And here again we see the connection between suffering and ignorance: when we don't understand suffering, suffering leads to more ignorance. We don't understand suffering, we don't understand its cause, we don't understand how it comes to be.

In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to happiness. We think having what we want will make us

happy. And as I think you've all seen, having what we want only goes so far. It doesn't actually lead to a very deep kind of satisfaction. In fact, when we get what we want and have that moment of "Ah, yes, this is the way it's supposed to be," clinging arises from that, and we are just deepening the rut of this pattern of dependent origination, this pattern of suffering.

But if we can meet this suffering with wisdom—mindfulness and wisdom coming together—the causal chain can lead us in another direction, towards liberation, towards freedom.

So suffering leads to ignorance. Ignorance conditions mental formations. Based on ignorance, mental formations arise. Just as a reminder, mental formations are the intentional aspect of our experience.

And so based on ignorance, our intentions are formed—how we choose things, decide things, and behave. These intentions are the mental formations. Mental formations are the patterns and habits that lead us forward through this cycle. Out of ignorance, these patterns and habits make us act in unskillful ways. We take the most obvious move to get rid of suffering: to have what we want, to get rid of what we don't want. Which just leads us through this cycle. We think we are acting to alleviate our suffering by getting what we want, but actually it's just cementing this process further.

So these unskillful patterns and habits are the mental formations that result from ignorance. With mental formations as a condition—these mental formations conditioned by ignorance—consciousness comes to be. But ignorance is an interesting factor here. Ignorance is at the beginning of the chain, but one scholar monk, Ñāṇatiloka, pointed out that ignorance isn't just at the beginning. It's actually arising at every point on this chain.

So in those mental formations, those unskillful habits and patterns, it's not simply that ignorance has propelled them into being. There is that aspect of it—because of ignorance we act in unskillful ways. But in that very acting unskillfully, ignorance is there in that moment. Ignorance co-arises with every link in this chain when wisdom is not present.

With mental formations as a condition, consciousness comes to be. We can think of the habits and patterns conditioning our consciousness and what we experience. These are the filters we've talked about—those habits and patterns, the proclivities. Ignorance has put us into a certain frame of mind, and that frame of mind then conditions how we see things.

As an example, which we've used before, if there's an arising of anger in the mind, there is a kind of proclivity, a filtering that tends to point us towards things that confirm that anger, or perhaps even just pulls unpleasant experience out of our environment. When we're in an aversive state, it tends to orient us towards the unpleasantness in our environment. This is the process of mental formations conditioning consciousness.

This filtering mechanism is pretty deeply put into our psyche. It's deeply ingrained that when we have an agenda towards something, our mind is designed to exclude things that aren't in line with that agenda.

There's an interesting, amazing study that points to the power of this. Researchers asked participants to watch a video of basketball players and count the number of times the ball was passed between players on a team. While watching, most people were able to pretty accurately count that number. But then they were asked at the end: did you notice anything unusual? The vast majority said no. Occasionally somebody would say, "Was there a gorilla in there somewhere?"

And there had been. While these people were passing the basketball, a person in a gorilla suit had come out, wandered around the basketball court, and then walked off. The vast majority of people did not see this. Their sense of their own perception was so strong that when they actually saw the video again, they denied it was the same video. "This can't be the same video." This is the power of this filtering mechanism.

With consciousness as a condition, nāma-rūpa—materiality and mentality—comes to be. That's a somewhat unusual term. Other translations render it as "mind and matter" or "name and form." The most concise definition I've seen is that it refers to the processes of our body and most of the processes in our mind. If we go back to the five aggregates, mentality and materiality are the four aggregates of body, feeling, perception, and mental formations. The only one excluded is consciousness. And that consciousness is what's conditioning the other four.

So this is one way to understand materiality and mentality: as four of the five aggregates, the four excluding consciousness. There's a very close dependence between these two. The five aggregates are often talked about as arising together. In one sutta, the Buddha describes his exploration of these links in the chain of dependent origination, contemplating mentality, materiality, and consciousness. He thinks: what conditions mentality and materiality? Consciousness conditions that. And what conditions consciousness? Materiality and mentality condition consciousness.

So he sees that there's a kind of back and forth, a mutual conditioning of these two. In one sutta, a monk is confused about this and asks Sāriputta to explain it. Sāriputta gives an analogy. He says it's as if there are two sheaves of wheat propped against each other—they hold each other up. If you take one out, they'll both fall. This is the way in which these two are mutually conditioning.

Based on the state of our consciousness, however it is disposed, if it's flavored by anger, then the other aggregates are conditioned by that flavoring of consciousness. If we have anger in our minds, we tend to perceive things that confirm that anger. The feeling tends to be unpleasant. Our body may be distorted with tightness and tension, and our face may have an unpleasant expression on it. So these other four of the aggregates—mentality and materiality—are conditioned by the kind of consciousness, the kind of flavoring to consciousness.

Now we've made a full loop around this chain. We're back where we started: there is this mind and body, and there are the six sense bases. But you can see now—when I first started talking about it, we were approaching it from a neutral place. There's the eye, and then there's a sight, and then there's contact, and then it's either pleasant or unpleasant. But actually, coming in from this point, it's not starting from

something neutral. It's already got a spin to it. Our mind already has a spin to it. We are predisposed to have contact with things that confirm our ignorance, our views, our identities. And so this cycle tends to reinforce itself. A very potent cycle.

This chain being a description of causes and conditions that support the arising of suffering, and understanding that it's not lockstep, that there is possibly a way to get out of it, we look at how we can change the conditions. If we can change the conditions, then perhaps the cycle will lead in a different direction.

The main way to change the conditions is to bring mindfulness and wisdom to our experience, moment by moment. The only place we can have any foothold or toehold in breaking this chain is in the present moment, in this very moment. We can't do anything about what happened in the past. But we can meet this moment with mindfulness and wisdom. This begins to undermine that ignorance, which is co-arising at every point in this chain. When ignorance is present in the mind, wisdom is not present in the mind. When wisdom is present in the mind, it begins to knock that ignorance down.

We can use mindfulness and wisdom at any point in this cycle to begin to dismantle this process of suffering. And there are some weak links in this chain. We've talked about in particular the link between feeling and craving. There's another one between suffering and ignorance—that link at the beginning of the cycle where suffering tends to lead to ignorance.

In that quote I read where the Buddha said suffering leads to bewilderment or to search—in that search, we may meet a teaching, some wisdom that seems to point us in a different direction. If that wisdom meets us at the right moment, it will lead to faith instead of ignorance. Suffering also has the possibility of moving not to ignorance but to faith.

There's another chain described called the chain of transcendent dependent origination that begins with suffering and then moves from faith to gladness, to rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are, to disenchantment, dispassion, liberation. A similar kind of causal link leading from suffering met with wisdom and understanding, leading to faith.

The work at this point in the chain is to understand suffering. This is the first noble truth. This is what the Buddha told us is our work with suffering: understand it. Not intellectually, but understanding in the moment how the suffering comes to be, how it dismantles. Understand the processes around it. Essentially, understand some of the aspects of this chain.

This is much of what we've been doing here—meeting our suffering with mindfulness and wisdom. With this teaching, all of the teaching we've been doing, the discussions in the interviews, the teachings, the question and answer—there's this wisdom being chewed on in this room. And this wisdom and the mindfulness together, when they meet suffering, they begin to put little holes into that suffering. We begin to see how this thing we used to suffer over—it's not such a big deal anymore. There's a lot more space

around it. Or sometimes we even see suffering end.

Completely. A particular pattern simply collapses when we see, "Oh, I see how I think this is going to continue forever." Seeing that ignorance in the mind, actually seeing it—the ignorance can't sustain under the light of that understanding, and it falls apart. The pattern falls apart. We've all seen this: the power of mindfulness and wisdom to cut through our suffering, to transform it in a moment.

Then there's the link between feeling and craving, which is also a weak link. We've actually talked about this one quite a bit, so I won't spend much time on it. But I do want to point to another sutta where the Buddha highlighted this aspect of feeling. I'll read it to you. He brings a completely different twist on the topic than the chain of dependent origination, where feeling leads to craving, to clinging, becoming, birth, suffering—that's the flavor of dependent origination.

In the sutta, the Buddha said: "I will teach you the all, the root of everything. All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings." So here we're in the same terrain as some of those links of dependent origination. We have contact and feeling, and there's attention, which is in the realm of mental formations. But then it goes in a different direction: "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 Nibbāna is their culmination."

Here the Buddha points to feeling, then to concentration and mindfulness leading us to wisdom. So whatever we feel, bringing concentration and mindfulness to our experience—this is a very central practice in what the Buddha teaches, this mindfulness of feeling. Bringing concentration and mindfulness to our experience of feeling, we simply see, "Oh, it's feeling. It's just feeling." That wisdom—essentially, feeling leads to craving when ignorance is present with that feeling. When wisdom is present, feeling leads to the cessation of feeling. Pleasantness ceases. Unpleasantness arises and ceases. It's just feeling.

One key aspect of this sutta that I like to highlight is that it points to all things. All things have liberation as their essence, merge in the deathless, and culminate in Nibbāna. All things. It doesn't matter what we bring our mindfulness and concentration to. Joined with wisdom, whatever we are paying attention to has this capacity to lead us to liberation. The touch of a doorknob. A feeling of anger. Fear. A feeling of bliss, of happiness, of balance of mind, of equanimity. Whatever we are experiencing, mindfulness and wisdom lead us toward freedom.

Whatever we're doing—brushing our teeth, eating a meal, sitting in meditation—moment by moment, this work of seeing our experience can begin to break this whole chain apart. We see ignorance at work. And in that seeing, there's freedom.

So let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for listening to the Dhamma.

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