Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:32

The subject of this talk is dependent origination, one of the most complex teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha himself spoke to this complexity in a conversation with Ananda. Ananda was expressing his joy, his love of the Dharma, and in particular the joy and beauty of dependent origination. He said, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is, how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear."

The Buddha responded, "Do not say that, Ananda. Do not say that. This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine, that this generation has come to be like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe."

Clearly the Buddha both acknowledged its profundity, its complexity, and its importance to us. He states that it is by not understanding this that we are stuck. Several of you in our meetings have talked about feeling all tangled up, tangled like a ball of string—just as he mentioned to Ananda, it is through not understanding this that we are tangled.

I understand the teaching of dependent origination to be a detailed exposition of the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. It goes into depth about what the process is by which suffering is created in our minds. I understand dependent origination to be a teaching as opposed to a practice. We don't practice dependent origination, but it is very helpful, very practical for us to understand how this process works in our minds, how suffering is created. It is eminently practical because it is through this understanding that our mind begins to comprehend how to let go of the causes of suffering.

This chain of dependent origination is described as a set of causal links explaining what causes suffering to come into being. Through understanding the causes, we see that it is not lockstep, not automatic—it is causal. There is a way in which when the causes are reversed, the whole process of suffering simply falls apart.

I hope to make this talk both clear and practical. It is a teaching that for me has been very supportive in understanding my moment-to-moment experience, understanding how suffering is created. I hope to share with you some of the ways this has supported me in my understanding and exploration of experience.

As the Buddha pointed to, it is through not understanding this that we stay caught in suffering. In that very statement, to some extent the Buddha is equating an understanding of dependent origination with

full liberation. So we are probably not going to get there tonight. But I find the teachings work in a really iterative way. We hear about something, we massage it, we reflect on it, we may begin to explore it in our direct experience, and then we hear about it again so that we deepen progressively in our understanding.

Some motivation perhaps for understanding this: the key motivation for me is that it describes so clearly how suffering comes to be and that it describes it as a causal process. Through understanding this teaching of dependent origination, we begin to see how experience conditions experience.

Dependent origination could be most succinctly summarized as the statement: when this is, that is. When this arises, that arises. When this ceases, that ceases.

We begin to understand our suffering as conditioned—not as either random or foreordained. This is helpful for us to notice and recognize. We begin to see our suffering as the unfolding of an impersonal set of conditionality rather than either something that somebody else is doing to us or something that we have absolute control over. We begin to see suffering as caused by this unfolding chain.

The links in this chain are all related to processes in the mind and body. This is another piece I think is really helpful in terms of this teaching: it points to the arising of suffering being related to processes in our own minds. The other piece is that largely the impulsion through this chain of conditions relates to choice, to intention in our mind.

Essentially, we could say that when we are not mindful, when we are not present, when wisdom is not operating with mindfulness, our habits and conditioning are making our choices for us. And those choices tend to lead us down the garden path of suffering. When mindfulness arises, when wisdom arises, when we see it happening, the choice can be made to bring mindfulness and wisdom to our experience, which tends to lead us towards freedom, towards happiness, away from this chain, out of this chain.

So the other piece around this chain is that it begins to point for us to ways to redirect, to let go.

There are twelve links in this chain, and we will talk about all of them.

Let me name them all right now, put them out there, and then go back through them.

The chain begins, classically, with ignorance. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality—mental and physical processes—come to be. With mental and physical processes as condition, the six sense bases come to be. 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, becoming. With becoming as condition, birth. With birth as condition, old age and death—or as the Buddha puts it, the entire mass of suffering comes to be.

One piece to point to here: the chain starts with ignorance and moves through to suffering in those twelve links. Yet it is understood that suffering, that last link of the chain, the arising of the mass of suffering,

tends to feed back into ignorance, and thus the cycle perpetuates itself. So it is not simply a one-way chain. It is a cycle—a cycle of dependent origination.

Classical teachings from the commentaries break down this cycle into three stages, three parts essentially, talking about a former life, the present life, and a future life. They assign specific links to these various lives, basically saying that the ignorance and mental formations from our previous life will feed forward into this life and influence our experience here. The links of the chain in this life are laid out from consciousness through mentality-materiality, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming. These are discussed in terms of suffering in this life, and that's a place where we can really see this process at work.

The understanding is that the ignorance and mental formations from a previous life have the capacity, the property, the forward motion essentially, to land and re-arise. The momentum of those can re-arise in this life and influence how we are here and now. Likewise, how we are in this life is said to feed forward into a next life—birth, aging, and death in the next life. The literal phrasing of the links supports this understanding. In particular, the phrasing around birth is understood to mean the literal birth of a being, so it seems fairly clear that it's talking about moving from one life into another.

There is also an understanding in the Pali Canon that this chain of dependent origination refers to the moment-to-moment arising of suffering—how in the present moment, ignorance feeds into our consciousness, conditions our consciousness, and impels us forward in this cycle. It seems pretty clear when we actually look into our experience that it's not just about previous lives. Whether or not you have a sense of previous lives, it seems pretty clear that ignorance in this life is influencing us in this life. And so we can explore the entirety of this chain here and now, which is how I plan to explore it this evening.

This is my own personal way of resonating most with this teaching. I have no personal experience or sense of former lives, so I can't connect that to my direct experience. Yet I think one of the powers of that teaching about a former life influencing this life is that we see how ignorance can go underground and operate in funny ways. You may have some kind of intention that was formed a long time ago, and suddenly that intention bears fruit in this moment. You might see this as the arising of a thought from long ago—an old habit or an old pattern produces a thought here and now, and then there's reactivity here and now. Part of what this points to is how conditioning works across time. Thanissaro Bhikkhu sometimes talks about the way this conditioning operates. We often think of conditioning as one moment to the next to the next. He indicates that the conditioning can also come in over time.

In this talk, I am going to mostly look at it from the perspective of this life. From this perspective, the term "birth" would refer to the arising of a sense of self, taking birth into an identity. We feel this. We feel this birth into "I am the one who has to be right," or "I am the one who owns this or controls this." There's a palpable sense of something arising into being, a sense of being born into an identity. And the term "aging and death" refers to the fading and passing away of all experience, essentially—that everything that arises

falls apart.

I'd like to explore the chain in some depth here with you, and I'm going to start in a somewhat unconventional way.

As I said, the chain begins with ignorance, but I'm going to start in a somewhat unconventional way—right in the middle of the chain. I'm going to start where we are, with our senses.

One of the middle links of the chain is our sense bases. Let's start there. That's a pretty easy place to connect with our experience. We have these sense bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and skin, and our mind. Based on our sense bases, and because consciousness is present, we experience contact. Consciousness has to be present for us to experience contact, of course. If consciousness is not present—if we're lying there knocked out in surgery—we're not going to experience contact. So consciousness has to be present and the senses operating. Based on that, contact will happen. We will experience sight, sound, smells, taste, touch, and experiences in the mind: thoughts, emotions, moods.

Every single one of those sense impressions has a feeling tone to it. This is the next link. So we have the sense bases conditioning contact. Now we have contact conditioning feeling. Every contact has a feeling tone to it. Just the arising of that very simple aspect of whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—conditioned on contact.

Based on that feeling tone, craving tends to arise. In a very normal way, if something is pleasant, we like it and want it. If something is unpleasant, we don't like it and want to push it away. When things are neutral, sometimes we just don't even notice them. So in a very natural way, almost habitual, when feeling arises we respond by moving towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. We want the pleasant; we don't want the unpleasant. This is craving. This is craving at work.

Usually when that craving begins, we automatically begin to act on it. It's almost hard not to once craving is set in motion—unless we're mindful. When we're mindful, we can explore craving. We can look at the feeling of wanting, feel that magnetic pull towards some experience, and simply observe it. Usually, in much of our life—and certainly before we began practicing—that feeling of wanting would quite normally lead to clinging: taking action to get the thing, essentially following through on the craving.

Bhikkhu Bodhi gives a beautiful analogy to show the gradation between craving and clinging. He says that craving is like a thief in a house who is reaching out to take something. Clinging is when the thief has picked it up. It's that kind of gradation.

Once an object is clung to, once we've got it in our possession in some way, shape, or form, the next link arises: clinging conditions becoming. The clearest description of becoming I've heard comes from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He talks about becoming as the arising of intentions and actions that rally in the service of that clinging. The clinging has happened, and once the object is clung to, our intentions and motivations begin to congeal around how to serve that clinging. How do I keep this thing? How do I

control this thing? How do I produce this thing? How do I maintain this thing? A whole host of intentions arise around that clinging. This is becoming.

We like becoming. Becoming actually feels really good. It's that moment when you have the sense of, "Oh yeah, I'm in charge. I can do this. I can accomplish this. I can figure this out. I know how to make myself happy."

That's becoming. Following on from becoming is birth, which is actually a taking of identity, a real solidifying, a kind of solidification of that identity. I look at becoming and birth this way: becoming is like the intention towards an identity, and birth is the identity itself.

Following on from birth, the Buddha actually says that suffering becomes inevitable. We've taken birth, and inevitably either the thing that we are trying to control or fix or hold onto is going to disintegrate and go away, or something is going to happen to undermine it. If we've taken birth into an identity like "I'm the one who is always right," well, something will come along to prove, of course, that we're not always right, and our identity crumbles. The identity may crumble. An actual possession or ownership of something may be taken away from us. Once we've moved into birth, the Buddha says, suffering will be inevitable.

I want to go back and touch into something around becoming being pleasant. The pleasantness of becoming is one way in which the cycle reinforces itself. This chain of dependent origination is sometimes called the wheel of becoming, and the pleasantness of becoming has a potency to it for us.

If we look at the links of the chain starting from feeling, we've felt something and wanted to get something, and that moves us into craving. When we think about or feel into the craving, we see that craving is actually an unpleasant experience. Often that unpleasantness is masked because we're focused outward on the thing and imagining in our minds how great it's going to be when we get it. We're not really noticing the suffering, the unpleasant quality of the wanting itself. Wanting has automatically—when we want something—a sense of lack. Something feels off. So wanting is unpleasant.

When we move to becoming and we have that sense of being in control, partly there's the appreciation of having gotten that thing now. The wanting has produced the result: we've gotten what we wanted. So we get a little hit of pleasantness from having gotten what we wanted. And not only that, we get the hit of the pleasantness of becoming, which I think largely has to do with the fact that it feels like we have control over our wanting, that we can affect and accomplish and get what we want.

A large part of the happiness that arises when we get what we want is actually the fact that the suffering goes away. This, I think, is a piece of why becoming feels good to us.

As we're going along in this cycle, we take birth, we suffer over the loss of something or the loss of an identity. And we think back, "Well, what was the last time I felt really good? Oh, it's when I had that control. That's when I felt really good." It kind of propels us back through the cycle. So to some extent, the

pleasantness of becoming is one of the propulsions through this cycle.

I want to give an example of this part of the chain—just to talk about how this works in our experience. I'd like to do this through a more complicated example in a way. It's about a state of being rather than the simplicity of just something pleasant that we like and want to hold onto. I would like to explore how this works because many of the ways we suffer have to do with identities that we have.

Take, for instance, wanting to be a good yogi. We have this sense of what happens in our mind. Perhaps an idea comes into our mind—maybe this wanting to be a good yogi is born by thinking about describing some insight to a teacher or something like that. This contact with this idea. A thought arises in the mind about describing some insight to a teacher, and in that fantasy, that's a pleasant fantasy perhaps. You're getting some kind of affirmation from the teacher in the fantasy. So there's pleasure in that fantasy. The mind has created this fantasy and is delighting in it.

Then there's the desire—because of that pleasant feeling, there's a desire to have that fantasy become a reality. That's the wanting, that's the craving. The clinging is about a fixed attitude that being a good yogi is actually an important thing. We've created this idea, "Oh, I want to be a good yogi." So again, that movement from craving to clinging is a gradation. I want to be a good yogi, and that's really important. That's the craving and clinging pieces of it.

And then the becoming is all of the intentions that arrive to try to put that clinging into effect. You may have some ideas, some intentions around how you need to behave to be a good yogi. What does it mean? How do you need to pay attention? The mind gathers itself around what it thinks would be the intentions, the actions to create that into a reality. Perhaps sitting long hours in the hall, or moving really slowly—whatever it is that you've got, thinking about what it might be to be a good yogi.

So for simplicity, just assume that for at least a few moments you've gotten the sense that you are a good yogi. Birth. There's a distinct feeling: "Yes, I'm a good yogi." I'm familiar with this, as well as the opposite, which I'm getting ready to describe. The sense, for just a few moments: "Ah, I can do this. I am a good yogi. I know how to practice." There's that birth, that taking birth into "this is what I am."

In that birth, there tends to be an augmentation of the distinction between self and other. If I'm a good yogi, it often means there's some kind of comparison going on. It probably means I'm a better yogi than somebody else. There's that augmentation of self-other that happens in this process of birth, this taking birth into an identity.

The aging and death of this could happen in so many ways. In my own experience, often the aging and death of the sense of being a good yogi was a crash and burn. There would be something that would prove either that somebody else was a better yogi than I was, or that I would suddenly sit down and my mind didn't have control—I couldn't just choose to say "stay with the breath" and have it stay with the breath.

Sometimes these identities get born when conditions come together and we sit down and suddenly the

breath is right there, there's an ease with it, and it's pretty easy to stay stable with the breath. All of this is conditions coming together to make this happen, and then we take ownership of it. "I did that. I'm making that happen." We take birth into that identity, and then two or three sittings later, we discover we can't do that. Actually, we can't control the mind at all—it's all over the place. In a way, what happens in that moment is that we take birth into "I'm a bad yogi." The ending of one identity, the arising of another.

Suffering happens here. The actual crash and burn of the good yogi is suffering. Sometimes we can have a sense of fear that arises around identities—a sense of somehow needing to continually prove that we're a good yogi, continually pushing ourselves harder and harder, suffering in that. Suffering both from the fear of "what happens if I can't keep this up?" I remember sitting down on some occasions and the mind would be seeing things changing so rapidly. Then I'd sit down the next sitting and think, "I can't do that. How do I do that?" A lot of fear came up because I couldn't figure out how to do what the mind had been doing before.

We suffer around these identities. This is the process, how identities lead us into suffering.

So that gives you a little bit of a flavor for some of the basic processes at work in dependent origination. Now I want to come back to the early links in the chain, the ones I haven't talked about yet.

This chain, as I said earlier, describes a cyclic pattern. The arising of suffering conditions the arising of ignorance. The Buddha said that suffering will condition or lead to bewilderment or search. Very often it leads to confusion, bewilderment. "Why me? Why is this happening to me? How do I fix this? How do I change this?"

So suffering, when not understood, leads to ignorance—the perpetuation of this cycle. And in fact, the main definition of ignorance is understood as not understanding suffering. The Buddha's definition of ignorance in this context is not about not understanding some random set of facts; it's about not understanding suffering. He says, "Not knowing about suffering, not knowing about the origin of suffering, not knowing about the cessation of suffering, not knowing about the way leading to the cessation of suffering—this is called ignorance."

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is for suffering to be not understood. This is the usual way that so much of our lives unfold. In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to happiness. We think that getting what we want will lead to happiness. And this is a form of delusion—this belief that if I just get what I want, then I'll be happy. Well, we see how long that lasts, right? It maybe lasts for a few moments, a feeling of happiness. And when that dissipates, it's like, "Well, where's the next one? How can I get the next one?"

Acting on ignorance, not understanding suffering, and acting on the ignorance further deepens this cycle of suffering. If suffering is met with wisdom—with mindfulness and wisdom—it begins to lead in another direction. And this is the first noble truth. The Buddha suggested: understand suffering. So the first noble

truth is essentially the practice that supports one way to get out of this cycle of suffering. Understand it—not intellectually, but how is it created? What is the process of suffering?

We're doing this. This is what we're encouraging you to do. You observe in your experience the arising of anger. You feel it in the body. You see how it shifts and changes. You notice there are thoughts; perhaps you can let the thoughts go and just stay with the experience. And you notice that the experience dissipates. We see how thoughts condition our body, how our body conditions thoughts. We see this back and forth process. In all of the work that we're doing here, we are exploring this.

With ignorance as a condition, the next link is mental formations. With ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be. Based on ignorant patterns in our mind, based on not understanding suffering, we make decisions, we choose things, we decide things based on this misinformed idea that getting what we want will make us happy. Out of ignorance, we act in a very short-sighted way. Our minds are pretty short-sighted about happiness. It's like, "Yeah, just the next thing. If I can get that, that'll make me happy." And then when we see that that happiness is kind of short-lived, it's like, "Well, what's the next thing? What's the next thing I can get?"

We may not actually believe that having what we want will be ultimate happiness, but we do believe that we should be able to chain together a whole bunch of those moments and have no periods of not having what we want in there at all. And we think that would be happiness. There's a way in which our whole habits and patterns and choices are coming out of this misunderstanding.

Out of ignorance, we usually take the most obvious choice to get what we want, get rid of what we don't want. And habits and patterns form around this. These habits and patterns are mental formations conditioned on ignorance. We think we're acting to alleviate or end our dissatisfaction by getting what we want, but we're actually cementing—re-cementing—this process of wanting, getting, having, identifying, crash and burn. "When was the last time I was happy? When I had what I want. Let me find something to want." And we go through again.

So these are the mental formations conditioned on ignorance—the mental formations to choose to act based on this deluded understanding about happiness, about how happiness comes to be.

The next link: with mental formation as a condition, consciousness comes to be. Based on our views, our beliefs about where happiness comes to be, our mind picks certain things out of the environment and doesn't pick other things out of the environment.

This is consciousness arising based on our proclivities, our mental proclivities. We've talked about this in terms of filters, for instance. If anger is arising, we may, seeing through that filter of anger, pick out of the environment things that confirm why we should be angry. We selectively—it's not we doing it, it's not intentional in a way—it's the process. It's the process of our mind. There's that filter of anger, and the filter itself filters certain things in and not other things. So we see certain things, we hear certain things; we

don't see, we don't hear other things.

This is a very powerful process in our minds, this filtering mechanism, how this works in our mind. It seems pretty potent and deeply embedded. It is possible to see through it, but I'd like to tell you a story about just how deeply embedded it is, because it's quite amazing.

Some of you may have heard about this study. It's on a factor of mind called selective attention—I think that's what it's called—something like that in psychology. They were researching selective attention, how the mind chooses to pay attention to things and not pay attention to other things. In this study, they gave a group of people a task, a pretty simple task: watch this video and count the number of times a basketball passes between people in a white shirt. So you watch this video. People are passing a basketball around, and you're counting the number of times people are passing the basketball. Simple agenda. People did it. By and large, people could answer the question: this is how many times the basketball passed between people in the white shirt.

A few people afterwards would say something like, "Was there like a gorilla in that video?" And there indeed had been—a guy in a gorilla suit that walked through the middle of the basketball game and actually stood there, really obviously stood there, and then walked off. The vast majority of people did not see the gorilla.

Now, that's one thing, right? The fact that, wow, that agenda—there was an agenda in the mind, do this task. That agenda kind of collapsed down the awareness such that the gorilla was not seen. That's one thing to recognize: okay, didn't see that. But the scary part—the scary part about the way this works—is that when people were shown the video, most of them said, "That has to be a different video. I would have seen the gorilla." The scary part is that we believe our senses to be an accurate, camera-like recording of experience. And it is just not that way.

Consciousness is influenced by mental formations. In this case, the mental formation of an agenda. This happens all the time. We really cannot say that we are seeing everything. Consciousness is present in some experiences, not in others. Mental formations condition consciousness.

With consciousness as a condition, mental and physical processes come to be. This is mentality-materiality. Based on the state of our consciousness, the state of our mind, this influences the other processes of our mind and body. Essentially, mentality-materiality—a simple definition—if we think about the five aggregates that Guy talked about the other night, consciousness is one of the five aggregates. And here we have consciousness conditioning mentality-materiality. Mentality-materiality is understood to be the other four of the aggregates. That's one way of understanding mentality-materiality: mind and body processes.

So consciousness conditions, the state of our consciousness conditions the mind and body processes. Having the mental formations influence our consciousness—seeing the gorilla or not seeing the

gorilla—this informs the other mind and body processes. For instance, if anger is present in the mind, influencing how we perceive and feel experience, experience may tend to be unpleasant. We may tend to perceive things that confirm the anger, confirm our rightness in a situation. Our body may be impacted. There may be a kind of contracted expression on our face, or tightness, tension inside the body as a result of this anger.

So here we are, back at the place where we began—with mentality-materiality, and mentality-materiality influencing our sense bases. We're back where we began: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, taking in experience.

And yet what we see now, coming back through it in this cycle, is quite different from when we started. Perhaps when we began, it sounded just like, "Well, of course we're taking things in." But now you see that coming back to this place, we are not taking things in in a neutral way. They're already coming in with a spin. We may not even be seeing certain things. Agendas may be pulling certain things out of the environment while leaving other things unnoticed.

The whole process tends to reinforce our attitudes, our beliefs, our views, because our filters will tend to confirm our views. And so this cycle reinforces itself.

That sounds perhaps rather hopeless. But fortunately, it's not hopeless. Because this chain describes conditionality rather than determinism, it's possible that with changed conditions, the cycle can be broken. The main supports for altering the habitual way this cycle unfolds are mindfulness, wisdom, concentration, and energy.

There's a beautiful teaching around dependent origination—one of my favorite teachings. It's found in the Majjhima Nikaya in a sutta called "Right View." In this sutta, the Buddha points to the possibility that wherever mindfulness and wisdom come into being, right there, we can have freedom.

For every single link of the chain of dependent origination, he says—and I'll read just one example, for clinging: "When one has understood clinging, the origin of clinging, the cessation of clinging, and the way leading to the cessation of clinging, one here and now makes an end of suffering."

Now you may notice that pattern is familiar. It's repeated: "When one has understood feeling, the origin of feeling, the cessation of feeling, and the way leading to the cessation of feeling, one here and now makes an end to suffering. When one understands ignorance, the origin of ignorance," and so on.

This pattern is repeated for every single link in this chain. No matter where you are, no matter where you wake up, bringing the practice of mindfulness to bear on whatever it is you wake up to, the possibility of freedom is right there.

It's often taught that there are weak links in this chain. People often say, "I have to break the chain of dependent origination at feeling. I have to see the feeling and then not have it lead to craving." But this

teaching points to something more expansive: wherever you wake up, if you wake up in the midst of rage—that's a mental formation—the Buddha says you can understand the origin of mental formation. Understand the mental formation, the origin of mental formation, the cessation of mental formation, the path leading to cessation of mental formation, and here and now make an end to suffering.

This framing—essentially using the understanding of the Four Noble Truths with each link of the chain—connects to what I said earlier, that the Four Noble Truths are basically the opposite of ignorance. To me, what this sutta is saying is that ignorance is what we are working with in this chain. Ignorance is where we can get some traction.

We get traction by bringing mindfulness and wisdom to our experience—mindfulness and the understanding that happiness doesn't come from getting what I want. Happiness comes from letting go; the letting go is where happiness can be found. That understanding begins to undermine the ignorance present in any moment of experience.

It doesn't matter where you wake up. Mindfulness and wisdom can free us in this very moment.

Now, we may not necessarily experience this as full freedom in that moment. We may feel it as a shift, a sense of a little bit of letting go. Instead of "Wow, I'm really angry," there's "Oh, it's just anger arising." Just anger. That shift allows us to be more at ease with experience. That may be how wisdom is being experienced in the moment—and that is undermining ignorance in that moment.

So anywhere that we wake up, any experience we wake up to can be the place of freedom.

This gives me a lot of inspiration, a lot of confidence, faith, and joy actually. At certain points in my practice, I had this idea: "Okay, this is my self-hatred retreat. I guess I get to look at self-hatred."

And at some point, when the self-hatred is done, then I'll get to work with insight." That kind of belief was operating.

But being willing to meet the pattern of self-hatred, being willing to watch it in just this very way—self-hatred is arising—and in fact, using the links of contact and feeling. In this exploration of self-hatred, I had just heard one evening... I had been working with self-hatred for weeks on this particular retreat, and one evening Joseph did a question and answer session. He said, "If something's particularly sticky, try meeting it with a double note: contact when the experience hits, and then the feeling tone."

So this is highlighting those two links—contact and feeling. The contact of the experience of self-hatred arising. I was just noticing, okay, here's self-hatred. The movement of self-hatred, the movement of thought towards "you're no good, you're a failure"—being aware: oh, contact. And then noticing the unpleasantness. Contact, unpleasant. Contact, unpleasant.

And in a moment, in a split second, seeing that arising of self-hatred is just an arising at a very

fundamental level. Seeing it just as some pattern arising in the mind. It's like watching some tree grow—there's the tree of self-hatred. Just seeing it in a completely impersonal way. In a split second, the pattern fell apart. And replacing that sense of self-hatred was bliss.

Then the next moment was something along the lines of, "Never again will I feel self-hatred." And the next moment was a little more wisdom. It's like, no, this is just this moment. And in that moment, there was just this kind of balance or equanimity of: it's like this right now.

That particular recognition into self-hatred actually was very potent in my life, in that it seemed to have the power to really cut through the delusion of that pattern. That pattern was seen for being just a self-creation. The pattern of self-hatred was seen as a fake. Essentially, my understanding is that it cut the belief in that pattern.

So right in the midst of being willing to be present for self-hatred, a very deep insight arose. Anything, anytime, anywhere—it's possible. If you're having a dukkha retreat, wisdom can arise in the midst of dukkha. Freedom in the midst of dukkha. It's not necessary to have it all end. That dukkha doesn't have to all go away before freedom, before the sense of understanding arises. Right in the midst of your experience, whatever is happening—meet it.

Let's just sit for a moment.

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