Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:32

Tonight the topic is dependent origination. This is one of the foundational teachings of the Buddha, fundamental to understanding how suffering is created in our minds. I think of it as a detailed exposition of the second noble truth—the truth that craving is the cause, the origin of suffering.

I've been giving many talks on dukkha lately, and yet this is what continues to arise. The Buddha taught, as I mentioned last week, "What I teach is suffering and its end." There is something profound about this teaching as a description of how suffering arises. I don't think of it as a practice; we don't practice dependent origination. We don't practice the arising of suffering—suffering simply arises. And yet this description of how suffering comes to be can be tremendously supportive for us in our practice.

The teaching is quite complex and profound. There's a famous story of Ānanda expressing his appreciation for the Buddha's teaching and for dependent origination in particular. Ānanda says, "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 responds, "Don't say that, Ānanda—that this teaching of 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."

Essentially, the Buddha is pointing to Ānanda's confidence—"Oh, this is so clear to me"—and saying, "Well, there's probably more for you to understand there, Ānanda." The Buddha continues: "It is through not understanding, not penetrating this teaching that this generation has become like a ball of tangled string, unable to pass beyond states of woe." Here the Buddha is connecting the lack of understanding of dependent origination with being stuck—stuck on this cycle of struggle and suffering, caught by these patterns. Elsewhere, the Buddha seems to indicate that one who deeply penetrates dependent origination has fully seen the Dhamma, is fully awakened. It is a deep teaching, a profound teaching. We're probably not going to get it tonight.

And yet, in my own exploration, I find that meeting teachings works in a cyclical way. There may be some piece of a teaching that resonates with me, speaks to me. I practice with it, I understand a little bit of it. Then I might hear the teaching another time, and because there's been some level of understanding, the teaching goes a little deeper. We can hear these teachings over and over again, each time perhaps understanding something new, seeing something new in our experience.

I think it's helpful to explore this teaching of dependent origination, the teaching of how suffering comes to be. There are a couple of aspects of the overall picture I want to point to that have been supports for me. I do want to try to make this talk both practical and accessible. For me, this teaching has been a direct

support for practice, and that's what I hope to convey, what I hope to transmit to you.

The first thing I want to point to about this teaching is that the Buddha described suffering coming into being as a process. It's a detailed description of how craving leads to suffering, and in this description he's pointing to processes that work in our minds—processes that we all share as human beings. As we start to investigate this teaching in more depth, as we look at what it says, we can begin to recognize some parts of this process at work in our own minds.

Instead of taking the process of creating suffering personally, instead of taking it as "poor me," thinking we're the only ones who ever suffer, we can recognize it as part of a human process that the Buddha articulated almost 2,600 years ago. We are not alone in how our minds do these things. The genius of the Buddha was his ability to articulate how these processes work with such clarity. We can start to see these processes and recognize, "Oh, this is what the Buddha was talking about. This is how it works"—not just in this mind, but in human minds. He's articulating a human process.

Another piece of this teaching is that it points to the arising of suffering—the arising of struggle, dissatisfaction, discontent, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair—as a conditioned process. It doesn't arise randomly. There are conditions that come into being, that create, that tend to head us in the direction of suffering. The chain of dependent origination contains twelve links, and we will briefly touch on all of them tonight. These twelve links describe conditions that support each other in the creation of suffering. It describes a conditioned process, and yet not a deterministic process.

This is how the Buddha taught dependent origination in brief. He said: "With ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, 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 comes to be. With contact, feeling. With feeling, craving. With craving, clinging. With clinging, becoming. With becoming, birth. With birth, aging and death. And thus is born the entire mass of suffering."

So it describes conditions that lead to the entire mass of suffering. And yet these are conditions, not determinism. Much of what leads us on in this conditioned direction is the lack of mindfulness and wisdom. The very root of the chain of dependent origination is ignorance—ignorance about suffering. Because of that ignorance, because we are caught and not mindful of what's happening, typically our habitual patterns or tendencies are tumbling on, and those habits and patterns basically lead us through this cycle over and over again.

And yet, if we introduce the conditions of mindfulness and wisdom, a very different process can unfold.

This chain, this description of "with this as condition, that comes to be," is laid out in twelve links as I described. It's interesting to notice that the last link—aging and death—is equated with suffering here. The Buddha says, "Thus arises the entire mass of suffering." It is also understood that suffering, when met with

bewilderment rather than mindfulness and wisdom, tends to reinforce ignorance. And so this chain becomes a cycle: with the arising of suffering, when mindfulness and wisdom are not meeting that suffering, more ignorance is born and the cycle perpetuates itself.

Yet the hope, the possibility revealed in this understanding, is that while this cycle tends to perpetuate itself when mindfulness and wisdom are not present, the cultivation of mindfulness and wisdom can begin to shift the unfolding.

Still, it's useful to understand this chain, this cycle. The teachings in both the suttas—the words of the Buddha—and in the extensive commentaries that have built up around these teachings describe dependent origination in different ways. In one interpretation, dependent origination describes how suffering can arise based on conditions from the distant past, including former lives, and can propel into the distant future, including future lives. This understanding suggests that the ignorance being cultivated in this life may be perpetuated very far into the future and come from very far in the past.

There's also a description in the suttas and commentaries about this teaching being a moment-to-moment description of how suffering comes to be. This second perspective is the one I will speak to more this evening. It's the one I resonate with more fully. I don't have any direct experience with past lives; that's not part of my experience, and so I can't apply this teaching in that way in my own practice. Yet this teaching has provided profound support for me in my practice of looking at moment-to-moment suffering.

I think we can also understand that this teaching, whether or not you believe in past lives or future lives, points to the ways that ignorance and suffering are perpetuated over time as well as being created in a moment. We see this in our practice. We're sitting here, perhaps calmly with the breath, the mind fairly calm, and then for some reason we do not see—although it is conditioned—a memory of the past arises. Things that have happened in the past come into the present through thought. In this way, the conditions of the past contribute to and influence what's happening now.

This teaching of dependent origination has many layers, many feedback loops, many feed-forward loops. In the classical description, as I said, it begins with ignorance. Ignorance is the ground out of which the entire mass of suffering is born. If we see through ignorance, the whole thing falls apart.

Yet I've found in my own exploration of this teaching that it's helpful to start partway through in exploring what it means and how we can see it in our own practice. So I'm going to skip the first four links or so right now and jump directly to exploring the sense bases in our experience.

This is one of the links. The fact that we have mental and physical processes conditions the sense bases. We have these bodies, we have these minds, and therefore we have sense bases. We have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and the mind. Because we are conscious—because we're not corpses—these sense bases are receiving sense impressions.

With sense bases as condition, contact arises. Because we have sense bases, we experience sight, sound,

smells, taste, touch, and things arising in our mind. This is sense bases conditioning contact. With contact as condition, feeling comes to be.

All of these contacts—we've talked about this—every single contact that we have, every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, everything that arises in our mind is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a universal factor of every moment's experience: it contains this flavor of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. With contact as condition, feeling tone comes to be. Very simple—just pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Based on this feeling tone—and we've talked about this link quite a bit outside the context of dependent origination—based on pleasant feeling, we tend to want. We like that feeling; we want more of it. If unpleasant, we tend to not like it; we want to not have it. In this way, with feeling as condition, craving comes to be.

We discussed this especially as we explored mindfulness of feeling. As we begin to bring mindfulness to feeling tone itself, we might see the power of how mindfulness and wisdom can start to turn this chain in a different direction. When mindfulness simply sees pleasant experience—"Oh, this is a pleasant experience"—and many of you have seen this—"Oh, pleasant"—it doesn't lead onward to wanting, to leaning towards. It's just a pleasant experience. It arises, it passes.

When we are not mindful, when ignorance is present in the mind, that feeling tone tends to condition craving. It conditions wanting. This points back to that very beginning link. Ignorance is actually the link that conditions the entire unfolding of the chain. When ignorance is present, feeling leads to craving.

This is a lot of what we look at in our experience—the craving, the wanting. It's very simple, feels kind of automatic: something's pleasant, we want it, we move towards it; something's unpleasant, we move away from it. As we talked about, it's a kind of organic, amoeba-like response to pleasant and unpleasant. And yet in our own minds it's not hardwired. It is possible to simply notice pleasant without having a subsequent reactivity, without having that craving follow on from the feeling. Craving here represents both the leaning towards and the leaning against.

When ignorance is present, we kind of automatically want to act on that wanting—to do something, to get the thing, to get rid of the thing. We take some kind of action to hold on to the experience, to grasp an object, to push away an experience, to figure out how to control or fix or change an experience, or to push away an object. This is the movement in the direction of clinging. With craving as condition, clinging comes to be.

There's a gradation along the line of craving and clinging. It's almost like clinging is an intensification of craving. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the English translator of many of the suttas in the Pali Canon, described the act of wanting, the mental state of wanting, as being like a thief who has spied something they like and is reaching out to get it. The act of clinging is the picking it up. It's a kind of intensification, but there is a

distinct congealing or grasping, a holding to, that happens with clinging.

Once we've clung to something, it sets in motion processes of mind that want to serve that clinging. I like this description by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

He says that the next link in the chain, called becoming—clinging conditions becoming—is "the intentions and actions that rally in the service of clinging." It's the process of behavior that's generated in order to keep that thing, to hold something at bay or maintain our grip on it. The thief grasps the object, and then there's a whole set of processes involved to help them keep it—the sneaking out of the house, finding a safe place to store it. A whole sequence of activity unfolds in this process.

Essentially, I think of this becoming as the intentions that lead us to a place of feeling like we're in control of our destiny. We like becoming. It feels like we're in charge, like we know where we're headed and how we'll get there. We feel like we know how we're going to control something, fix it, change it, or keep it. So there's the act of grasping, and then there's this whole complex of mental processes trying to figure out: How can I keep this going? That's becoming.

Following from becoming is birth into some kind of identity. Things become "mine" or "me." This can take an obvious form of identification—"This is my cup. It's mine. It's got my name on it." Or it might be something along the lines of "I'm the kind of person who does things right"—a kind of owning. Like the person who thinks, "I am the one who can control things." Becoming is the movement in the direction of "I know how to do this," and birth is like "I am doing this." It's almost the same gradation we saw between wanting and clinging—the movement and direction, then the full taking birth into that identity. "I can control this. I can fix this. I can hold on to this. This is mine." Not "this is how I'm going to keep it," but "this is mine."

From here, the Buddha says suffering is inevitable. It might result from the obvious separation from something we consider ours, or it might arise in a subtler way. When we take birth into an identity—not just of owning something, but of being "a good yogi" or "the one who can fix things" or "the one who can control this"—we inhabit those identities. Then, as we've discussed, the truths of impermanence, unreliability, and lack of control manifest. We see that we don't always have control of our destiny. We cannot always be the good yogi. We cannot always be the one who controls the outcome of events.

When we see this, that identity is proven in some ways to be a myth. If we've clung tightly to it, we'll suffer. We may feel like a failure—"I did something wrong"—or we may feel the world is to blame, that others are responsible for this suffering.

This process of taking birth into identity quite often also comes with the birth of "other." Sometimes this process of becoming and birth is actually experienced more as creating other—"That person is to blame. That person is wrong. That person is something." There's this separation, and in that separation there is also a sense of self. So sometimes we can explore this process of becoming and birth by noticing when

we're "othering"—when we're making somebody into other, projecting some identity onto them.

We sometimes suffer when others do this to us, putting identities onto us. There's enormous suffering in this world from this selfing and othering. Racism, sexism, homophobia, all forms of discrimination have this process at work. And so the exploration of birth is important. You might notice that sometimes a sense of birth has a clear feeling of "me here," and sometimes it has a sense of "you there"—them.

The other. So noticing both sides of this process—this separation, this congealing into identity—leads to so much suffering in our world.

This cycle we've gone through so far—from sense bases to contact, to feeling, to craving, to clinging, to becoming, to birth, to suffering—tends to perpetuate itself. It tends to reinforce itself. Because we don't understand suffering, because we don't understand how this whole process works, we are very much driven by this pattern, especially the deep pattern around feeling tone: pleasant leading us towards something, unpleasant wanting to push us away from something. We're really driven by that process at such a deep level.

This includes the cycle itself, this chain. Many of the links in this chain are mind states, are processes in our mind. Craving, clinging, becoming—all processes, all mental formations—and they come with a feeling tone. Wanting feels unpleasant. Have any of you noticed that? When you start to look at wanting, you see the feeling of wanting itself doesn't feel good.

Along with this process of there being something out there that we think we want, we're separated from that, and there's a little bit of unpleasantness about the separation from that thing or the wanting of that thing. But there's also this: when wanting springs up, there's immediately a feeling of offness. Wanting comes with unpleasant. The experience of wanting is unpleasant. And so because of that, there's also the drive to get rid of the wanting. There's not only the desire to have the thing we want; there's the desire to get rid of the wanting. So we've got this double process going on.

And then, if we act on that wanting—which is likely if we're not paying attention to what's happening—and we get the thing we want or get rid of the thing we don't want, we get the moment of some pleasure from having that thing. We also get the pleasure of becoming in that moment. When we've got it, we've got the control: "Yes, I've figured it out. I know how to get concentrated. I know how to do this." That becoming, that sense of feeling like we have control, feels really good.

So not only when we get what we want do we have the little bit of pleasant from having it, we get the pleasantness that comes from the wanting going away, and we get the pleasantness of feeling like we've figured it out. These cycles tend to reinforce themselves. Without mindfulness, it's very hard to break through this cycle of wanting, craving, clinging, becoming.

And there's more. Let's go back to the links we haven't talked about yet: ignorance conditions mental formations, conditions consciousness.

Because this chain describes a cyclic pattern, as I described, suffering tends to lead to more ignorance. We can think of this as almost the first link in the chain. Suffering tends to lead to ignorance. When mindfulness and wisdom are not present, suffering heads in that direction.

When suffering is met with mindfulness and wisdom, there's the possibility—actually, there's another chain that's described, the chain of transcendent dependent origination—where when suffering is met with understanding, suffering conditions the arising of faith. And faith conditions the arising of delight, joy, happiness, and concentration, moving in the direction of freedom.

So at this point in the chain, suffering without mindfulness and wisdom leads to more ignorance. With mindfulness and wisdom, we step onto a completely different path towards faith, towards freedom.

A main definition of ignorance is not understanding suffering, not understanding the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha 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."

With ignorance, in ignorance, we tend to think that cycle we've talked about—that deep pattern around getting what I want will bring me happiness, getting rid of what I don't want will make me happy—we tend to believe that is the way to happiness. That very belief keeps us caught on this cycle.

With ignorance as a condition, when we have this belief that getting what I want will bring me happiness, when we do not understand experience to be impermanent, unreliable, out of control, it conditions our mental formations. It conditions intentions, actions about how we decide to do things, how we behave.

Mental formations is a whole set of things that go on in our mind—everything from anger, frustration, confusion, irritation, pride, conceit, arrogance, to concentration, mindfulness, faith, wisdom. All of these are mental formations.

With ignorance as condition, certain mental formations tend to arise. When we have these beliefs about what will make us happy, if we think what will make us happy is getting what we want, we tend to condition the mind in that direction. Essentially, these mental formations are the whole set of our habits and patterns that we've been looking at—all of these patterns that we see arising in our minds.

We think that we're acting to alleviate our suffering when we engage in our habitual ways of trying to get rid of something unpleasant or hold on to something we think we want. We believe we're acting in our best interest, and yet we are seeing very clearly here that this is not a way to a deeper kind of happiness. Yes, it can create a kind of happiness in the moment—a short, momentary kind of happiness. And yet we're learning about a deeper kind of happiness that's possible here.

So with these habits, these patterns conditioned by our beliefs about what leads to happiness, the next link is: consciousness comes to be. I've spent some time reflecting on what this means—that with mental

formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. The way I'm understanding it at this point is that because of the way we think, because of the habits and patterns of our mind, we have filters in our experience. We're seeing the world through certain lenses.

We see this a lot, I think. We notice certain patterns or habits, familiar ones particularly. Somebody the other day was talking about seeing the world through an angry filter—like looking through an angry lens. It didn't matter what the attention was turned to; anger resulted.

I've had this experience. Anger is one of my most familiar patterns. One time I was doing walking meditation in the lower walking room here, and I was noticing that anger was the state of the mind. I was working with it and exploring it and being with it, yet it was pretty predominant, so I was kind of stuck in it. I turned around at the end of my walking path, and at the other end was a pair of shoes. My mind landed on that pair of shoes and exploded in anger. Who put those shoes at the end of my walking path? This is the filter of anger.

With these filters—these mental formations, our agendas, views, ideas, beliefs, emotions—we tend to see things in the world in a certain way. What we take in, what consciousness connects with, is filtered based on our ideas, agendas, views, opinions, and emotions. We think that our senses are taking in experience as if our eyes were cameras, our ears were microphones. And yet that is not the way our minds work; that's not the way our senses work.

There are studies on this factor of mind in psychology; it's called selective attention. When we are focused on something, there are things we simply do not see. We can be asked to look at a video and do a certain task—focus on something, watch someone doing a magic trick. I just watched a TV program where they were playing with this selective perception, and they said, "See if you can figure out how I change this liquid into a bunny." So I was watching really closely. At the end, I thought I'd seen maybe where that switch had happened, but I was really focused on it. Then they ran the video back and said, "Well, did you see these other things that were happening at the same time? This very large bunny walking across the video?" No, I didn't see the very large bunny walking across.

The agenda to focus meant consciousness did not take in the bunny. This happens to us all the time. And yet we believe that we're seeing things clearly, that we are seeing things exactly as they are. Even something as simple as an agenda can screen certain things in and certain things out. Imagine what a whole history of a pattern can do in terms of taking in information about the world. We do not see things as they are. There's a famous quote: we don't see things as they are, we see things as we are. This to me is mental formations conditioning consciousness. Consciousness lands on things in a certain way—or may not land on things at all. Consciousness may not come to be. The bunny consciousness did not come to be.

With consciousness as condition, the next link is: mental and physical processes come to be. Based on these mental formations and what we're taking in, our minds and bodies are influenced. If we've got the angry lens on, our bodies are impacted—our face may become distorted, our body may be tense and tight.

Mental formations and consciousness conditioning mental process, physical processes. Mental states of mind tend to condition more mental states of mind.

We tend to filter in or out certain things that agree with our perceptions and keep leading us on toward suffering. This cycle tends to reinforce itself. Our filters tend to reinforce our pre-existing perspectives.

So the cycle continues. We come back to this beginning point. We've looped all the way around now, back to the sense doors. When we first started talking about this, it seemed straightforward: there's a body, there's sight, I'm seeing things, there's pleasant and unpleasant. But now we see that we're not coming at this from a neutral place. We are already skewed, already influenced by mental formations, ideas, agendas, views, and beliefs that influence what we take in.

This cycle has a very strong tendency to condition and reinforce itself—reinforcing our views, our beliefs, our opinions, our patterns.

And yet it's not hopeless. It's not hopeless because mindfulness and wisdom can completely change the direction of this pattern. Again, dependent origination describes a chain of conditions with ignorance at the head of the list, leading to the entire unfolding of this pattern. When we bring mindfulness and wisdom to our experience, we are undermining ignorance.

There's often an emphasis on breaking the cycle of dependent origination at the feeling-craving link. It's a very powerful practice to explore feeling tone. The Buddha emphasizes exploring feeling tone over and over again in the suttas. He emphasizes it in the second foundation of mindfulness: when feeling arises, when pleasant sensation arises, know it's pleasant. Know unpleasant. As we open to this exploration of feeling tone with mindfulness and wisdom, we see the possibility for it not to lead on to craving. Bringing mindfulness and wisdom to feeling tone undermines the possibility for ignorance to be there, because we are noticing in the moment: this is just feeling tone.

And yet, while that's a very powerful place to break this chain—bringing mindfulness and wisdom to feeling tone—the Buddha describes that attention to any place we find ourselves, anything we wake up to, anywhere we are in this chain, can be liberating. Mindfulness arises in the midst of, let's say, screaming rage. We have not seen the feeling that led to that. Screaming rage is present, and mindfulness arises there. The Buddha says: right there, it's possible to understand that screaming rage. Screaming rage is a mental formation.

In one sutta, the Buddha describes how we can practice for freedom right in the midst of exploring every single link in the chain of dependent origination. If we look at mental formation—when one understands mental formations, when one understands screaming rage, the origin of screaming rage, the cessation of screaming rage, and the way leading to the cessation of screaming rage—in this way, one has arrived at right view and has arrived at the Dharma. In this way, one has freedom here and now.

The full quote reads: "When a noble disciple has understood craving, has understood the origin of craving,

the cessation of craving, and the way leading to the cessation of craving, that one here and now makes an end to suffering." That same pattern—a pattern you probably recognize—is repeated over and over again: when one has understood clinging, understood the origin of clinging, the cessation of clinging, and the way leading to the cessation of clinging, one here and now makes an end to suffering.

At every link in this chain, the Buddha applies the pattern of the Four Noble Truths as an insight into that particular experience. It might be screaming rage. It might be depression. It might be confusion. It might be feeling tone. It might be love. We understand the state of mind. We understand the experience, the origin of the experience, the end of the experience, and the way leading to the ending of the experience. We here and now make an end to suffering.

Whatever is happening, no matter what is happening, the practice can in that very moment lead to freedom.

I talked about my belief that I had to get over or get beyond certain hindrances, especially around self-hatred—feeling like, okay, well, this is my self-hatred retreat, I guess I have to wait for enlightenment later. That kind of belief lived in my mind. I felt I had to wait for insight.

But when I finally surrendered to recognizing: this is self-hatred, this is how self-hatred arises, oh, this is how self-hatred ends—the mind understood in that moment something very deeply, right in the midst of exploring. I wasn't seeing feeling leading to whatever it was. I was just noticing the experience. I did notice that the experience of self-hatred was unpleasant, but right in the middle of whatever's arising.

To me, this is an inspiring part of this teaching. For those of you who like references, the sutta I'm quoting from—which applies the formation of the Four Noble Truths, this pattern of the Four Noble Truths, to all the links of dependent origination—is in the Majjhima Nikāya, number nine, called Right View.

I find that very inspiring because it keeps me coming back to waking up here and now. No need to create anything else. What's happening now we can meet, we can wake up to. It doesn't matter what we bring our attention to, what we are noticing in the present moment. It doesn't have to be something else. This experience—Alexis pointed to this in his talk the other night—everything is showing us the Dhamma. Everything. Even screaming rage can show us the Dhamma when we bring mindfulness and wisdom to bear on it.

Let's just sit for a moment.

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