Transcendent Dependent Arising

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:34

Over these weeks of being here, we've been watching the mind do its thing, getting familiar with the habits and patterns of our minds. And I've been hearing from pretty much all of you a real sense of just being able to watch—a kind of amazement of, "Yeah, I don't have to be involved with it. I can just watch it happen." And often we see it weaken. We see it fall apart. We do experience a kind of letting go. At least we experience a kind of okayness that it's here. We're not caught up in the habit or pattern.

So we're seeing how the habits and patterns affect our minds. We're learning with them. We're also seeing how the practice affects our mind. Both of these things are going on at the same time—the qualities of awareness and wisdom and patience. We're hearing the understanding and the recognition: "Oh, this is what it's like to be aware with something," and what effect that has on the experience. More ease, more peace, even as we're seeing something challenging.

And so we're seeing both the conditioning, the habits and patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion, how those tumble on. And we're also seeing how the wholesome qualities flow on, how they strengthen and develop as we practice. So we're seeing the conditionality on both sides: the conditionality of how greed, aversion, and delusion affect the mind, and how the wholesome qualities and the practice, the qualities of awareness and wisdom, affect the mind.

The Buddha described the conditionality of our reactive habits and patterns in the teaching of dependent origination. I think most of you are familiar, at least to some extent, with that teaching. And that's not the topic of tonight's talk, by the way, but I'm going to talk about it just a little bit right now, as a kind of framing.

The teaching of dependent origination describes the arising of suffering, describes the arising of the sense of self, describes how we get caught—the patterns of how getting caught works in our minds. It's kind of an amazing teaching, that the Buddha could see so clearly how these patterns work in our minds. It describes the conditioned nature of suffering.

In this teaching, there are some very familiar links in the chain. Particularly, there's a place in the teaching of dependent origination where it says that with every sense experience, we experience a feeling tone. And then from that feeling tone, what tends to arise is craving. That's one of the key places where we're taught to be curious. What happens? How does feeling lead to craving? Because it doesn't always lead to craving, and we can see that. And so we can understand in that experience.

The teaching says that when feeling arises, craving can arise. But it is not what might be called a cause.

Feeling doesn't cause craving. There are other conditions that are in play for feeling to lead to craving. And the teaching of dependent origination offers one of the keys at the very head of the chain: the whole thing is kind of initiated, kind of started rolling, with ignorance. Ignorance about how suffering works, ignorance about impermanence, ignorance about unreliability, ignorance about not-self. So with that kind of functioning in the mind, when ignorance is present in the mind, feeling will lead to craving in that moment. When feeling is arising with ignorance in the mind, feeling is going to lead on to craving. And so we start to see the difference between when the mind has ignorance, when feeling leads to craving, and when feeling can just be feeling, and we understand it doesn't have to lead on to craving.

This teaching on dependent origination also includes, in some forms of it, that there are conditions that lead to freedom. Some of the conditions that lead to freedom are talked about with respect to dependent origination in this way: when ignorance is not arising, feeling may not lead to craving. Probably won't lead to craving when ignorance is not present. And when craving doesn't arise, clinging doesn't arise. And when clinging doesn't arise, becoming doesn't arise.

This is one of the ways that the teaching on dependent origination, in its simplest form in the suttas, is taught—just a very simple statement of relationship: when this arises, that arises.

When this is, that is. When this ceases, that ceases. When this isn't, that isn't. This formula offers a way to understand how, when craving is not arising, clinging doesn't arise. When craving ceases, clinging will cease. There's a way out of the pattern, out of the habits and patterns that our minds typically go through.

If certain conditions aren't present, suffering doesn't arise—the suffering connected with greed, aversion, and delusion. When feeling is met with mindfulness and wisdom, ignorance is cut through, and craving won't arise. The conditions for how those things might not arise are awareness and wisdom.

There's also an understanding that there can be cultivation of conditions that support the letting go, that support the ending of the habits and patterns which lead to suffering. Often we don't know how to let go. We can't do that letting go so much. But the Buddha points to conditions that will support letting go.

It's said he had a reflection after he became awakened. He got curious: the mind is free from greed, aversion, and delusion—how did that happen? What was the condition that supported that release? And he walked backwards. What was the condition that supported that? And what was the condition that supported that? He walked back through a number of different conditions in the mind.

This is actually quite inspiring to me. He walked back to suffering as a supportive condition for the launching towards freedom. And this is embedded in his teachings—he speaks of understanding suffering, the first noble truth. That's the head of another process, another teaching: the teaching of transcendent dependent origination.

I'm going to go through this teaching this evening, but I'm not going to try to walk through every single link. It's a twelve-link chain, as the teaching of dependent origination is also a twelve-link chain. I'd like to

describe the flavor of it rather than going into depth with each link. There isn't really time for that.

Let me start with a few reflections on this teaching. The first thing that's inspiring to me is that the Buddha pointed out there are conditions that can support our freedom, that support the mind moving in the direction of freedom. The same lawful process that perpetuates dukkha—when this is, that is; when this arises, that arises; when this isn't, that isn't; when this ceases, that ceases—the same lawful processes that perpetuate dukkha also lead us to freedom.

I'm going to read through the links now. I won't define them just yet, but I'll list them. These are understood to be supportive conditions.

The condition of suffering supports the arising of faith. The condition of faith supports the arising of delight. The condition of delight supports the arising of rapture, which supports the arising of tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are. Knowledge and vision of things as they are supports disenchantment. Disenchantment supports dispassion. Dispassion supports release. And release leads to the understanding that freedom has been reached.

So, starting with suffering as a supportive condition for faith—this is interesting, and I think I'll spend some time with this link. Suffering leads to faith. But suffering also leads to ignorance.

has not really reflected on suffering in a way that includes an understanding of its workings. When we experience suffering—and certainly before I met this path—I was caught by my anger, caught by my self-hatred. It felt like there was no way out.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says this about suffering and faith: "Since it is suffering that impels us to seek the way to freedom, suffering is called the supporting condition for faith. By itself, however, the confrontation with suffering, even at the level of mature reflection, is not sufficient to generate faith. For faith to arise, two conditions are required. The first is the awareness of suffering, which makes us recognize the need for a liberative path. The second is the encounter with the teaching that proclaims a liberative path."

So for suffering to not just lead us back into the cycle of ignorance and the tumbling forward of feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, suffering, ignorance—for it not to just tumble on that way—something has to happen. There has to be a kind of reflection around suffering. What is this? Is it possible to be free of this?

It's said that the Buddha had this reflection or question around his own experience: Does somebody know a way out of this? There's a teaching in the suttas that says suffering will lead either to ignorance and confusion, or it will lead to search. And that's that question: Is there a way out?

I had this question for myself. I had tried just about everything to not feel like I was helpless, like I was being whipped around by conditions in the world—by what people did to me. That's how it felt: what people did to me and how my mind reacted to it. I was miserable. I was so miserable. And there was a question: Is there a way? Is there a way out of this?

Right around that time, a friend sent me a book about the Dharma. I didn't really understand much of what the book said, but I got a sense that there might be a way. The simplicity of the teaching I received from that book—I think I mentioned this earlier—was just: try noticing your difficult states of mind. So for me, anger in that time. Try noticing your anger instead of reacting to it. Try noticing your anger instead of following the anger.

I did not understand how that worked or why it would work. I thought, won't that just make me more angry? But I was in a place where I was willing to try just about anything, including something that didn't seem to make a lot of sense. There was suffering and the meeting of a teaching that said there's a way. Even though I didn't understand the connection, there was a willingness to try.

That willingness is a little bit of faith. That willingness to say, well, you know—for me it was kind of like I'd hit bottom, so nothing else had worked. I'd tried everything else I knew of to navigate my life. And here was another kind of out-of-the-blue crazy idea, but why not? Nothing else has worked. I might as well try this.

Within weeks I understood something about how and why it worked, and so faith began to be supported. At first it was just taking it on faith. Actually, I didn't just take it on faith from the book because my friend had said, "This stuff is really useful. It works." So I had that too, that piece in terms of the leap to faith. But fairly quickly I began to see the value and the benefit. This launched me onto this chain: faith supports delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness.

It put me onto that path.

The sutta in which this teaching is described presents this chain, this set of conditions, as a very natural unfolding. The image, the analogy that's used, is one of water running downhill. The Buddha says, just as when the rain falls from the sky and the water collects in rivulets and gullies and flows down the mountain to ponds and streams and rivers to the ocean—just as that happens, so this process towards freedom happens.

There's another sutta that speaks of some of these same links and uses slightly different language for understanding the naturalness, the onward-leading quality of finding our way into the path. It uses the phrase "there's no need for an act of will." That teaching begins with virtue. If someone is engaging with virtue, if someone is not harming, there's no need for an act of will: "May non-remorse arise in me." It is natural for non-remorse to arise in one who is engaging with ethical conduct. In one who does not have remorse, there's no need for an act of will: "May delight arise." It is natural for one who does not have remorse to experience delight. And this is where the chain links up and goes on. There's no need for an act of will in one who experiences delight. It is natural for rapture to arise.

Now I'd say this doesn't mean that we don't have to do work, because those patterns of delusion and ignorance are so strong. They get in the way. We see this, right? We see this. It's quite natural for delight to

lead to rapture, and rapture to lead to tranquility, and tranquility to lead to happiness—when the mind is not caught in greed, aversion, and delusion. That's the movement. And so it's a natural movement.

And yet, we can think about that analogy. This occurred to me when I was giving this talk one time. The water falls on the ground, and not all of it gets to the ocean. Some of it gets absorbed into the ground and pulled up into the plants and then evaporates back into the air. Some of it just gets stagnant in a little pond. There's a little dam in the way, and the water just sits there and then evaporates and goes back into the air. So those processes also happen in our minds. The ignorance and the delusion are like the formation of dams for that process of naturally flowing.

This teaching of the naturalness of the unfolding—to me it's inspiring, but it also means we can't just sit back and say, "Okay, I don't have to do anything because it's natural." The defilements also have their momentum. They're also nature. And they will take over. So we do have to bring a practice for this natural process to unfold.

As this process unfolds, the process towards freedom, the way it's framed—faith supports delight, delight supports rapture, rapture supports tranquility, tranquility supports happiness, happiness supports concentration—it sounds like they're one step at a time. But really it's more of a spiral, and there are feedback loops in this process.

So in my story around meeting suffering, finding a teaching, and then being willing to practice with it—that was the work. I found that teaching. Now the other thing about the teaching that the Buddha offers: it's a teaching of engagement. It's not a teaching just to believe and think about. We have to put it into practice. And so the faith has to put us into motion—to act, to try what the Buddha taught, to try those tools: mindfulness, effort, looking at the wholesome, understanding the wholesome and the unwholesome, all of the teachings that the Buddha offered for working with our mind. And here we're exploring primarily mindfulness and wisdom—to observe, to have the curiosity around what's going on here in our minds.

That's the activity, that's how we engage. That's the doing part. And this particular practice does move more into not doing as much. When mindfulness gains momentum, we don't have to do much at all. But we've been talking about skillful means, ways to navigate. When we see the defilements get strong, we bring in some tools to navigate, to not be caught in them.

To be able to learn with them, as opposed to being pulled under by them.

These feedback loops are so important. I talked about that experience for myself—trying this thing that made no sense to me intellectually, but then seeing over the course of the next few weeks a very clear understanding of how this practice helped.

That first moment really of seeing—just seeing, "Oh my gosh, this stuff works!" I could see the mind kind of heading towards a pattern and it just let it go. It just vanished. And it's like, "Oh my gosh, I never would

have thought that was possible." It's possible for the mind to let go of that pattern of anger. Wow, that's amazing. Delight and joy arose there. And there was also a kind of feedback loop to support the faith. So there was the faith to try it, and then as I played with it, there was the confirmed experience: this works. That supported more faith, which supported more engagement, which supported more seeing, which supported more delight and joy. The whole thing—it's like these feedback loops.

A little bit of faith will support a little bit of effort, which may begin to allow us to see something, and then there's some delight that supports more faith, there's more engagement, we may see something even more clearly, something new. Seeing some nature of something as impermanent supports it even more. We gain some concentration, which supports our mind to feel more stable and balanced. It's a spiral. It's a cycle.

This chain is teaching that in a way—it is pointing to conditions that are supportive for freedom. And yet there's a little bit of a paradox here, because the whole direction of this, the liberative teaching, points in the direction of non-clinging, not acquiring. So there's a kind of paradox: what does it mean to cultivate these conditions but not acquire them? Not have a sense of trying to hold on to them. What these conditions support is letting go, not clinging—even to beautiful states of mind.

The whole teaching of noticing when there's clinging, just that encouragement—notice when there's clinging—we start to be attuned to that. We start to be attuned to the feeling: contraction, distraction maybe. We start to be attuned to that experience, and we will feel it when we start to cling, if we start to cling to wholesome states. So the very direction of the teaching helps us to not cling to anything.

We may hold on to or cling to wholesome states of mind. I definitely knew there was clinging to investigation in my practice around investigating anger. I kind of knew that there was an identity there. I really knew that I was a good investigator. And yet, while I was clinging to that, while I was observing and knowing about anger, the suffering—there undoubtedly was some kind of tightness around the investigation. But while there was investigation of anger and self-hatred, the little bit of clinging around the investigation was not felt as suffering. And as the self-hatred and the anger fell apart, got really diminished, then I started feeling the clinging in how I was using the investigation. That's when I could really start to look at that part. What does it mean to investigate without clinging to investigation?

So the practice, as Gil Fronsdal sometimes says, is self-correcting. It will point out when we're clinging. And because that's what we're exploring, we'll see even when we cling to the practice. And we will feel the suffering of that.

These first few links—suffering supports faith, delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration. To me there's some inspiration here in this set of links: that these beautiful qualities—delight, joy, happiness, calm—are part of the path. And the conditions of supporting them, of nourishing them, of their growth and development—they are nourished by being aware of them, by recognizing them. Delight is happening. Happiness is happening.

This, to me, is part of the beauty of this teaching—that these qualities of mind are firmly on the path. They are supportive conditions. They aren't the end of the path. They aren't what we're going for. They are supportive conditions that support the mind to be able to see. Moving to the next few links of the chain: for the mind to become concentrated and to see things as they are.

To see the changing, conditioned, unreliable nature of experience.

All of these conditions support the mind to become more stable. The concentration of mind and the different kinds of concentration we've talked about. Here we're exploring the moment-to-moment concentration more than one-pointed concentration, although one-pointed concentration can happen in this practice—but that's not really the point of this practice. So concentration develops, stability of mind develops, and we are curious. The aim, that concentration with wise view, starts to get curious about experience as impermanent, unreliable, and not-self. Wisdom starts to show us things as they are.

This link in the chain—knowledge and vision of things as they are—impermanent, unreliable, not-self. I'm not going to spend a lot of time here; we've talked about this extensively over the last few weeks. But as we start to see this, as we start to see the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience, sometimes that's experienced as quite delightful. It can feel almost like a relief. Feeling the letting go of clinging around something, understanding that something is conditioned—it's just not me, not who I am—and something falls apart, and it's like, what a relief. So sometimes seeing things as they are does feel good. It has a relieving quality, a releasing quality to it.

And sometimes there's a deep rebellion against seeing things as they are. This is part of the process of how our minds work. Carol talked about the comfort we have in our habits and patterns—it feels like an old comfortable shoe. When those patterns and habits start to fall away, there can be this sense of, well, who am I without these things? There can be some resistance to seeing the nature of experience as it actually is. At some level, we don't like the fact that things are impermanent and unreliable. So there can be at times a kind of, no, I don't like this.

I would say this is in the terrain of the next place in the chain: knowing and seeing things as they are leads to disenchantment. As we start to see things as impermanent, unreliable, not-self, we recognize that our old habits and patterns are... yes, we become disenchanted with them. We see that they're based on an incorrect perspective of experience. We start seeing through. We've been enchanted. Actually, I like this definition, the framing of this link as disenchantment, because it points to how we have been in a spell of enchantment—thinking that having something will make me happy, that getting rid of something will make me happy. We've been enchanted by delusion, enchanted by ignorance, and through that whole process we think greed and aversion are actually doing something for us. Through this process of recognizing the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience, we start to see that no, actually, it's not the way our minds' magic showed us to think it was. We start to become disenchanted with our habits and patterns, disenchanted with greed, aversion, and delusion, with the ways we've been living our lives.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has this to say about disenchantment—the Pali term is *nibbidā*: "Nibbidā signifies the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

If only it was that easy. I think that serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena that happens when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered—that's kind of the end of the process. Getting to that point is a challenging part of practice, where we are resisting tooth and nail. I do not want it to be this way. There are many different relationships we have to seeing the truth.

I'll spend a couple of minutes here. We start to see truth and we resist those truths, and there are emotional flavors that we have when we start to see the truth. I'll just name a few of these. *Nibbidā* itself, translated here as disenchantment—I like that one. That's the sense of seeing something that we thought was something else; we become disenchanted with the way we saw it. But the word is also sometimes translated as revulsion.

And this can be a flavor of the relationship, of seeing the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience—a feeling of "ugh." It doesn't have aversion in it. I think it's in the commentaries that this flavor is compared to a dog that has found a bone, but this bone has been sitting in the sun for ages. It's bleached, there's no nourishment left in it, there's no marrow in the bone. The dog picks up the bone, smells it, and just walks away. "There's nothing here for me." That's the flavor of nibbida. There's nothing here for me. There's no use in picking anything up. It's not going to nourish me.

As we explore other flavors of relationship to seeing, at a very deep level, the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience—sometimes it can be fear. There can be a sense of "Who am I?" or a feeling of vulnerability. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya pointed out a flavor of homesickness. I like this one because there is a feeling at times of wanting to go back to delusion—if only I could just ignore the fact that things aren't the way I want them to be. There's this wanting to go back to the delusion we had, that feeling of homesickness, of returning to those comfortable habits and patterns, even though now they've been revealed to show suffering. So homesickness is another flavor. Sometimes there's a flavor of just disinterest, of boredom, of not wanting to practice. "Enough already. Enough already."

At this point in practice, when we're starting to really deepen through to see the nature of experience as impermanent, unreliable, not-self, this teaching that Sayadaw U Tejaniya points to—to notice the relationship to experience—becomes crucial. Because that's how the practice will deepen. All of these relationships are like the mind grasping at not wanting it to be this way. So as the mind is going through opening to truth, it reveals very deep and subtle levels of clinging. They aren't necessarily felt as subtle. This can be a pretty challenging time of practice. So notice those relationships.

Sometimes when somebody is talking about experiencing a lot of fear arising and they've been practicing for a while, I will ask, "Is there any content connected to this fear? Is there a story about it?" And often

they'll say, "No, it's just... it just feels primal. It feels visceral." That can be the flavor. Feeling into the nature of experience as completely unreliable—vulnerability, fear can be a very natural kind of resistance to that truth. It's not about some story of abandonment as a child or something that happened ten years ago. It's much more related to the direct experience of meeting the nature of experience.

As the mind begins to attune to, to land with the truth and not resist it in these ways, it moves in the direction of dispassion. We're no longer drawn towards that which we were formerly enchanted by. This to me is like the serene withdrawal. There's been that recognition—we're just not interested in moving towards or away from anything. We're not interested in craving, clinging, becoming. The mind is not drawn towards or away from experiences. And there's an understanding that holding on to any experience makes no sense.

The word for dispassion, viraga—that word itself is often translated as dispassion, but it also has a meaning of something like fading. Raga can have the meaning of strong color; it also has the meaning of lust or strong desire. And the "vi" prefix means the fading of that. Viraga: fading of lust, desire. But the "raga" part also refers to the bright colors of cloth, like dye. And viraga is what happens when you put a cloth out in the sun—the cloth fades. There's a natural fading process that happens if you wash the cloth in soap and water and then put it out in the sun. The dye is going to fade over time. So this word, often translated as dispassion, also carries an analogy. And I take some comfort in this analogy, because the fading away of a dye is a long, slow, gradual process.

So this is another place where the Buddha is pointing to the gradual nature. The very word for the mind that lets go and stops moving towards and away from experience, the very word itself says this is a process. It's a slow process of fading away—the letting go, the release of the fibers of that rope. It's a similar image in a way. It's a gradual process.

The last few links, which I'm not going to say much about at all: dispassion is that place of the mind understanding that there's nothing to pick up. The mind doesn't move towards things or away from things. It understands that picking up anything doesn't make any sense. So dispassion is this deep understanding.

And when there is the depth of understanding with dispassion, the next two links—release and knowledge of release—it is said that dispassion is a decisive support condition. Release and knowledge of release will follow. So the earlier links all involve more work, the practice, observation of experience and curiosity and investigation. But dispassion, the wisdom of not picking up; release, the heart experiencing the release of suffering, the recognition that suffering is not here; and then the knowledge, the intellectual understanding, the reflection—it's said that there does come a reflection: it is released. These follow quite naturally.

So this whole set of conditions, the path that we are on, the tools that we are exploring—they have put us in this flow. We hear these qualities in your descriptions of experience. We try to point them out. Notice

the wisdom. Notice the delight. Notice the joy. Notice this process. Because the noticing of the process of the path unfolding is a supportive condition for the path to keep unfolding.

I'll read this last quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi about realizing the unconditioned. And the unconditioned is another way of saying freedom, nibbāna:

"Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned, it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbāna cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with saṃsāra to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism and emotional self-indulgence. Nibbāna can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards saṃsāra and scrutinizing it in all its darkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

To me, that comes back to that very first link. Suffering leads to faith. Suffering met with wisdom is a supportive condition for freedom.

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