Wheel of Dependent Origination

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38:59

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.

Homage to the blessed, noble, and fully self-enlightened one.

So, I thought I'd try and make a fairly comprehensive statement about this wheel of dependent origination, just so that I've got a cassette to show people when they get confused about it. Saves me saying the same thing over and over again.

First of all, just to put it into the perspective of the Buddha's life. Remember that he left home and we can presume it wasn't for frivolous reasons. He wasn't doing a hippie trip or something. He was motivated by what we would call these days an existential angst. It's put mythologically as him coming across these *deva dūtas*, these messengers from the gods, as it's put. A sick person, an elderly person, and a corpse. And what it signifies is that in his middle or early twenties, he woke up to the fact that life comes to an end, there's sickness, old age, and death. This threw him.

So eventually when he leaves, and he goes and practices with various teachers, and then finally, as it were, goes on his own to achieve the enlightenment, he can reduce the whole of his teaching to suffering and the end of suffering. That's what he says he teaches. He reduces it to those three words: suffering and the end of suffering. It's three words in the Pali. And what he discovers of course is the way out. And luckily for us he has this ability to get it across.

And what he gives us is a psychological paradigm. And I think it's very important for meditators to know this. Because if we don't, we come to the meditation with our own psychological paradigm, which is got from our own tradition of psychology, psychotherapy. Not that that's all wrong. It isn't at all. But when the Buddha's talking about psychology, he's talking about suffering and the end of suffering. It's specific. It's nothing to do with how we learn, how we develop. It's not developmental psychology. It's nothing to do with psychotherapy as such. It's to do with finding out how suffering arises and how it passes away.

So if we have a clear idea of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the wheel of dependent origination, then that intelligence which is going to liberate us can see more clearly. This is the paradox that that intelligence which liberates us needs to be instructed on how to do it. It doesn't come naturally it seems.

Now, just to put what I say in perspective, his regular companion, Ānanda, who was with him for twenty-odd years eventually, was obviously present for all his talks that he gave, or at least most of them, and he would obviously take the opportunity to discuss this with the Buddha when he's with him. I mean,

he's there in the room, he's attending to the man. So he comes one day to this conclusion, and he says to the Buddha, "I think I've understood this business now. I think I understand this wheel of dependent origination that you're teaching." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, don't say that, Ānanda. This stuff is deep. This stuff is profound. It's subtle."

So whatever I say must be taken in the context of that announcement of the Buddha towards Ānanda.

The first thing to understand about the Buddha's teaching is that he's not into metaphysics. He's not into where does the universe begin and where does it end. Is it eternal or not eternal? Is the soul lasting or not lasting? Is there a God or is there not a God? So he's not talking about origins in that sense. So when he points to the first link of the wheel of dependent origination, when he's pointing to the base of it, when he talks about ignorance, not knowing, he's not talking about some distant time where consciousness arose out of some primordial mass into this state of not knowing. He's simply saying that at this present moment, right now, consciousness is in a state of don't know. It doesn't know.

That not knowing is not culpable. It's not as though we deserve to be not knowing. It's not as though we should feel guilty because we don't know. It's simply a state of not knowing. Just as when a car breaks down, we don't know. If you're not mechanically minded and you open the bonnet, you still don't know. Just don't know. You don't say to yourself—well, some people do, of course—"I'm a fool, I should know about this," etcetera, etcetera. You just don't know.

And, of course, it's a position that we as human beings find very difficult. We do want to know. We feel secure when we know. So you wake up and you've got a pain at the end of your nose and you're sure it's cancer. And you go to the doctor because you want to know. "So what is it?" "It's just a pimple," he says. "Oh..." Fantastic relief. If he said it's the most dangerous cancer, it'll blow your brains apart in two weeks, and of course you'll fall apart. But at least we know. It's better for us to know we're going to be blown apart than not to know. It's an easier state to be in. We can handle that. We know that. But not to know is very difficult.

So, bringing ourselves, as it were, into this lifetime, not worrying about past lives and future lives and getting into what might seem to others to be metaphysics. What does the fetus know? What does it wake up to? As its sensual basis begins to develop, it begins to hear heartbeats of the mother, begins to feel the place it's in. And there's no doubt a time when it's absolutely gloriously in this lovely bath of warmth, being fed, growing, etcetera. And then, slowly, it becomes uncomfortable. Then the dreadful passage, a smack on the arse, and they're there. The eyes open, and suddenly, we're here. See? From a state of not knowing, we're suddenly somewhere. From a state of some sort of cloudy feelings, which are nice, we go through this terrible pain. And suddenly we're here. And we've got no language. We can't reflect on it. We just hear. Very present. But we're present in a total state of ignorance as to what's happening to us.

So it's no wonder that very slowly we just come to see or we come to accept or we come to understand that this is what we are. I am my body. I am my eyes and my ears. I am my feelings and my thoughts. It's got to

be a natural mistake because that's all consciousness knows. But it's a mistake. And because of that essential mistake, a load of suffering comes our way. In fact, all our suffering comes our way. And that mistake, of course, is the belief, is the conception, is the understanding that we are what we appear to be. Human beings. Psychophysical organisms. Rather like that phrase. A psychophysical organism. A breathing, feeling, sensing, emoting, thinking, psychophysical organism. And so that's what we think we are.

So that's our first disposition, *saṅkhāra*. So from *avijjā*—*vijjā* means knowing, *avijjā* means not knowing—we produce our first *saṅkhāra*, our first disposition, which is me, self. Embodied, an incarnate entity.

So with that fundamental disposition we find ourselves in the next link, the body and the mind. Now, in Buddhist understanding, these are two different forms of energy. Both suffering from transience, both not-self, and both, if we attach to them wrongly, will create suffering, will create dissatisfaction, won't bring permanent happiness. But the body and mind in the Buddha's understanding are two different things, though intimately entwined as milk in water. But through good meditation, even in this lifetime, they can be separated as a sword can be taken from its scabbard. It's one of the powers that we can get if we want it. And then you don't have to pay anything at all to go to Mallorca and all these beautiful places. You just wander off.

So, having entered into this conglomerate of the body and mind, it obviously has ways of communicating to the world and for the world to communicate to it, and that's your five senses, six senses. The five ordinary senses that we know, and the sixth is that part of us, the brain, and the mind which is in the brain, which is there to receive and to process stimulus. This has got a special word for it in Pāli: *mano*.

Now having established these qualities, having established a fundamental disposition, all these things are arising at once. We make contact with the world. So contact comes to us also from the world. So we hear a sound. The sound, as we know, is just pressure on the eardrum. It comes into the brain. And that first contact is known as *phassa*, is contact.

At that point of contact, there is only what is stimulating the base, the sensual base, here the eardrum, the eardrum itself, the sensual base, and this consciousness. Nothing else is there. So at primary level there is just that percept of that fundamental stimulus which is coming in at the eardrum. It just is a pounding. It's just the earth element. It has no sound about it at all. Once that is there it is, as it were, brought into the mind which is the sense base and there it's processed and we begin to hear something. And that's really all part of this contact.

But when that happens, there arises in us a response. And the response is to perceive it, to experience it as either pleasurable or non-pleasurable. This is when we move on to the next stage, which is *vedanā*, feeling. So from contact, which is felt as a neutral experience, we move into experiencing it as something which is pleasant and unpleasant.

Now, this consciousness which has come into life is experiencing things as pleasant and unpleasant. Is it no wonder that it just wants to center on what is pleasant? And when it centers on what is pleasant, it finds happiness. So there you have your next link, *taṇhā*, which is translated, unfortunately, as craving. But *taṇhā* means this reaction, this reaction of wanting, not wanting.

So from the stimulus, from the actual given percept of *phassa*, contact, we have a judgmental mind coming in at a feeling level, a feeling level saying likable, unlikable. There's an immediate reaction by that consciousness of saying this is it. If it's likable, there's wantable. If it's unlikable, it is definitely not wantable. There's a whole area in between of neutral feelings, but if in your meditation you really go into the neutral feeling you'll see that there's always a shade of liking and not liking.

These feelings are divided by the Buddha at its simplest into five. The physical pleasant and unpleasant feelings, such as when you're sitting there, you get pain in the knees, that's a physical unpleasant feeling. If you're sitting there and you're feeling very comfortable in the body, that's a pleasant physical feeling. There's pleasant and unpleasant mental feelings, which is basically our emotional life. So if you're sitting here and you feel joyful, then you're experiencing pleasant *vedanā*, pleasant feelings. If you're depressed or angry or whatever, then you're feeling unpleasant stuff. And there's that whole business of the neutral feelings, for instance, around the breath, which are very neutral.

So, having established that *vedanā*, that feeling base, we have this reaction of wanting and not wanting. When that wanting and not wanting comes up, only then, only then does the I appear. I want, I don't want. The I, the idea of a self, of me wanting something, in terms of the psychological process, comes in quite late at the end. That means that at that point, this consciousness has identified, has become what it is now wanting. So up until that point, that identity isn't there.

We know that. You know that in your meditation. When you've sat there in your meditation and, shall we say, a depression or an angry feeling has arisen or something, or a joyful or wonderful feeling, and you are observing it as an object, then that I, meaning I am depressed, I am joyful, can't arise. It only arises when you become it. It only arises, for instance, when the sun comes out and you throw yourself on the lawn and suddenly you become sunshine. You're there with the sun. From a point of view of indulgence, I am this pleasant feeling.

Because we're not enlightened, we're constantly moving in and out of that. Because we're meditators, we can find that position of not being that position. And when we fall out of that grace, we fall into the self, and we establish this relationship in the world, whereby we're seeking happiness there. That's what we're doing all the time. We're trying to seek comfort, we're trying to seek security, we're trying to seek happiness in the sensual world. So there's your *upādāna*.

When the Buddha describes the five *khandhas*, the five heaps that some of you will know, which is another division of the human experience—meaning the body, all our perceptions, all our feelings, all our emotional and mental productions, and our discriminative consciousness—he calls them the *upādāna*

khandha, he calls them the grasping *khandha*. In other words, this is only a problem when we say this is what I am, when we identify with it.

So there's your *upādāna*. Now at this point, the I has come in to identify. The next point is *bhāva*. *Bhāva* means becoming. So now, the wanting, I want, now becomes get it. There's an impulsion of will into that want, and it becomes an action. An action of thought, an action of speech, or an action of the body. At which point, *kamma* is created. That's an action. That's becoming.

So from liking not liking, wanting not wanting, I want I don't want, I do I don't do. Remember that even not doing something is also an action. It's a decision not to do something.

So now we've taken a whole series of progressive acts which has produced a *bhāva*, it's produced a becoming, it's produced an act of *kamma*, which basically is just an action. Now, the importance of an action is, of course, is that because the mind is something we can condition, as soon as we put an action into the mind, an empowerment, we have conditioned it. The more actions we put of a similar nature, it becomes a habit. The more habits we engender is the definition of our personality. And once we have that personality, which is no more than a compendium of habits, our destiny is assured.

So, having made this *bhāva*, this act, we now go into the process of being born, decay and death. Again, keeping the wheel of dependent origination right into the present moment, that simply means that the action is begun, the action is gone through, and the action is completed. And that's the end of the process. In terms of the mind, there's been a conditioning. There's been a conditioning set into the mind.

So, a child, for instance, hears, just hears the little dingy bell of the ice cream man. Now what comes to the ear is just this little knocking. It's taken in, you see, and suddenly there's a perception of bell, there's a perception of the understanding of the bell, there's a perception of ice cream, there's a memory of ice cream, and joy arises. See? The joy arises. So this is *vedanā*. We've had the contact, this is *vedanā*. As soon as the joy arises, wanting arises: I want, jumping up and down, I want an ice cream. See? And nothing will satisfy that child now, unless he gets that ice cream, goes through the motions of eating it, swallowing it, and completing it, and feeling for a moment that lovely satisfaction, which only ice cream can give us.

But, foolishly, he has now established a habit. A habit of seeking happiness in ice cream. Hence, whenever that ice cream van comes, out he'll go demanding his ice cream. Later on, of course, ice cream becomes beef stroganoff. Spaghetti a la Bolognese. Beautiful wines. And of course, the more we indulge in food, the more we must seek our happiness there. And if one day there's no food in the larder, there's no tea in the morning, there's no toast, misery, frustration, horror. That's the other side of the wheel. That's another conditioning coming up, you see.

But anyway, that in summary is how the wheel works. And it works in terms of this process, you see. Parts of it are given. A state of ignorance is with us all the time until we're fully enlightened. We have a set of dispositions. They're your *saṅkhāra*. With that disposition you enter into every moment. And a disposition

will manifest according to the stimulus. In this case, ice cream. So a certain disposition will arise entirely due to the sound of that ice cream bell, ice cream tune. That can only be done because we have a body and a mind. It can only be done because we have these six senses. It can only be done because consciousness with the sense base and this stimulus from outside is making contact. It can only be done because that contact, this consciousness—not the mind, excuse me, this consciousness—sees the happiness.

It therefore now forms a relationship with this feeling of happiness, which has only as its catalyst the ice cream. And therefore it wants it, it associates with it, it identifies with it, it demands it, and before you know it, it commits the act, and the ice cream is bought, eaten, and digested. That's the process.

Once we've understood that process, we can also see that there is one specific link which is going to undermine that whole process. And it's right there between *vedanā* and *taṇhā*. Right up until we get to vedanā feeling, it is utterly and totally conditioned by the past, by our dispositions that we have already developed. There is nothing you can do about that. Whenever the ice-cream van goes, we will reach to vedanā just like that, which is the pleasant and lovely feelings that arise when we hear an ice-cream van. There's nothing you can do about that. That is set by past conditioning.

The next process of wanting it is also set by past conditioning, the desire for it, the craving for it, but by putting our mind right there at that juncture, we stop the next process, which is to identify with that craving, I want, and thereby we stop the empowerment of that craving, and we undermine that conditioning of seeking happiness in ice cream.

Now, in order to do that, we have to be able to distinguish that moment. And that is the core thing of our meditation if we want to approach the enlightenment through the understanding of *dukkha*, through the understanding of suffering, which is one of the three characteristics. When we see that, when we are in a position to see that, then we can see that the one is a reaction of the other, the one is dependent on the other. Dependent, *paṭicca*, *paṭiccasamutpāda*, right? That which arises dependent on.

We can see that the feelings arising from the sound of ice cream is depending on that, there arises the craving for it. By just keeping that aloofness, and this is what solitude means in its spiritual sense, maintaining that inner aloofness to see the connection between these two things. And sometimes we're aware of the pleasant feeling, sometimes we're aware of the craving.

Sitting there before your morning porridge, not moving, just watching that movement in the mind of the pleasant feeling that has arisen at the very sight of porridge and the craving for it which arises with that pleasantness. Just to sit there and to wait till this craving passes away. And there's just the pleasantness. And then to eat for the purpose of feeding the body, not to feed the greed. Feeding the need, not the greed. In doing that, we are undermining all that process of seeking happiness in porridge. Which is ridiculous, isn't it? To seek happiness in porridge. And in so doing we undermine that disposition of seeking happiness in the sensual world. And in so doing this consciousness is finding a new relationship to the world not based on seeking happiness in it, not based on craving.

To be able to experience pleasure without indulgence is an important experience in the meditator's life, because then they know it's possible that you can live life without expecting anything from it, without wanting anything from it. It's a liberation. The taste of Nibbāna is freedom.

In the same way, when it comes to pain and suffering, whenever that pain arises, there arises that not wanting, I don't want. Yeah, get the Prozac. Swallow the Prozac, finish your pain, fine. But the pain is still there somewhere. In the same way, we see the original pain, whatever it is, emotional or physical, and we see our reaction of wanting to push it away or, if it's too great, wanting to run away. Just trying to hold that connection, just trying to see it, being aware of one and the other, sometimes being aware of both, seeing the connection, allowing that pain, allowing that reaction to slowly die away and just staying with pain.

To stay with pain as pain is to discover that there's no suffering in it. The suffering only comes because of our reaction to it. So, we can say that the whole process of our meditation is to take the suffering out of pain and the indulgence out of pleasure. Just to do this will make us arrive at *nibbāna*, the end of suffering. And it is the process of seeing how suffering arises and how it passes away.

When we're calm, then we can also see the other two characteristics. Easier to see them when we drop down at the point of contact, where there isn't even the idea of it being pleasant and unpleasant. And that's to see this transiency, this constant transformation, this flow of events, each single and discrete. No sensation is ever the same as the last one, even though it may feel to be the same. It isn't the same because a sensation arises and passes away every single moment.

To be aware of sensations, be it if they come from the body or the mind, is to always be in the present moment. That's why we always center on the breath. That's why we always center on the body. Because when we're there with a sensation or a feeling, we know we're in the present moment.

That sense of *anattā*, not self, remember, is not a philosophical proposition by the Buddha. It's not a metaphysical proposition. There is a not-self. There is a no-self. He's never said that. He said, there is not self. Everything in this world is *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. It's transient, it will cause some sort of dissatisfaction if we associate with it or identify with it, and it is not self, not me, not mine.

So as soon as we get into that meditative posture and we can see, feel, experience a sensation, painful or unpainful, an emotion, painful or pleasant, and we can see it as an object, we are experiencing not-self. To stay at that point where we see vedanā and taṇhā, the given feeling and our response to it of craving, is the position of not-self.

So, understanding this, you see, it makes our meditation very clear. As soon as we sit, we must make the effort to come to a point of concentration, at least some stillness in the mind. And that sometimes takes a little while and sometimes takes a long while. It doesn't matter. Just bring a stillness. And then we access this level of consciousness which is just this observing, just this observation.

Then we need to have that essential faith. And an essential faith in our own Buddha nature. You know they say the Buddhas can only point. We ourselves have to become enlightened. So it's an act of faith that is within us. A higher faculty which will work this stuff out. Which will make the insight and which will liberate itself. And it will do it the quicker we get out of the way. And the quicker we get out of the way, means that when we look at something, we have to draw that consciousness, that attention, into the present moment. To bring it into the present moment and just to allow the mind, to allow that consciousness to observe. That's all.

So I hope that's clarified things. It's not made things worse. How then, just to finish off the talk, how then would the Buddha mind work? Now, this has to be in terms of a little conjecture on my part, because it's never said explicitly. But in the later works of the Abhidhamma, there has to be an explanation as to how an enlightened being works. How do they actually experience life?

First of all, the *avijjā*, the ignorance, is now *vijjā*. There's no confusion in the enlightened person's mind as to the way things really are. So we can say that the enlightened person is now not coming out of a state of ignorance, but coming out of a state of knowing. This knowing, remember, is not a matter of facts and knowledges, it's a disposition. It's a way of being in the world which is not going to cause that being any more suffering. That's what we mean when we talk about somebody being enlightened. The *Arahant*, somebody who's enlightened, need not know how many hairs there are on his head, or her head. It's not necessary, you see.

What is the *paññā*? What is the enlightenment? What is the wisdom? It is a relationship with life, which is different from being deluded. So now that person is coming from a state of wisdom, still has the body, a body which can be painful and pleasant. No problem, you see? But when that body is giving sensations, coming all the way up now, straight up to contact, there is no delusion coming from that particular disposition. So reality, as it were, is not distorted into a delusive idea of the way I want it to be. And the way I want it to be is to get the world to make me feel happy. That's your essential position as an unenlightened person.

Coming into the world without any demands upon it, you can see that an enlightened person is very sensual. Because there's no filtering. As that comes, pleasant and unpleasant feelings arise. There's still some sort of reaction to it. But that reaction is no longer suffering. There's no reaction to that pleasant and unpleasant feelings in terms of all those things that we associate with suffering, depression, anger, anxiety and all that. All that, from taṇhā onwards, which are the saṅkhārās, which are the dispositions, they're the same thing as what we start off with, have now been totally transformed from the vicious to the virtuous.

And the enlightened person lives always in some mode of the four illimitables, either friendliness, love, compassion, joy or peace. The Buddha himself says it. When you get to Nibbāna, you are contented and with it happy. Being in that state now, how then does the Buddha act, you see?

Well, they had to coin a new word to express an enlightened person's action. And the word they came up

with was *kriyā*. In the Buddha's understanding there are two types of actions, *kusala* and *akusala*, meaning skillful and unskillful. What he means by that is those actions taking us to enlightenment and those actions taking us the other way. When the Buddha is already enlightened then this business of kusala and akusala no longer apply because he's already there. Therefore his actions now become, and it's translated as functional which is rather dry.

But basically, his heart is now motivated to help other people to become enlightened. So all those actions arising out of a base of wisdom are now for the benefit of others. But there's no attachment to them. There's no, I am doing this. See, the grasping is gone. And yet the action is still there. The doer has disappeared, there's only the doing.

That's why when this very old man corners him and says, look, give me your teaching now, and the Buddha says, sorry, I'm on my alms round, can you come back later? He says, look, I'm an old fellow, I could die any moment. He says, well, okay, I'll give you the teaching in short. In the hearing, there's only the hearing. In the seeing, there's only the seeing. In the cognizing, there's only the cognizing. So this old man became enlightened in a click of the eye. It didn't work for me.

So that's how an enlightened person works in the world. She no longer identifies with what she's doing. It's just an act coming out of a pure relationship with the world and with people that she finds herself in. And I would suggest that there are times that even we act like that, even though we might not have cleared the base of ignorance, there are times when through our constant effort to do what is skillful, constant excitement of that motivation of loving kindness, of compassion, just occasionally, we do something which is done out of an absolute purity of heart. For the benefit of the other, not for oneself.

I think that's it.

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