The Ethical Psychology of the Buddha (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:39

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened one.

You may find it useful this evening to have the dependent origination in front of you, the chanting that we do, because I intend to go through that and make it clear so I can explain it. I called it the wheel, I think there — the wheel of dependent origination. That's the Tibetan thing because they have that lovely picture of the wheel in the jaws of Samsāra, the evil one. But it's just dependent origination — in other words, things arise dependent on something else. That's the basic position of the Buddha: that nothing has its own existence. There's no such thing as an independent entity in the universe. All things are arising dependent on other conditions. That's the basic teaching, and the connection in terms of *kamma* I'll do tomorrow.

So today it's really trying to understand the psychology that we're studying about ourselves, to understand it and then to see if actually we can realise it for ourselves through our meditation — actually see this process. So it starts with this word *avijjā*, and it's translated as ignorance. But ignorance gives it a pejorative meaning; it makes you think, well, you're ignorant, you should have known better. But it's basically a not knowing. I did find a word which expresses just not knowing — it's nescience, but nobody knows it, so there's no point in me using it. English is full of all these redundant words.

So this *avijjā*, not knowing — what's it referring to? What is it that doesn't know? In the Theravāda tradition, the southern school of Buddhism, there was kept to the original Buddha's approach about what is the experience. As Buddhism developed, the question shifted slightly to, well, what is it that has the experience? And so the psychology shifts. We get into a more metaphysical psychology — psychology that includes a consciousness which doesn't belong to this realm of existence. That's *Nibbāna*.

But in the Theravāda school, what they tend to term these days as southern Buddhism as opposed to northern Buddhism — to get away from the prejudice that there is between these two schools — the accent is more on the actual experience of *Nibbāna*. However, when it comes to this word *avijjā*, not knowing, it's obviously something that doesn't know. It's not a blank nothingness out of which conditions arise — that is a not knowing. And the closest we can get to that understanding is birth.

So at birth, what do we actually know? We've come with some baggage, if we're to believe rebirth, having come from a former life. But in terms of that moment, whether it's within the womb coming to some

awareness, suddenly hearing mother's heartbeat — I don't know — or whether it's when you're actually born and suddenly you're out there taking your first very painful breath... at some point we can say that this child knows nothing. We can agree on that, can we, to a certain extent?

So then, of course, all the stuff piles in — parents, society, education, all that. And the child comes to know. But at that point of *avijjā*, that not knowing, there is right there at the beginning an association, there's an identity. So when that child cries, it's me that's crying. When that child's happy, it's me that's happy. So there's no distinction in the child between the I which is experiencing things and the experience, as far as we understand — not until the age of four or five months, it seems, does a child actually create its first object out of this mass of sensation that it's experiencing.

Suddenly something separates out — usually obviously your mother comes out — and from then on the child objectifies the world. So that I don't know what age that gets to, but maybe somewhere around two, between two and three, the child knows there's a world out there and I'm in it. I'm here. But the important point for us to understand is that there is a moment when this knowing presumes it is what it's experiencing, and what it's experiencing is this psychophysical organism. So there's no... that's who I am. I am this. That's the point.

And what this does is it creates a relationship with this, and that relationship is one of trying to be happy — which is understandable; you want to be happy. And anything that makes me unhappy, I want to get rid of. So right there within that first relationship, that first hazy sense of who I am — we're not talking about a concept here, we're not talking about words — there is an immediate knowledge that some things are painful and some things are un-painful, and that when things are painful I don't like it, and when they're pleasant I do. Even if it's not at a language base, it's at that fundamental animal base.

An animal, even a primal animal, knows when it's suffering and when it's not suffering. Even a worm — if you prod a worm it curls up, doesn't it? It's not doing that for fun, is it? We can't get into the head of a worm, I know, and it's all meant to be the pathetic fallacy and all that, but the fact is... I had this in a magazine that I get called The Week, which collects all the news from all the newspapers. It's like a leech, really — it lives off the newspapers, but it's very handy because it puts all these opinions for you there. And it always has these reports occasionally from scientists. It always has a report from the science community. And one week it was proven without any shadow of a doubt by scientists in Canada that fish do not feel pain. The next week it was proved without a shadow of a doubt by scientists — I can't remember where — that fish do in fact feel pain. So how they work this one out...

Anyway, so here we have this not knowing, this awareness, this consciousness. It's difficult to find a word, and probably the best word is "the knowing" — a gerund, which is a verbal noun. So it gives us the idea that it's not an object but a process: the knowing. You see that in the literature, and I much prefer that word because it takes us away from the idea that it's something like an object in the universe. It's a process — the knowing.

And this knowing has made a mistake. That's the point. It makes a mistake. You can't say it's blameworthy; it's just made a mistake of believing it is what it's actually experiencing. And this creates this primary mirror image that I was talking about yesterday — of the self. This knowing feels itself within the psychophysical organism. It's a sense of presence. You can get it now if you're in a very silent place — you get a sense of your being here, that sense of presence. And that's often looked upon by traditions elsewhere as your soul, because you've always got that sense of presence. You don't have it in sleep, of course, but when you wake up, there you are. Here I am. Every morning, here I am. And that sense of presence, which seems to be constant with me all the time — constant — is what you might say my first object. I create myself. That's my mirror, and I myself cannot be separated from what I'm actually experiencing. That's another point too.

So if you ask somebody, "Well, who are you?" they'll say, "Well, I am my thoughts, I am my emotions, I am this, I am that." They describe themselves. So this I and what we experience are one and the same thing. Only in meditation do we find this other place within ourselves where the I sits as seemingly retreated out of the body, out of emotions, out of thought, into this objective observer. But it's still there in the sense of me.

So that's what you might say is a fundamental delusion about me, about who I am, running under every moment of my life. It's always there — it's not always activated, but it's always there as a way of looking, a way of experiencing my life. It's always underneath there, and it rises up as the "I am," which manifests later in this sequence.

And because of this, dependent on this not knowing, the delusions arise. And these delusions, these habits that we have which are based on wrong understanding, are known as your *saṅkhāra*. So that's the *avijjāpa ccayā saṅkhāra*. Dependent on this delusion, this initial mistake — the *avijjā*, this not knowing — we have created a whole mass of conditioning. And again, how we create that mass will become obvious. But important for us to understand is that running underneath our lives is this fundamental delusion, and on top of that are our habits, our conditioning, always running underneath at this unconscious, subliminal level.

And the thing is, we don't know how much of it's down there. That's why it's so horrific when you meditate — you find you've got all this stuff. And when you think you've got rid of it, you find more. And it's all down here in this psyche. So you've got these two things just running underneath our lives like that.

Now, dependent on the *saṅkhāra*, these conditionings, consciousness arises. So how does that work? Well, a consciousness — and this comes again later in the wheel — is based upon a sense base. So as soon as a sense base touches on something... as soon as I see a tree — I was walking around just recently — as soon as I see a tree, the photons hit the eye, and all that, but it taps into this base I have around trees. And up comes my relationship to trees, dependent on all the trees that I've had a relationship with. And that's determined, and that's what we're trying to do — we're trying to undermine that by cutting through these

old perceptions, but they're there.

Coffee — as soon as you get the smell of coffee, it goes into it and there's a conditioning there to get coffee. So it comes out and off you go. Tea, whatever it is, biscuits — it's all underneath here, all underneath, just waiting like a devil to grab you and throw you in the pot. So those are your *saṅkhāras* underneath. *Saṅkhā ra* means those things made with... they're not only *saṅkhāras* in the past, conditionings coming from the past — they themselves are conditioning. Every time they rise, they condition you in the same way, and that's how they manifest. So if you're greedy, the more you feed your greed, the more greedy you get. Very simple.

And you get some funny translations, really — concoctions. You'll see them translated as volitional conditionings. And what that's pointing to is that what makes these conditionings is your will. So again, we'll make that clearer as we go along. But tomorrow, when we talk about *kamma*, then that becomes a central concept.

So you've got not knowing. We begin with a non-culpable not knowing. We make a mistake. We create a self. We create the world. And this world is our habits underneath — the underlying habits which will make us see the world in a particular way. You've only got to think of being born in a different culture — a different world.

So now, dependent on that and on this arises this consciousness, this cognition. So that's your basic awareness of things. So we're not talking here about this insightful intelligence — it's buried in that consciousness, but it comes out as a discriminative consciousness. You know this from that, you know what it does, you know where it's going, you know what it's for. It's that understanding consciousness. It translates as a discriminative consciousness.

Now, dependent on *vijñāna*... dependent on consciousness arises... *nāmarūpa*, that's right — body and mind. *Nāmarūpa* refers to your body and your mind. Now I have to be careful here. The body here is the sense body. Of course there is a physical body — like your nails. But what do I know of my nails? I know the shape, I know the feel of them. But I can't get inside my nail. I can't be my nail. Have you noticed that? And have you noticed that when you cut it off, it's fine. But if somebody cut your hand off, it'd be completely different.

So it's more in the sense of relating to our sense body — what we actually know through our senses of the body, rather than the body itself, although we can include that because obviously even if we don't know parts of the body such as our hair, if you lose your hair it can be a disaster. I can tell you that now for certain.

So *nāmarūpa* — and in the Buddhist teaching these are two different forms of energy. This is the thing — two different forms of energy. Difficult these days in certain circles because everything's reduced to matter, but mind is of a different form of energy. And we can sometimes separate that in our bodies. For

instance, if you feel angry, in a really good moment of perception you may separate out the body, which is quite burny, from the mind, which is a much lesser feeling. And this mind is just of a finer substance — I'll use the word of a finer material. But remember, nothing here has any substance in itself. It's just a finer energy, for want of a better word.

Now, this *nāmarūpa — nāmarūpapaccayā* — there arises the six sense bases. Now the six sense bases are important because they define this consciousness. So your consciousness is dependent on the sense base, the Buddha says. So for instance, my eye consciousness is dependent on the eye. I can't have eye consciousness through my ears, no matter how much I try. Even if I had enormous powers, I don't think I could still see through my ears. So whatever consciousness I have must be dependent on the sense base.

Now the sixth sense base, remember, is the mind itself. And what that's referring to is the processes — the basic processes the mind has to perceive things. So for instance, at the eardrum there is only pressure; there is no sound. But these pressures are taken inward and there's this whole process of turning that — what are basically contacts, if you tap your finger like that, your thumb and finger together, that's what happens on the eardrum — there's no sound at all. But it's taken in and a sound is manufactured, and then it goes through the process of naming the sound: bell. And then it gives you a reason: alarm. And then it says, "I've got to get up." So there's a whole process that goes on in the mind which is all really to do with the mind base.

So those are your six sense bases. And it's because of these six sense bases that we can contact the world. So that's your next step — the *phassa*.

Now, the three things that we need to have contact: we need to have that sense base, we need to have an actual object to have sense of, and we need that consciousness. And what the Buddha says is when those three are there, that's when you have perception. And if one of them are missing, you don't get it. So if you're unconscious, you probably don't see anything — you won't see the gorilla walking across your room. If you're in a room where there's no light, you've got your eyesight, you've got consciousness, but you can't see anything. So those three things have to be there for a perception to arise.

Inwardly, on the sense base of the mind, that of course refers to your memories, to your images, to your thoughts that arise out of this base of *saṅkhāra*, this underlying base. And as we discover in meditation, once you stop controlling your life and just sit, all sorts of stuff comes out of this dustbin, doesn't it? There's no reason for it. There's no reason within the heart. It just effervesces.

So we've got to the point now of contact. Now it's the next stage where we begin to live in a dual world. And the dual world is those contacts that are pleasant and those contacts that are unpleasant.

There's a whole range of contacts in the middle that the Buddha talks about as being neutral, but if you go into them and really feel them as they are, I think you'll see they tend ever so slightly towards being pleasant or unpleasant. So there's a fundamental dual world we live in, in terms of our experience. What

we're experiencing is either pleasant or unpleasant.

And you'll notice that the word there is this *vedanā*. So remember vedanā includes all the sensations, feelings, moods, emotions as we experience them in the body — that's vedanā. It's the felt sense of our lives. And included in that, although it's not written into the actual process always, is the saññā, perception. So whatever we experience always has a mirror image at a conceptual level, and there's your memory. Every time you eat an apple it goes into this memory block, and then every time you eat an apple this memory comes on to the apple that you're eating. Without saññā then that wouldn't be possible. And that's your level of experience, which is most of it is completely natural.

I mean, if somebody stands on your foot, that's going to be normally painful. If somebody offers you a sweet and you put it in your mouth, that's normally pleasant. So there's a certain base. Other parts, other things can be to do with our culture. I remember my teacher who was Burmese almost feeling sick at the sight of a Marmite jar. Can't understand it. Mind you, if you've ever had their fish paste, then you know what life's about. Have you had that fish paste? Thailand and Burma, yeah. Oh, well. I'll leave that for another lifetime, I reckon.

Some of it's cultural like music — some music we love because it's our culture of the music we find strange. And so on and so forth. These days tend to be a bit more multicultural. Food, all that. Also personal likings, things like that. So all that will have an effect at that visceral level of the body and feeling.

Okay. Now this is a really important point in the wheel because what happens next is the cause of suffering, and the word that the Buddha uses is *taṇhā*. And taṇhā refers to those desires and those wishes that arise from this delusion, and it's arising out of that mass of conditionings.

So when we go in for a meal, part of it's quite natural to the body — the sense of appetite. But there's something else coming out of that conditioning base, the *saṅkhāras*, where we've developed an enjoyment of, in the wrong sense, an attachment to food, something that we're trying to make ourselves happy with. And that's what you call a greed.

So when that food comes, there arises the desire for more of that pleasure, and that's your taṇhā. The taṇhā comes up and it wants to grab that vedanā in a way to make it satisfy itself. But the important point here is that at this point nothing's actually happened. Nothing's actually been created. All this is the product of the past.

So when I chew an apple and I get the pleasant sense base, that's to do with all past apples plus the apple I'm eating of course. And when the desire for the apple comes up — hold on, I've done the sequence wrong — when I see an apple and the desire for an apple comes up, and I've not done anything, I'm just there with the sight of the apple and the feeling of wanting the apple, then at that point nothing's happened. It remains as a potential. The desire hasn't manifested.

And that's a really important point to get because just because you feel bad about something, because some bad feeling has come up, doesn't mean that therefore you should feel guilty. It's like a double take. But desires come up just because of past conditionings. So if guilt comes up about feeling certain feelings, or shame about certain feelings in the past or certain feelings that arise, that's something that we don't really have to put on this particular desire because that desire is just a product of the past. We've not done anything yet.

So for instance, if the rule is to take only one biscuit, and I'm standing in front of those biscuits and everybody's taking a bit and there's two left, and I have the desire to take that extra biscuit, this remains at the level of potential. Nothing's happened there.

And being a good yogi, of course, I allow that to arise and pass away. Now, I shouldn't feel guilty about that. That's just my conditioning. Every time I see a biscuit, I want it. Fair enough?

So at that point, the taṇhā — we have to understand that these are the products of past action. For those of you who know your Pali, that's a *vipāka*. It's not a *kamma*. It's not an act. It's a product.

So here we have a pleasant feeling arising because of some perception — the biscuit — and here we have the desire to take it. And at this point nothing's happened. Now you can see if I can hold that position and wait for this to die, wait for this to fade away — what's it come out of? It's come out of these saṅkhāras, these underlying conditionings. And in allowing it to fade away like that, I'm undermining the power of this conditioning, this desire for biscuits.

So there's your renunciation. That's what renunciation means. It means to let go of a desire in order to undermine a certain bad, a certain unwholesome conditioning.

So there's your *upādāna*. There's your taṇhā. If, by misfortune, by a moment of mindlessness, I attach to the desire for the biscuit, then the I comes in. So it's "want I". Now at that point when I've identified, when I'm lost in the desire, it's almost impossible to jump out of it. Before you know it you've grabbed that biscuit. But then it's too late, you've done it. So you may as well eat it. You've committed the sin. That's it, you've done it. Of course you could put it back and there will be forgiveness.

But at that point where it turns into an action — so this upādāna, upādāna means grasping the I. So our sequence is "I want a biscuit," but the actual psychological sequence is "biscuit, want, I". If it were "I want a biscuit" there'd be no escape. You wouldn't be able to escape because the identity would be immediate. It's the very fact that identity comes last that you can cut into that process and allow these desires to pass away.

So what you're identifying when you do that is of course with the wisdom inside you and not with the greed. Even so, we should beware of the biscuit.

So then after that upādāna there is some sort of empowerment. Something goes into the desire which

manifests an action, and that's *bhava* — that's becoming. Bhava is the same as kamma, an action. It's the same as cetanā, the will. Because at this point, there's some sort of fuel, some sort of energy goes in there, which brings what was potential into an actual.

Now, when you're doing walking meditation, just stand there for a minute, say, intending to walk, intending to walk. And you can feel there's an intention to walk, but nothing happens. You can do that all day, nothing will happen. And then suddenly, the foot moves. So something's gone in there. And that's the will.

And as soon as you've empowered a thought or a word or an action, you've created a kamma, you've become. Now this becoming — the reason why the Buddha uses the word becoming here and not say kamma or other words is because what's really becoming is the I. The I is becoming. It's being reborn every time you create an action. The I goes in there. And that's where the fundamental delusion lies, right underneath the whole lot about who I am.

So upādāna — this I rises to grasp it. "This is me." And once that's happened, there's an empowerment and the I rounds again and that identity is strengthened.

Now at this point you get birth, ageing and death. So the dependent origination is written as though it were three lives. That would be the sort of traditional way of teaching it. So the ignorance, the delusion and the conditions are all in the child being born. And then you pass through everything that we've described throughout lives, the wheel turning and turning and turning. And then in the next life, you go through the whole process again — birth, ageing and death.

But for a meditator and for the more spiritual side, the Buddha is obviously really pointing to this present moment. This present moment has all the not knowing, the ignorance and the potential right here. There is this constant process. When I say constant, it's obviously not continual because it's not there when you're asleep. It's not there when, for instance, you're behaving in a wise way. At least the saṅkhāra, the unwholesomeness is not there when you're acting in a wise way.

But this fundamental sense of self — that's always there somewhere. It's always there somewhere. And then there's this, the action, the actual action has a beginning, has a process and has an end. That's your birth, ageing and death. And that to a meditator, that to us as meditators are seeking liberation from this circle, that makes much more sense to us. Because that tells us we can become liberated right now.

So that's the dependent origination. In its forward movement, or in its positive — that's a funny thing to say because it's getting worse — in its negative movement, where it's getting better, is when you start undercutting that process.

And there are two points where you undercut it. At that point of desire, wherever you see a desire which is unwholesome, unskillful, not virtuous, if you can just hang on in there and wait for it to pass away, then these saṅkhāras, these conditionings are being undermined and slowly, eventually, in time, all these *kilesa*

, all these defilements are taken out of the system.

At the same time, there's the goodness — all the love, the compassion, sympathetic joy, generosity. All the beautiful virtues begin to enter into that space. So remember in this process nothing is destroyed, it's transformed. So where we see selfishness, when that selfishness disappears it naturally moves to generosity. Where you see cruelty it naturally moves to compassion. It helps to push it along a bit with little exercises, but it's a natural process, a natural process.

So that's what's happening, actually, we say, a more obvious level, where we are changing ourselves by the simple process of not feeding into those desires we see as unwholesome and feeding those desires we see as wholesome. And you couldn't get simpler, really, could you? Absolutely.

Underneath this, there's this ignorance, this not knowing. And this is where the *vipassanā* strikes home because vipassanā is right here where this fundamental delusion lies and it lies in these three particular perspectives that somehow there is some sort of continuity, some sort of substantiality about my life and who I am.

And impermanence — beginning to really grasp impermanence that actually things are not just changing, it's not like you get a piece of clay, mess it up and make a cup and then make a saucer. It's actually moment to moment and each moment has to collapse entirely before the next moment arises. So we're actually living in a process of living-dying, living-dying, living-dying. That's the way — the radical impermanence taught by the Buddha.

The second one is of course the psychological problem which is where we experience suffering and that's to see this *dukkha*, this unsatisfactedness. And that's what this wheel points to at that level of desire. So we're undercutting deep down when we're actually also working with desire.

And the third one is the not-self, which is this primal mistake we've made about who we are, this identity. And of course, in our meditation, we're constantly pushing stuff out to look at it. So whereas once I may have been certain I am the body, especially as a child, I'm now not so sure. Whereas once I would say, I feel — well, looking at them, who's feeling what? Where once I would say I think, I am, I think therefore I am — well, how can it be if I'm looking at it, if I'm aware of it?

So this disconnection is actually a relocation. We're relocating constantly backwards into this other place that we call the observation post, the observer, the feeler, the experiencer. But even here, to our astonishment, we find me. I'm still there. I'm feeling. So obviously this goes deep and I find that I can't jump behind that. The only way I can jump behind that is by falling asleep. And then I completely disappear for a while. But you can't get rid of that last me. You try. Every time you think you're going to get rid of it, you find another me getting rid of that me. So it's impossible. You're into a mirror image, which is like you can't get beyond it.

So that's why — this is the genius of the Buddha — he says, "Don't try. What are you trying that for? It's a

waste of time. Rather, place your attention on the object. Place your attention on the object. Bypass that sense of self." And very slowly, one begins to experience life without this sense of self in little blips and blobs. And that's what I'm referring to when you have these moments of absorption. Again, I use that word because I can't think of another one.

However, having said that, if you get to a point where the body is absolutely still and the mind is stopped, like there's no thought, and the heart's very calm and there's a complete peacefulness, and as you're watching the breath, which is the only thing that's left, there comes to you this very strong sense of self, a sense of presence, a sense of the observer, the feeler. So, turn your attention onto that, with no — not the idea of trying to get rid of it or anything — just turn your attention onto that sense of presence and find out how that's being manufactured. Because that can't be you, that's also an object that you're aware of. If you're aware of something, it can't be what is the actual awareness.

So it's that process and hopefully there'll be a little crack in that deep identity as to who we are. And then finally of course, the Buddha's clear that the final end is not an annihilation. Very clear about that. He's accused of it because he tends to prefer a negative explanation, negative words that we repeat — the unborn, the undying and all that. But he says the only things that are annihilated are greed, hatred and this fundamental delusion about who we are.

And twice in the scriptures, but there are other places too where he points directly in a way to this experience which is beyond the phenomenal world, and he states quite clearly there is a consciousness. So he has to use the same word unfortunately because the language doesn't reach that far. But he says there is a consciousness which is not coloured by the senses, it's not manifested, there's nothing in it, without boundary — which means that there is nothing in it to create a sense of a boundary. You've got to have phenomena to create boundaries — and in all directions full of light, in all directions full of awakeness.

And of course when one is fully liberated, when one actually has cleared all this stuff, then the person re-enters life, re-engages. So don't forget that. It's not as though we're going to this place of sublime indifference. The Buddha immediately — his first thought is, "Who can I teach this to?" The compassion arises immediately, the connection with other beings. With wisdom, compassion arises naturally. That's what they say in Zen.

And so, let's face it, the future does seem bright after all. And that's what I would call our spiritual hope — to distinguish between expectation, which is some idea, some future time, an idea of a date, "I will be liberated on the 6th of June," some idea of what liberation is, all these great expectations. But when you consider the teaching and what he's saying...

and when you look into your own experience there arises this spiritual hope, an existential hope. You see that all this massive suffering will eventually be worth it. It's a whole process of evolution, you see, it's a whole process. And although again he won't make absolute statements because he'd always be accused of the other side, being an eternalist, you will see that through your practice, that it's an absolute

psychological or spiritual imperative that consciousness will move to its liberation. It's just a spiritual imperative. You can't stop it.

So all beings, in the fullness of time, will be liberated.

And on this happy note, I can only hope my words will have been of some enormous assistance and that you will be inspired to continue your labours and arrive at that wonderful place sooner rather than later.

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