Dependent Origination Leading to Awakening in Ordinary Daily Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 46:10

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

This book comes from a very good work on Dependent Origination by Venerable Payutto, a senior monk from Sri Lanka and a well-known scholar. He has written two very good books, both very readable—one on karma and one on dependent origination. This diagram comes from his book, and he explains it in his own way. If you get that book, you'll probably get a fuller description than you might get this evening.

The bit at the bottom is very common. That's the wheel of dependent origination. The word "wheel" comes from the Tibetan tradition, and they of course made it into quite a lovely diagram. But in our school, it's simply dependent origination, in the usual prosaic way.

You'll see that it runs the usual sequence: depending on ignorance, there arises sankhara. You see they've got all sorts of translations for sankhara—volitional impulses, volitional conditionings, preparations, concoctions, you name it. Everybody who writes about it finds another word for it. But the thing about sankhara, remember, is that they are conditioned and they're also conditioning. So every time a sankhara comes up, such as a bit of greed, it's coming up because of past action and it's affecting future action. It's both conditioned and conditioning.

Because of that, consciousness comes up. All these things are dependent on each other in a sort of immediacy. Without consciousness, you wouldn't get any sankhara. Without sankhara, you wouldn't get any consciousness. So it's all a sort of interdependency as well.

Then we have the usual flow from consciousness to body and mind. In dependent origination, it really is body and mind because it's about this psychophysical organism. The two words you'll come across, nama-rupa, sometimes refer to materiality and mentality—name and form, which is really a bit confusing.

Anyway, once you've got a body, you've got the six senses. Here again, they refer only to the physical base. It's in the next one, contact, that the mentality comes in. Because at that point, you've got the sense base, you've got the object that it becomes aware of, and you've got consciousness. At that point, you can say the body and mind are actually manifesting, moment after moment.

Once we have contact, of course, we have some level of feeling, some sensations. These sensations are physical—the five physical ones: sense of smell, hearing, and so on. And on the mind, it's that initial

arising of a thought or an image. That's your mental sense door. Everything from the senses comes through the sense door of the mind. Basically, what comes in through the physical senses is just original data, very simple data. The ear receives just a tapping, just a feeling of the sound waves. Then it's the mind that takes it in and begins to tell you what it is. It's a bell; it gives you meaning. It's an alarm bell; it tells you what to do. You've got to get up. All that belongs to the mind.

Now, the important thing is vedana, because at vedana, we decide whether what we're experiencing is pleasant or unpleasant. We went through all that last night. Remember, there are 108 of these pleasant and unpleasant feelings. But I think you can make it very simple: normally we're aware of something that's unpleasant or pleasant, and there's that middle bit of neutrality. But if you look closely enough, it shades into one or the other.

Dependent on that—arising with that, of course—is saññā, which are your concepts, your perceptions. Saññā begins with a sort of photocopy of what's happened. That becomes your memory.

And that photocopy grows and grows, dependent on how many times you have a similar experience. So every time you eat different biscuits, your idea of a biscuit grows forever until it's as big as a supermarket. That's the memory we have.

And it's this memory and imagination, plus these feelings, that we work on to develop our dreams and fantasies—and realistic things too, like planning your holiday or thinking about your career. That's all dependent on those basic components. And those are your sankhara.

Now, not all sankharas are bad, remember. And not everything we do begins from a point of ignorance. Sometimes we begin from a point of wisdom, and then you have proper intentions. Those sankharas become your beneficial habits.

The Buddha, remember, is liberated in the sense that he no longer identifies with this psychophysical organism. But while he's in it, he's conditioned. So as soon as the organism feels hungry, that's when he gets his bowl and nips out for a bit of food. It's not as though he's not conditioned by the situation he's in, nor does he lose his general personality or his language. He says nothing is destroyed apart from this ignorance and what comes out of that wrong understanding—all our acquisition, that sense of always having to acquire something, get something. Greed and aversion and fear. Those are your two aversive qualities.

Dependent on that, of course, we have our reactions, and that's tanha. From that wanting, that original movement towards something you desire, there's then the identity: "I want." This is really crucial—a remarkable discovery by the Buddha—because normally speaking, the "I" comes first in our experience. The first thing you say is, "I want a biscuit"—I don't know why I'm on about biscuits all the time—"I want a coffee." It always begins with "I." "I want." And if it's you, I say "you want." Or "he wants," "she wants," "they want." It's always the person that comes first.

And what he's saying is: no, that's not true. Psychologically, the "I" comes at the end of the line.

Now, if it came at the beginning, you wouldn't find an escape, because that identity completely locks you into your desire. As soon as you say "I want ice cream," you're locked into ice cream. You can't escape it if that "I" is already there. So it's because of this discovery—that the "I," the sense of self, the identity comes at the end of the line—that we have the liberation to see the process of desire and find the escape.

And of course, the next one is bhava. From that identity comes the empowerment. Bhava is the point where the self continues becoming. There's the action that it presumes, and the force that makes the action, which is your will. So these three things—the will, the action (and in fact, the Buddha says will is action), and the sense of self—continue on once you've started that wrong identity.

Now, in the Abhidhamma, it does point out that for somebody who doesn't have the identity anymore, the wheel still turns. There's still that coming out of wisdom—an aspiration or intention, a wholesome intention, which fires off a certain habit, which then produces an action. That action is known as kriya, which is just a way of saying it's not personal in our way. The way they translate it is "functional." So an action can be wholesome or unwholesome, but for somebody who's completely liberated, it's just functional. He gets up and does this and does that. There's no sense of identity with what they're doing.

The identity, as it were, falls back into that sense of mindfulness. Though you have to be careful here, because it's not the same as the self that you feel when you're an observer.

So we've covered the beginning of the action, and then of course the action continues and eventually ends. Birth, aging, and death. The classical way, from the Visuddhimagga and Buddhaghosa, was to see this across three lives. Your past life was based on ignorance and created certain conditions. Then you were born. You have a body and mind and go through this life. When you die, you're born again, grow old, and die, dependent on the conditions you've created through this wheel.

But in the Abhidhamma and even in the scriptures, this is also happening all the time. Every time you fire off something dependent on greed, hatred, and delusion. Remember, we don't always behave like that. Sometimes we actually do good.

Now here they've got the escape at ignorance. That of course digs deep. Every time in your meditation you begin to see more clearly these three characteristics—the impermanence, the role of desire, and this identity business, the ownership, the possessiveness we have, the sense of control over things—the more we see that and let go of it, the more we perceive its consequences. We are undermining ignorance as such.

But the real escape from an ordinary daily life experience position would be between the feeling and the tanha, the desire, the attachment. It's catching that moment and then just hanging on, waiting for that unwholesome desire to pass away completely. That allows us to rid ourselves of these unwholesome sankharas. Once we do that, we've found the escape. Those little arrows pointing upwards show us how

we can do that.

The important thing is that awareness we should try to develop all the time—being aware immediately when some desire arises, able to acknowledge whether this is wholesome or not. If it's unwholesome, hang on in there, just wait for that power, that energy, to die away. Every time you do that, remember, you're deconditioning yourself. What was perhaps an obsessive action becomes less and less powerful over time. It's not that we're never caught out, but through that constant effort, we're rubbing away at the stone until it's completely dissolved.

Dependent origination shows us how the first escape comes. You'll see there are three arrows here: skillful conduct, faith, and wise reflection. These are what we must bring into our daily life—these attitudes in order to really change, to strengthen that path out of suffering.

The one in the middle, faith, we begin with that. We know that faith in Buddhism doesn't mean belief as it might in other religions. It's more to do with confidence, and that confidence comes about through practice. It might have begun for us by just hearing something that made sense about Buddhism, or meeting a friend who talked about it. Immediately there's enough confidence to go to a meeting. In the meeting, you have enough confidence to have a go at the meditation. Then you have enough confidence to bring it into your daily life. As you see the benefits of it, your confidence grows.

This confidence or faith, saddha, is known as an indriya. Indriya is translated as a faculty, though that doesn't quite get across the idea that it's actually a power within you. The word actually comes from Indra, who was the main god of the Vedic system, so it means an empowerment, something powerful.

If you think of anything in your life which you've gone for, you've had to have that confidence. It's the basis of virtually everything we do. What confidence does is make us commit ourselves. If the confidence isn't there, we start suffering from doubt. And what doubt does is undermine our confidence in ourselves. By doing that, you never commit. The fact that we are here on this retreat means we have actually committed.

So it's to rejoice in that commitment. It's the basis.

That stupa we have out in the meadow there—see those first three steps? That's what they symbolize. They symbolize confidence in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. And they're polished, nicely shaped, you see. Then, of course, the heavy climb comes to get to the top through the rocky ways.

So that confidence is both a practice, but it's also in time to do with the heart, to do with some sort of heart connection. That heart connection is best held within a sort of thankfulness, a basic gratitude—both in the teaching and the Buddha, and even through the teachers that we have. And it falls back upon them, you see, with that gratitude. It strengthens your commitment because you want to be like the Buddha. You want to follow the path. You want to end up fully liberated like him. And that's why we have these beacons such as Mae Chee Kaew, whom I have on the side there. Having people like that gives you that

sort of confidence. Well, if they can do it, I can do it.

It's like anything, isn't it? Nobody had climbed Everest until Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing got up there. And after that? Everybody and his dog gets up there. I mean, you get these ninety-year-old women getting up there. There's a seventy-year-old woman going up there, you know.

So once the gates open—see, that's the rejoicing of the Buddha. "The Dharma gates are open." That's how he puts it. The gates of the Dharma have been opened wide. Once somebody's perceived something, everybody can get through it.

So that sense of confidence, that sense of faith, is absolutely necessary. And when somebody achieves first path and fruit, it's known as a *bala*, as a power. It becomes unshakable. I mean, they might deny it under torture, but in themselves, they know that it's truly correct.

But we're weak.

So then there's the one on wise reflection. These are three levels of understanding. The first one is known as *sutta mayā paññā*—the wisdom that comes from reading or listening or receiving some sort of instruction. And that really doesn't become your own until we've thought about it, until it's becoming our own intellectual property, you might say. And then, of course, it's substantiated through our practice, through vipassanā.

So there are these three ways that we grow in this wise reflection. Now, what would be examples of wise reflection? Well, Buddhism talks about the eight worldly conditions. Gain and loss. Success and failure. How much of our daily life is about gaining something? And how much in the past have we suffered from losing something that we gained?

Then there's honour and dishonour.

How we're viewed by people—honour and dishonour. Things that have made us feel ashamed or guilty, and other things that have made us feel proud, even conceited. Then there's happiness and misery. Well, they happen all the time, don't they? We go through loads of those every day. These are known as the worldly conditions. And finally, praise and blame, which is close, I think, to honour and dishonour.

So it's again just looking at the way we behave, the way we pass through a day. That yoniso manasikāra, that wise reflection—it's good, you see, in the evening, just to sit quietly and go through the day. Reflect upon things that we've done which we should be proud of, and things that we shouldn't be proud of. It's a case of just going through the day and reflecting on that. And then from the reflection, to make some sort of commitment, some sort of decision.

In the morning after chanting, I suggest that you make certain commitments. Something you want to do, something you don't want to do. We all know our habits. We all know what we're good at and what we're not so good at. And it's just this daily commitment. Slowly, it does penetrate. It does get through.

From a more modern point of view, or from a point of view that we might understand more easily, you might call them the four worldly pursuits: sensual pleasure, fame, riches, and power. I think we connect with that much more easily. How much of our time is spent trying to escape suffering by getting into some sort of sensual pleasure? Films, calling people up and telling them how miserable you are, things like that. Then there's doing something for fame, which would come under praise. Riches—everyone wants to be rich, for heaven's sake. And power, being able to make other people do what you want them to do.

So those are reflections throughout the day. You might look back and think, "Oh yes, that was me taking control of the situation and not taking into regard what other people wanted."

There's a lovely little bit in the scriptures where three Arahants are living together, and the Buddha asks them how they live so well together. The chief monk says, "When I get up in the morning, I ask myself: what if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do?" And presumably they all say that. I mean, that's the problem with that approach—everybody has to agree to that idea. Otherwise you have a fisticuff.

So we've got the three characteristics. Reflecting always on the three characteristics. Impermanence. At the end of the day, another day gone. One day closer to the end. After a meal—that's it, one less lunch in this lifetime. You just keep noting this with a sense of humour. You don't get yourself miserable. You just note that, in fact, this is one less. Every time I give a talk, this is one less talk I'm going to give. It's just pinpointing little pin pricks on the way, and slowly you let go. The whole point of seeing anicca is to let go, to see: what's the point of holding on to something? It's gone. And so it brings you much more obviously into the present moment. This is lunch—that's it, it's gone, fine. It's being able to let go that anicca teaches us.

And when it comes to dukkha, that's also letting go, seeing these desires. Remember that when we have a desire, if we can stay with it—this is a wrong desire—if we can stay to the very end of that feeling and just feel that sense of release, it's like you've taken a chain off, you've taken a big weight off your back. There's a sense of relief. And then you get this sort of happiness arise, a happiness of release, of relief. "Got out of that one."

Didn't get caught up there. And in a sense, you've got to see that, or else you don't see the benefit of renunciation. If it's only misery every time you renounce—if you never get to the end point of a desire—it just feels like a struggle all the time. But if you just hang on in there, if it's a wholesome renunciation, then you get that release.

Now, that's a little touch of nirvana, because that's what the Buddha says. The taste of nirvana is freedom. Freedom. Freedom *from*. It's not freedom to do what you feel like. If only.

And of course, anatta, which again is about identity. It's about possessiveness. It's about a relationship which causes a lot of problems, a lot of suffering. And just letting go of that. You know when the self is

coming in. You know when you're getting angry with somebody. You get fed up with somebody. You want them to do something and they're not doing it. You get bored with something. Anytime you feel negative about somebody or something or your job or your work, you know that the self is seeking something else. It's just not happy with the situation. It wants something. It wants excitement. It wants something else.

So as soon as that comes up, it's a case of recognizing it. That's the effect of identity and possession. And as soon as you drop that, some little connection has gone. You see? So we're leading ourselves towards a life of ease, a sense of ease about life. We're not struggling anymore. We're not in conflict with the way things are. It's like an acceptance: this is the way it is. And that's it. And you work with it. Sometimes—a lot of times—it's not that pleasant, but you work with it.

A similar reflection which helps us here are the ones we do in the evening on sickness, aging, and death. And remember, when you contemplate that, very personally—like "this body may fall ill," and "I am aging," and "I will die"—it's sort of gently, gently saying that into our hearts. It's not going to leave it up in the head. I mean, anybody can do that. It's actually speaking so that you're touching the heart, touching the very—touching your emotional center, your feeling center. And then you get that response. So there may be a sense of relief that you're accepting it, but there may just be a bit of fear. So you've got to keep at it, you see.

And whenever you do that sort of exercise, remember, always remind yourself of the liberation. We're not ending up—the Buddha didn't teach annihilation. There is a good prognosis at the end. It's worth fighting for. So those sorts of things are the wise reflections that you might do.

And then the third one is skillful conduct. So this really breaks into things that we shouldn't do, that we try not to do. Those are your sīla, your five training rules. That's sikkhāpada. Pada means footsteps. Sikkhā means trainings—trainings of footsteps, footsteps of training.

So I think most of us are pretty clear about that. But the other dimension is, of course, to do with the more virtuous side of our nature. And in the evening, we chant this Maha Mangala Sutta, the highest blessings. *Maha* means great, *mangala* means blessing. And you'll note that this always leads to happiness. So virtue equals happiness in the Buddha's mind. It's a true happiness. The more virtuous we are, the more happy we will feel.

When we say happy, remember that there are various levels. You might not be happy on a surface level—not happy with this, not happy with that, not happy with the politics. It's more to do with this deeper level of happiness, a deeper level of contentment, a feeling that your life is worthwhile. That's what gives you that deep happiness.

And this comes out with people who are involved in politics, who end up in prison, end up tortured, things like that. You wonder—you wouldn't really want to do it, but you wonder—how can they endure that? Because on the surface of things, it's absolutely miserable. It's a really terrible experience to have to go

through. And some of them die, of course. But it's when you realize that the deep purpose of their lives, some form of political or social liberation, is where their happiness lies. And the giving of their life to that is their deepest happiness. So, you know, no greater gift has man than to give his life for another. We don't understand that unless we redefine what happiness is. It's like a deep sense of commitment to something virtuous. And if you let go of that, you betray yourself. That's very difficult to forgive when you've betrayed yourself.

So you can see he has a whole list of things here. And he does start off with something very straightforward—to reside in a suitable place, and to have done meritorious deeds. And then to have a skill, to have something that you can work with, a master of discipline. And then you've got your social responsibilities, looking after your mother, father, your children and all that. And then there's the basic thing, to not do any harm. And then there's a list of these virtues: reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, patience, gentleness. It's all there. This obviously is not an exhaustive list. It just gives us some idea as to what we should be developing. And then finally, the spiritual things—to listen to Dharma and to become fully liberated. These are the highest blessings. So it's reflecting on those sorts of things and then seeing how we can bring them into our lives. Every day we have opportunities. Every day.

So that brings us to *mangala*. And then there's livelihood. Our livelihoods are about service. A lot of people end up in work that they were enthusiastic about, and then it gets boring, boring, boring. It's terrible. The way to break through that is to stop asking what the job can give me. If it's always at that level—how much am I earning, what interest is it giving me—then it's very easy to become bored with it. It takes on more meaning when you actually do it for the benefit of others, for the benefit of the firm you're working for. Then it gives it a different layer of commitment. And that's what brings your happiness, no matter what you're doing.

And that leads us to lifestyle—to check out our lifestyle. How are we spending our money? How do we spend our time?

Who do we spend our time with? All these things have an effect on us.

One thing that many of you, I think, will have experienced—I definitely did—is that once you move towards the Dharma, old friends seem to disappear and new ones seem to come. Somehow you sort of move away from what those friendships were offering, which worked at one time, but now they don't have the same meaning. So lifestyle—what you eat, and so forth—there's a whole load of stuff that we can reflect upon there.

Then there's this virtuous circle. It's in the commentaries; I don't think it's made so explicit in the discourses, but this whole thing about gratitude, renunciation, and generosity. When you think about all the things that we've been given, which we couldn't possibly repay—you can't repay your parents for your birth. You can't repay them for all the terrible times they had with you as a kid. Society, what society has given us—its education, its health. None of this would be affordable at an individual level. You would have

to earn masses of money to get yourself educated and to get yourself healed. It's because of a communal effort that we're able to have these benefits.

And so if you actually go through all the things you've received that were gratis—nobody's asking you to give back to pay for the education you've had. I mean, now I know they do for university, but I was one of the lucky ones. At least until eighteen, when you've reached legal adulthood, everything's given freely—the national health system, all the social support systems that we have. The police. Where would we be without the police?

It's funny, there's always a certain negativity about the police because of their authority. But in fact, we need them. I know a meditator who's a policeman, and he says he's out on the line every night, sometimes in very dangerous circumstances, laying his life on the line. It's no easy job for them sometimes.

So when you actually recall all of this as a gift, then of course there's a natural desire to repay. And that's where the generosity comes from. Now, every time you give something, whether of your time or of your wealth, you're renouncing something that you could have spent on yourself. You could have been watching a film, or you could have been spending your money on some other rubbish. But now you're actually giving it for the benefit of somebody else. And that means letting go of something that you would have done for yourself. So there's a little bit of discomfort there.

And any offering you make of your time or wealth which doesn't have that little bit of discomfort means it's comfortable—it means you're not really renouncing. There's got to be an edge to giving if you want to actually grow in generosity. I mean, if a person wants to keep at the same level of generosity, that's fine. It's just that the more you give, the more you renounce, the more you are letting go.

So remember, the whole of the spiritual life really is in that word renunciation. And let's not confuse that with self-mortification, which is a completely different philosophy—that's about blaming the body for things. But renunciation, restraint—these words are very big in the Buddha's vocabulary. Restraining. Renouncing.

So those first three basic attitudes or modes, covered very quickly. And the consequence of that—the first consequence—is gladness. Gladness really refers to a feeling of being free from guilt and shame, not having those feelings within us, and a growth in self-esteem and self-confidence. That's what comes with virtue. You feel good about yourself.

And because of that, concentration is easier. And because concentration is easier, then the rapture comes. Rapture here is a big word, actually, but it just means feeling really good. We're talking about everyday life; we're not talking about deep, heavy, profound meditational states. Just feeling really good about ourselves, good about the world, even though we see it's not all brilliant.

And with that sense of happiness, there comes just a natural calmness about things. The calmness and then the happiness—it's just that combination: feeling at ease, feeling good about yourself, feeling good

about other people, feeling okay about your situation. It might not be brilliant, you know.

And that brings you to a level of what you might call happiness, just a way of being in the world. And then with that, of course, the concentration comes. And with concentration, the commitment to moment-to-moment mindfulness in daily life, insights arise quite naturally.

In the Mahasi tradition, it's sort of well known that people have insights more off the cushion than on it. Because just for that moment, they've given up trying. But they've come off the cushion with a sense of concentration, calmness, peace. And then, as it were, it liberates the awareness, the intuitive awareness to see things. So that's your knowledge and insight.

And this leads to disenchantment. Disenchantment with what? With the world as a place to seek permanent happiness. That's the disenchantment. It's not as though you can't be happy in the world, but you're not seeking perfect happiness anymore. You're not trying to manipulate the world always to make yourself happy.

And this leads again—these are very close to each other—to dispassion, which is similar. It's just not getting het up about things, being more accepting about things. Dispassion. And then finally, of course, the liberation, the freedom from suffering.

And the āsavas, the outflows—it's funny, they're translated as outflows, influxes, inflows, cankers, floods, effluents. Anybody and any dog wants to translate this word. But basically, it's the four—well, three actually, one was added later—the three platforms upon which everything arises. They won't come to you as a great surprise.

It's desire. Desire is something that floods us. It's coming out of this ignorance and it just floods our whole life. Think of it as a flooding of everything that we do. It's sort of there, or a poisoning, a subtle poisoning. And then there's the desire to become, to constantly recreate ourselves. So that's the self. There's the desire, there's the self, and of course that fundamental ignorance that's underneath. It's like you don't know, and therefore you keep making the same mistake. When we don't know something, we presume we know. And then that leads us constantly into making the same error.

This perhaps is more obvious in relationships, where somebody might find themselves constantly falling in love. And then, "I don't know what I saw in that person." And that keeps going for a few times. And then they realize it's not the other person's fault—it's them. And those sorts of insights come just by way of this constant reflection.

So this leads us really back to the beginning of this saddhā, this commitment, and seeing that commitment as a necessary starting point. That's the purpose of taking refuges and precepts. They're a point—everybody takes them at their own level of understanding—but it's a point where you commit yourself. This is it.

That commitment, remember, is a moment-to-moment commitment. It doesn't mean you can't become a Muslim. Why not? It just means that so long as this path is making sense to you, you'll keep at it. You'll keep going with it. And it's based upon that confidence which has arisen out of your personal practice, your personal experience.

I remember in my own case, when I started practicing Zen and I used to go up to Throssel Hole, I think it was about one and a half years. It must have been about one and a half years before this feeling arose of really committing myself, of saying, "Right, well, I'm not going to look around anymore. This makes total sense to me." And I went through their ceremony of Jukai, which takes about five days, actually. And by the end of it, you really feel you've committed yourself.

So taking refuge and precepts, even if you don't want to do it on a social level as an actual ceremony—every morning, you know, to have some point where you actually recommit yourself. Like, "Today I'm putting confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. And today, just for today, I'm not going to behave in an immoral way." That sort of continuous commitment every day has its effect.

So there was quite a bit in this little diagram. I'm glad I came across it. In the past I'd seen it but didn't recognize the potential. It can be taken as a meditational thing, but it's because of this right skillful conduct that it turns into a daily life process. That's what I found really interesting.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion and hopelessness, and that by your commitment to the path you will be liberated sooner rather than later.

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