The Specific Law of Conditionality

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 22:29

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

This evening, slightly different, I've written an actual essay. So I'm going to keep popping down and finding out what I'm supposed to have written. And I'm just wondering, how many of you have come across the law of this and that? Or sometimes it's better translated as the law of specific conditionality.

Okay, so what I'm going to do is share my page with you. This is the law of this and that, of the law of specific conditionality, *idappaccayatā*. Now, it says when this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. And from the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

Now, if we put them in a slightly different order, it makes a bit more sense. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. When this is, that is. When this isn't, that isn't. I'm hoping that's perfectly clear.

So, if we take the first proposition, from the arising of that comes the arising of this, and from the stopping of that comes the stopping of this. Okay, so this is basically what we would recognize as our usual way of thinking about causality. So the thief stole from the shop and he's now in jail sometimes. Someone disturbed the thief. He failed to steal anything and the police didn't bother to investigate.

Now, if this were the only way things happen because of things in the past, it would suggest the repetitive cosmos. It'd be difficult to see where creativity would come from since everything now is a product of the past. Now, in moral terms, that leads to determinism or fatalism. And there would be no room for any form of free will.

Now, indeed, at the Buddha's time, there was a person who taught this very understanding. He was called Makkhali Gosāla. Now, he taught that no matter what you did, you could not change your fate. Everything was determined. It was a very hard position, and the consequences of this meant that you were not responsible for your moral actions, good or bad. You can't blame somebody, can you, if they had to do it by fate.

Okay, so now the second couplet presents causes that leads to present conditions. How present conditions lead to present conditions. So when this is now, that is, and when this isn't, that isn't. So it's all in the now. So this we can call synchronicity. How many events come together to present a particular situation?

Now, if events arose from these conditions without past influence, there would be chaos because there doesn't seem to be any regulating factor. Now, from a moral point of view, that expresses itself as amorality. What's the point of morality when there's no guarantee it will have any effect? Needless to say, there was such a person who taught this, Pūraṇa Kassapa. He had the theory of the way of non-doing. But what he meant by that was that actions considered good and evil carried no inherent morality. And thus there exists no future consequences from committing either good or evil deeds.

So quoting him: "Even if one were to go along the right bank of the Ganges, killing and getting others to kill, mutilating and getting others to mutilate, torturing and getting others to torture, there would be no evil for that course, no coming of evil. Even if one were to go along the left bank of the Ganges, giving and getting others to give, making sacrifices and getting others to make sacrifices, there would be no merit from that cause, no coming of merit. Through generosity, self-control, restraint, and truthful speech, there is no merit from that cause, no coming of merit." So it's a pretty stark situation.

So how do these two forces operate, one coming from the past and all these different causes coming into the present? Okay, so an obvious example is this Zoom meeting. So for instance, we've all come from different causes. You've probably had to do various things before you set up the Zoom. I myself, I've got to make sure I'm plugged into internet rather than Wi-Fi. I've got to make sure the Zoom is updated. I check the talk on my tablet and then I press the necessary icons and here I am. So everybody will go through that similar process.

But this doesn't include the way in which we had to factor this event during our day, how future events affect present conditions. So lots of personal causes went into this particular event. And on top of that, there's all that's going on behind the scenes in the technology which is supporting this. And you can also include, of course, the conditions of nature.

So, if we take a snapshot of any moment, the event will be a meeting of all past causes and present actions and situations. Now, this then becomes the cause for one of the causes for the next moment, where more results from different causes meet. So there's a constant change, constant process. Every event has to be singular and unique. It's not conceivable that the same thing could happen twice. Never mind Groundhog Day.

So even though we're here seemingly in a static place, the Zoom meeting is constantly changing as I'm talking and you're listening. The technology behind it all, we don't know what's going on there at all. And nature, of course, is changing. So you can see that we're in a process of real, quite radical change.

So what Buddhism tends to call this is interdependency, interconnectedness. And I think it was Thich Nhat Hanh who came up with the word of interbeing when it came to the biosphere. And this comes out in the Mahāyāna's metaphor of Indra's web. So Indra was the king of the gods and at each vertex of his web is a jewel wherein every jewel is mirrored and so unique in itself. So the cosmos is holographic and in constant change.

And Blake writes it beautifully: to see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour. So we can see that it might even be more apt to call it the law of specific contingency, meaning everything coming to touch.

Now, there might be a little bit of a roar in the background. I don't know whether you can hear it or not. It's the tractor coming to take these bales of hay away. Which means, you see, that we can't completely with certainty say what's going to happen the next moment. That's how so-called unexpected events happen. Things that we don't expect. Earthquakes, tsunamis used to be called acts of God, but now, of course, they're acts of nature. And if we had an omniscient mind, we might be able to see that what is coincidence or luck is actually conditioned.

So now on a personal level, this brings us always to our little special subject of death. So we don't know the moment of our death. We live on a knife edge and therefore the Buddha's admonition to practice or develop continual mindfulness.

Now, when it comes to social, economic, political situations and all that, it does make us feel a little bit powerless when you see this law. We have such little ability to influence what's going on in the world. Of course, there are certain powers, certain people in power and corporations that will be capable of doing much more. But the overwhelming majority of us have very small influence. So the strength comes, of course, when we all act together. So that would be a case of contingency.

And if we accept our personal condition as little underlings pushing up against this heavy weight, accepting our boundaries, that should undermine all this anger and outrage, grief, fear, all the negative states that come up when we're going beyond the limits of our power and influence. And of course, that should make us more effective. It's better if the heart is not so embroiled but calm, the mind not so agitated but quiet.

So it comes really from having confidence that if we want to support something and we see others are going to support it, this interdependency, this interconnection will actually create a force. And we see that, of course, in various movements around the world.

This also brings us to the law of *kamma*. And what this tells us, of course, is that it's the working of kamma and what the consequence of an action will be is basically imponderable. There's no way you can really tell, you can really say what's going to happen. I mean, there's a general law that if we do something wholesome, well, then something wholesome will come of it. And if we do something unwholesome, there'll be an unwholesome result. But every action of speech and body just enters into the matrix of all relationships. And we can't know the effect of what will follow. Inwardly, it has an effect on our inner matrix of the mind. And we don't know what the effect of that will be. Except, again, that general understanding.

So here are just some examples. So there was a charity that I knew of which sent clothes to an African

country only to upset the tailor trade and the local economy. Now, the charity, of course, wouldn't have known such consequences. But you do ask whether they actually went and interviewed the people, got some understanding before they did it.

There was also a charity way back that I remember that would ask you to support an individual child. And you had a relationship with that child. You got pictures, you got little essays. Unfortunately, they produced jealousy in the other children in the village who didn't get that treatment. And there was disharmony in the community. So it was successful at attracting donors. But when that Western individualism meets the more communitarian African society, well, it didn't work. They had to pull the plug on it.

There's another one about tragedy leads often to charity, to a charity or to a new law. So the abortion law came in and it wasn't just women's rights. Of course, it was there, but it was fueled by the injuries and death caused by backstreet abortions. And in that negative sense, if this doesn't happen, this doesn't happen. Of course, if the law hadn't passed, we'd still be continuing with the unnecessary suffering and deaths of women.

Now, one thing that this reminds us of is the theory of chaos. So in the simplest way, I have no understanding of systems theory at all. But in the simplest of way, the example is that a butterfly, it's called a butterfly effect. So the flap of a butterfly with supporting conditions can end up as a hurricane. So even a small catalyst can bring about unpredictable effects. And this is, as I say, referred to as systems theory. I mean, an obvious place, an obvious system is, of course, the weather, which we come to know very intimately.

There was a case of a Bosnian nationalist shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife. And it's understood to be the immediate cause of the World War I, which started a month later. Now, he was visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina in an open carriage where there were groups of revolutionaries who wanted the country to be free from Austrian rule. I mean, even if he'd been just a little cautious, sat in a bulletproof vest or something, well, we might not have had the First World War.

On a more positive note, we have, of course, Greta Thunberg, you see, skipped school at the age of 15 to demonstrate outside the Swedish parliament, calling for greater action on climate change, which eventually led to the movement of school strike for climate. Now, there might not have been such a movement had it not been for that plucky little teenager.

Now, when it comes to our internal psychology, whatever we think, say, and act actually affects the internal matrix of our body, heart, and mind. And we don't know, except again, except in those broadest terms, that if we do something wholesome, then we'll have wholesome results. And of course, unwholesome results.

Here are some examples that I've just plucked. I haven't been specific in names and whatnot. But there was a man I was told of, a friend of a friend, who had been temperate ever since he knew he was an

alcoholic as a young man. Now, at retirement party, he took a sip and subsequently died of alcoholic poisoning. So needless to say, if he'd not had that false confidence at that moment, then he probably would have lived a long and healthy retirement.

There was a politician in Germany, actually, and I couldn't find the facts, but I'd seen the article. A leading member of the far-right racist party heard a child in distress and went to help. And when she saw the child was black, it so connected her with humanity, with all humanity, she dropped all her far-right beliefs. Now, if that little chance event, that's inverted commas, chance, had not happened, of course, she'd now be propagating far-right views.

So even if we cannot, even in this law of unpredictability, of contingency, yet the Buddha clearly delineates a way in which we can bring our own suffering to an end. Can't do it for others, but we can do it for ourselves. And of course, he describes that in dependent origination, which is another talk.

Now, when it comes to this specific law of conditionality, you can see how it supports the whole idea of impermanence. It's a real radical change. And there's no other way it could be. So it's not that everything is impermanent, it's also that everything is therefore unsubstantial. There's nothing at the core. There's nothing there which you can point to and say, well, this is always here. And this, of course, refers also to ourselves as a self, which we feel is a sort of steady state within ourselves. But what it's saying is that that also changes. And what we're doing constantly is selfing. And this is what dependent origination actually points out to us. And that's why the Buddha is constantly telling us that this sense of self that we have, the way that we experience ourselves is delusional.

So, where does this lead us to? Well, it ought to stop us being in conflict with conditions, like an open radical acceptance. This is the way it is. This is the condition of this present moment. Now, that doesn't lead to hopeless resignation. What it should do is lead to a realistic appraisal with the way things are, and it should be a basis for action. So otherwise, if we don't do that, we just live in a morass of delusive aims, constantly going against what is actually happening and just making things worse.

So there we are. And it's a wonder, isn't it? Like 2,500 years ago, Siddhartha Gautama, son of the Sakya tribe in North India, left home life, went to be a *samaṇa*, a wandering ascetic. Wondering whether there was an end to rebirth, constant round of birth, aging and death, all the suffering that it entails. And he not only discovered this root cause of the notion of self as false and delusive. He realized that there could not be an eternal soul self or integral, which is integral to the psychophysical organism. It's not possible for it to contain something eternal. And one of the reasons for that is because of this specific law of conditionality.

Now, having said that, of course, you have to remember that there is *Nibbāna*. And our spiritual aim is to find out exactly what that is.

Well, I think that's it. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that this law of

conditionality will allow you to modify and develop your actions to work with present conditions so that you become liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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