Transcendent Dependent Arising: The Spiral Path from Dukkha to Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18:36

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa
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Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

During the summer I got interested in a teaching commonly known as Transcendent Dependent Arising, the Upanissaya Sutta. I was drawn to this via the six maxims, ethical practices designed to help us face climate change in a way that preserves our integrity. One of these maxims is to see our good fortune in being alive right now at a time of such crisis for mankind. Instead of seeing floods, droughts, wildfires, soil erosion as horrors, we are to welcome each one as an opportunity to develop courage, resilience, and other gifts that come of meeting suffering with open arms.

The Upanissaya Sutta provides Dhamma support for this, as it traces out the list of causes and conditions leading to enlightenment. The first 12 steps might be familiar, showing how we create *dukkha*, meaning suffering in all its variations from minor irritation to heartbreak, excruciating pain or abject fear, by believing we can make ourselves happy in a world which is unstable, uncontrollable, inherently unsatisfying.

What is special about this teaching is that it doesn't stop at dukkha, but traces an equal number of steps leading from dukkha to liberation. It gives us a list of skills and qualities we can and should develop to bring about our own liberation. I've recently attended a Tricycle online course entitled The Spiral to Freedom, in which the teachers, John Peacock and Akincano Weber, look at this particular teaching, as well as a number of related teachings which explore the same area. They refer to these as the spiral teachings, and call the path leading from dukkha to liberation a spiral path. They also stress that all the links in the spiral path can be seen in ordinary daily life.

It all starts with dukkha, which I think is really good news. If you know you're unhappy, irritated, out of sorts, then you're already at the launching pad for the spiral path. Taking dukkha as a given, the teachings suggest a number of responses, which John and Akincano refer to as entry points to the spiral.

Let's take dukkha over climate change as an example. Suppose we are in a stew of misery at news of another wildfire. How can we meet this with open arms? For some, faith is the easiest way to counter the

pull into negative thinking. This could be the bright faith of the beginner, or the mature trust that grows with long practice. Every time another dark thought takes us back into the pit, we place our trust in the Dhamma to draw ourselves out. It could help to look at a Buddha rupa or whatever symbolises the Dhamma for you. Buddha touched the earth when he needed all his faith, and this is worth trying out sometime. Place your hands on the ground, feel its stability, its solidity, trust the vastness of the earth as a grounding in truth.

For some of us, faith might not come so easily. News of an environmental catastrophe and knowing that this has been wrought by human greed stimulates doubt rather than faith. And we are flooded by questions like, what is life all about? But the only answer is, I don't know. If we're willing to explore the experience of I don't know, this is wise investigation, a second entry point to the spiral. Although we don't have the answers, we have access to teachings that can point us in the right direction. Thus, the feeling of bewilderment is the catalyst that motivates us to learn about suffering and how it can be transcended.

At other times, investigation may seem irrelevant. We want to do something, anything to relieve the suffering. In this case, virtue becomes the link from dukkha to the spiral. We respond to the news of the wildfire with ethical action. We might donate to a charity supporting those affected, sign a petition or write to our local council. We find some positive action aiming to minimise the harm and pain. As well as being beneficial for the world, this counters the pull into depression owing to the perilous state of the world, restores our confidence in the power of goodness.

But sometimes we just can't find the energy, the goodwill needed to sign yet another petition or make that donation. Everything in us wants to turn away from the world, forget all its horrors. This impulse contains the wisdom of restraint, which is another entry point to the spiral. We let ourselves turn away from activity, withdraw to some quiet place, let go of all the thoughts about climate change or other news. Give ourselves the silence and rest we need to let our hearts heal. This could mean an hour's meditation, it could mean a long retreat, or perhaps all we can do is a few mindful breaths. Whatever works is fine. We're honouring a wholesome response to dukkha.

The opposite can happen too. The news of the wildfire leads to restlessness. We can't keep still and we certainly don't want to turn inwards. Instead, we need something to occupy us. In this case, we can use the entry point of dedication. We could wash the dishes as if this were a sacred ceremony, the most important task in the world, taking care of all the little details. Although we can't fix the wildfire, we can take care of what is at hand. And this is a very worthy response to dukkha.

At other times, the thought of taking care of anyone or anything seems an impossible burden. Perhaps thoughts of who is to blame and how it should be fixed crash into one another, making our heads spin. In this case, mindfulness provides a good entry point to the spiral. We don't have to follow each sensation of the breath. We can use phrases like walking to the shops, making the dinner, driving to work to keep us present, alert, mindful. Although news of the wildfire might still be tempting us to fret and worry, we are

choosing present reality as an antidote to those dead ends. And this is a valid way to lift ourselves out of dukkha and into the spiral path.

Sometimes we can't even muster the energy to be mindful. Everything seems hopeless. In this case, we need to look outside ourselves. Let inspiration become our stepping stone from dukkha to the spiral. Who or what will draw attention away from misery? Persuade us that life is worth living. For some, it's a weekend camping. Others might sign up for a study course. It could be as simple as meeting a friend, listening to a dharma talk, leafing through photos of happier times. I keep some well-worn biographies at hand when I need a lift or go out for a long walk. Sometimes gazing at the sunset is enough to inspire me, remind me of life's promise.

Thus, we have seven options for digging ourselves out of dukkha and into the spiral: faith, investigation, virtue, restraint, dedication, mindfulness, inspiration. Each of us will have our own strengths, our preferred entry points, and it will also vary from one situation to another and depending on what mood we're in. Working with these entry points is a powerful practice. As we try these in practical situations, we get to know our strengths, learn to play to them.

This provides a contrast with the standard *vipassanā* approach, where we simply observe, don't interfere, don't try to make things better. To launch ourselves out of dukkha and into the spiral path, we're allowed to be biased, seek out and amplify feelings and mind states that lift us up. Mindfulness is not only an entry point in itself, but it's also working in the background for all entry points, noticing what works, what doesn't, when we've gone too far, when we need to step back, take it easy, try another approach when we're ready.

Once we've found an entry point, the next link in the spiral is gladness. A moment ago we were stuck in the pits of dukkha, now we've found a way forward. The heart quite naturally gladdens when this happens. Surprisingly, the feeling of gladness is easily overlooked. We can be so intent on doing our virtuous action, so immersed in the beauty of the sunset, that we don't notice the change of heart. Unless we pay attention to this, we could inadvertently start another round of dukkha, stressing ourselves out in the effort to do our good deeds, so inspired by the sunset that the rest of life pales by comparison. We need to be on the lookout for gladness to deepen our faith that there is really a path leading from suffering to liberation and it is possible for me to follow this.

My advice also would be not to expect too much. A tiny glimpse of gladness is all the evidence we need that there is something here worth cultivating.

Gladness sets up the necessary conditions for rapture, the next link in the spiral. The word suggests an over-the-top joy, but if we are on the lookout for it, we find rapture to be quite a simple, down-to-earth experience. The background mood of gladness helps us engage, be interested in whatever we experience. This engaged interest in present experience is what we mean by rapture. This can be experienced quite simply as interest or curiosity. Look out for this at the start of any activity. As you step into the shower,

take the first bite of dinner, say hello to a friend, listen to a podcast. Sometimes it can feel a bit giddy or overexcited, expecting too much. Sometimes very mild, like a gentle uplift or refreshment.

Rapture sets up the condition for the next link, tranquility. This was one I struggled with till Akincano described tranquility as that cooling phase in every activity, when the initial fizz goes out of it. This put a completely different light on tranquility for me. And true enough, once I investigated that slight deflation when a new activity lost its sparkle, I detected an inner relaxation underlying the more obvious surface layer of disappointment. I needed to bring attention to the body for this. The mood of deflation still predominated in the mind, but within the tissues of the body, particularly the limbs, I sensed peace and ease. I realised that I had become more grounded, more settled within myself.

So keep an eye out for any slight deflation when a new activity starts to feel humdrum. Ask whether deep down peace has descended. I never knew disappointment could hold such treasure. But don't go straight for tranquility, skip over the rapture stage, thinking it's silly to be getting excited by things. For tranquility to have any depth, we need to put our heart into the activity, while it still strikes us as novel and interesting. The energy of enthusiasm lifts us up, and that is the same energy which transforms to tranquility when the novelty wears off.

Tranquility sets up the conditions needed for the next link, happiness. Once I had detected and assured myself that tranquility was really present, the mood of disappointment evaporated and instead the heart softened. I realised I was content, happy. While tranquility for me could be described as a bodily form of happiness, the recognition of tranquility allowed the happiness to spread from body to mind. Unless I had looked for tranquility within that deflationary phase when the fizz went out of an activity, the mood of disappointment would have remained. Nothing had changed in my circumstances to make me happy, only that I'd noticed and paid attention to the physical relaxation that happened as an activity turned from novel and exciting to humdrum.

I hope any of you who often feel depressed will take this point to heart. Trust that it is possible to be happy, even if you can't change the circumstances of your life. But beware the temptation to skip over the early stages, early steps and go straight for tranquility or happiness. Each step needs the support of the previous ones. We need to investigate each one, be prepared to come back to dukkha again and again, so as to get more familiar with the entry points, detect the change of heart to gladness and so on.

A happy mind quite naturally rests attention on whatever it chooses to attend to, and thus happiness sets up the conditions needed for *samādhi*. Samādhi is the ability of the mind to rest, be still, gather its energies around a particular focus. If we're happily washing the dishes, it won't take any effort to feel the rubbing movements, see the dishes, hear the gurgling of water. It's only when we're unhappy that we get distracted, planning or worrying so intently that we never notice our hands in contact with dishes. The unhappy mind has its energies going in multiple directions as one thought careers after another. The happy mind is unified. While washing dishes, we know we are washing dishes. The only thoughts that

come up relate to washing dishes.

There are many advantages to samādhi. We sense the gathering of our usually scattered thoughts as restful healing. From the Buddha's point of view, the greatest value is that the gathered mind can see more deeply into whatever it focuses on. If we want to see the cause of suffering and the path to freedom, then samādhi lets us see this more clearly.

This brings us to the many fruits of the spiral path, which start with understanding the Dhamma and lead onwards to full liberation from all suffering. To stick with our climate change example, I might start with a confusing mix of anxiety, anger and despair at the news of the wildfire. If I can follow the spiral till the mind gathers in samādhi, I might then see how I'm torturing myself with imagined fears. The horror has been grasped so tightly I feel guilty unless I'm suffering too. It comes as humbling relief to admit that I am not suffering physically and this liberates a much more genuine compassion for those who are.

I hope you will try out these teachings, get to know your easiest entry points to the spiral and the transition from misery to gladness as you do this. A word of warning. Words like gladness, rapture, tranquility, happiness can set us up for disappointment. Set your expectations very low. A momentary uplift from dukkha counts as gladness. The slight buzz that comes from a new activity counts as rapture. The slight relaxation in the body when the buzz dies away counts as tranquility, and so on. Remember, small is beautiful.

In small steps, may we all be liberated from suffering. Thanks so much.

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