Paṭicca Samuppāda, the Role of Desire and the Only Choice

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:03

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Yesterday I gave the moon talk and then it failed to, well, I failed to do the right thing. And so I lost it. So I'm doing it again. I'll be covering exactly the same ground, but of course it won't be quite the same as you yourself had heard it, or as those on the moon broadcast had heard it.

So we're talking about the dependent origination and centering towards the end on this process of desiring. Now, the dependent origination begins with this word *avidyā*, and it's been translated as ignorance, giving it some sort of culpability, like we shouldn't have been ignorant. But no, this is just a plain flat not knowing, didn't know. And it's because of that that we fall into a delusion. And that delusion, of course, is to believe ourselves to be this heart, body, and mind, this psychophysical organism.

And that leads us into a funny relationship with the world, wanting to be happy. So we acquire things, money, friends, power, and so on. And then anything that upsets us or threatens us, we push away, we get angry and so on. And if it's bigger than me, then of course I'll run for it. So these are your basic attitudes that come from that delusion: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear. And they have created these *saṅkhāra*. The saṅkhāra is translated rather awkwardly as volitional conditioning. But I think it's much easier to think of them just as our habits, habits of thought, habits of feeling, habits of reaction and so on. And these two, this not knowing, this delusion, and the saṅkhāra, the habits, underlie every moment of our life. They're just passing with us underneath every moment.

Now, when something moves on the saṅkhāra, it will manifest on that screen of consciousness. And consciousness is described by its six bases, the five sensual bases, the eye, ear, nose, and so on, and the mind-heart, the inner life of images, thoughts, emotions. And these five consciousnesses, whenever there's a stimulus, it'll manifest on that screen.

Now then we have, because of that screen, we of course become aware of our body and mind, of our materiality and of our mentality. And it can also be understood as what is subjective mentality and what is objective, our physicality. And these physical, psychophysical organism has of course these six sense bases. And whenever we have a contact, which includes a sense base, some sort of object, and the awareness, the consciousness of it, we have that moment when we become aware of something, conscious of something.

Now, that moment is, shall we say, just an experience. But we then put a judgment on it, or we look at it from the point of view of happiness. So obviously, there are some things that make us happy and some things that don't. And that's the point where it becomes *vedanā*, or feeling, physical feelings, mental feelings. So as soon as these first little sensations come up in our sitting posture, for instance, of pain in the knee or pain in the back or pain in the neck, as soon as they come up, immediately we say, oh, that's pain. Pain meaning don't like. And of course, if it's something pleasant, we suddenly have a lovely, joyous memory, then of course, we label that as something to be enjoyed.

It's the point next, which is the problem, how we relate to it. And this is our reactivity. So because we've determined to try to make this life really absolutely happy. Whenever something does create happiness, we grasp it, we try to maintain it, we try to make it grow. And when something is unpleasant, we want to push it away, etc. That's the point of this *taṇhā*, this translated as craving, but that's too strong. Thirst is not bad, but it's just that reactivity coming from the wrong understanding.

Now, at the next point, there is an identity. And this is the point where actually suffering begins, because that's when you say, this is me. I am this pain in the knee. I am depressed. And once that is determined, it's virtually impossible to stop the empowerment of that desire. So if the desire said, take an aspirin, get rid of this headache, and you say, yes, I will take an aspirin to get rid of it, it's virtually impossible to stop reaching out for the aspirin. You may, of course, change your mind in the process, but the reaching out or the movement towards, even the slightest movement, will be very difficult to stop. And then once you've started an action, there'll be a process of the action and the completion of the action, right?

Now that's looking at dependent origination from a present moment to moment experience. But of course it is also explained as a sort of three lives. In the past life, we've developed these habits. We come into this life with consciousness, with awareness. We go through this process. We build up, hopefully better, habits, which get us reborn in a better place. And life begins again, birth, death, birth, death. But to us, I think as, well, what can we say as Westerners really much more involved in our psychology and all that, then the moment to moment changes or the present moment experience of Dependent Origination makes much more sense to us.

Now, this is what's really important here is the Buddha's tremendous insight about the point of identity. So if we take a very simple sentence, which some of you will have heard me often use, one sees ice cream, one makes a contact with ice cream. It's a lovely sunny day, it's very warm, you're out walking and there it is, the vision, the seeing of the ice cream. And immediately that brings up a sense of liking. Once you like something, there's a wanting, right? So there's a contact, ice cream. There's like, ice cream. There's want, ice cream. And then there's I want ice cream. So the I comes in late in the process. I is a sense of identity. This is me. If that weren't so, there wouldn't be an escape. There wouldn't be an escape. It's the fact that it comes at the end of that process, that we can now, instead of moving into that identity, actually stop at the point of desire. And when we stop at the point of desire, we can see that process quite clearly. It's a sort of energy that wants to manifest, and it needs our permission, a decision to manifest.

And that's what comes after. This identity is known as *bhava*, becoming. When we are becoming, we are creating a self all the time, but it's also an action and therefore there are consequences. And it all reverts back to this desire. Now, we're talking here specifically about unwholesome desire, but it also works for wholesome desires.

Now, unlike the Buddha, we have this underlying identity, we have this underlying delusion, and so no matter how we try there'll always be that sense of self. Now that doesn't mean to say it somehow destroys the benefit of a good action, far from it, but there'll always be that sense of me doing something and with it this underlying little conversation about how wonderful we are or how we're not so wonderful or how we've given too much, spent too much and so on and so forth.

So now if we go back to this desire, we have to feel that, okay? So in our meditation, when we're sitting there, as soon as something comes into our attention, on that screen of consciousness, we become aware of it, right? As soon as that happens, the Mahāsi technique of labeling is extremely good at making us acknowledge what is happening. So if my mind is wandering, I know wandering, but then I can see that I'm planning something. So I know planning. And when I come back into the body, I can feel the agitation, the excitement of this amazing thing that I'm going to do, saving the world. And if I can stay with that, I'll see that there's a sort of little energy that wants to take me out, take me back into the dream world. And I've got to be aware of that. If there's an iota, a moment of inattention, I'll shoot off again up into la-la land.

So this whole process is explained by the Buddha in this dependent origination. And this desire has to be felt. It has to be known. It has to be understood. So that when the desire comes and we see it is unwholesome, we've got to hold it there. We've got to stand. We mustn't let it take us. We mustn't let it tempt us into an action, a thought, word or deed. And if we fail, that's not a problem. You just know that, ah, yeah, it's still a very strong habit. So, okay, I've got to work with it, which means the next time it arises, being slightly on the ball, just waiting for that energy to dissipate, dissipate, dissipate.

Now that energy, remember, doesn't disappear. It's always transforming to its opposite. So where there was selfishness, they'll find generosity. Where there's hatred, you'll find love. And where there's cruelty, you'll find compassion and so on.

So that was our little contemplation yesterday. It was probably slightly better, slightly longer yesterday, but at least we have gone over it again so it'll be slightly different from what you heard yesterday but at least we've covered the same area.

Now I think I also said just to finally finalize the, to finish off, this moment of desire is actually the only moment of, for want of a better word, free will, right? That's the point where we can actually say no or yes. Otherwise, we would just be automatons. We'd just be living faithfully. We wouldn't have an ability to guide ourselves.

Now, when I say that's the moment of choice, the moment of free will, actually speaking, it's very narrow

because what we want to do is get to a point of liberation from suffering. And the path is ahead of us. Now, we come along the path as if you were, so we say, just walking in the country, going somewhere to a tea shop, perhaps, of course, to a place where you can get a nice cup of coffee and a tea cake. And you know the way. It's on the map. And as you're going along, there's a little road to the left. And as you look, you think, oh, that's interesting. So now you've got a choice, you see. You can either wander up there, wasting time, getting more and more anxious as to whether the tea shop will be closed by the time you get there, and getting all flustered. And you may get lost, you see, even though you've got a map. And so you have to decide at that crossroad, have I got time? Do I want to go there? Do I need to go there? And then you move on.

So that moment of choice when the desire comes up is the point where we can liberate ourselves, where we can actually make the decisions that will liberate ourselves from this whole process of desire.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and they have not caused even further confusion and that you will, by your devotion to practice, liberate yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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