Dependent Origination is Based on Not-Knowing and Innocence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 41:48

It's been a while since I've given a talk, much longer than 20 minutes. After one and a half years, I've lost all my confidence. Even so, we'll have a go at fulfilling 45 minutes.

I want to take the Buddha's victory verse, which tells us what the end game is—the moment where he breaks through the veil of delusion. He says: "Through many births I have wandered on and on, searching for but never finding the builder of this house. To be born again and again is suffering. Oh house builder, you are seen. You will not build a house again. All your rafters are broken, the ridge pole destroyed. The mind has gone to the unconditioned and has reached the end of craving."

I don't know whether he said this immediately after he was liberated or whether it was composed later, but it's really an insight about identity. So I thought this evening just to run through the dependent origination, which is really the fullest expression of his understanding. It contains the whole teaching, because each link substantiates all his teaching. Once we've grasped it, it gives us at least some sort of map whereby we can see where our practice is going.

It's centred really on dukkha. This word dukkha—its root meaning is "hard to bear." Then it becomes anything that is suffering. It was originally translated simply as suffering, but in a sense that doesn't capture the fullness of the word. The word also means a sense of dissatisfaction, all the way from the littlest, minutest disturbance, all the way to existential horror. It's the whole gamut of human misery that this word dukkha is trying to capture, and he centres the whole teaching on that fact. He really grounded it: there is dukkha. I don't think the human being could ever deny that.

But this dukkha must not be confused with life itself being unpleasant. The whole process—being born, growing old, falling sick, dying—that's inbuilt in our process. And that isn't what he's talking about when he talks about suffering. He's talking about our relationship to that.

He himself, of course, was born and his mother died at birth. I often wonder whether that sort of remains in the psyche of the person, the loss of that mother, and produces some underground disturbance which may have caused his existential crisis in his twenties. Anyway, that's just an interesting thought.

He grounds all of his teaching on this word dukkha. And then the next statement is, of course, the cause of it. He points to the specific quality of desire. Now remember, we're translating this word tanha, which comes from the word "thirst." So it's a wrong desire, a desire based on wrong understanding. That's his

statement. And then he gives the path leading to the end of suffering.

So where is the original mistake? When we look at dependent origination, what we start with is this word avijja, which just means "not knowing." It's not a culpable not knowing—you just don't know. It's translated as ignorance, but that adds a connotation not present in the word itself. The word is simply "not knowing."

Because we don't know and we're born into a situation, we make that connection: "This is me." And that's your basic delusion. If you can imagine as a baby, we come out and we have this catastrophe of information which we can't make any head or tail out of. Then somewhere around four months, it seems, we start to distance and push the outer world outwards—the first object being your caregiver, your mother usually. By the end of three years, the child is very clear: I am me and everything else is not me. That's really the foundation. And of course the child knows what it possesses: "This is mine." I used to have lots of fun with my nieces and nephews stealing their toys.

There's always that look of surprise on their face, and I'd say, "Oh, I like that. I'll have that." And that would send them running straight to mother, shouting in protest.

So, anyway, apart from that bit of teasing—by the age of three, we have a very concrete idea of me, of me-ness. And that delusion, we say, is underneath everything we do. We never lose it. It's underneath the whole of our lives, this fundamental delusion, running beneath all our programs.

And what it's producing is the next phase: the saṅkhāras. Because of this delusion, we produce certain habits. And these habits based on the delusion of a self have to do with our relationship to the world. In order to substantiate ourselves, to make us feel more real, more safe, we collect things—we become acquisitive. That's where we get the greed, the lust, the lust for power. It makes us feel much safer. If you've got a million euros in the bank, it feels far safer than just a few euros.

So the basic ground of our happiness as deluded beings is safety. That's what we expect of our governments—to keep us safe from COVID and all the other stuff. You can see that's the ground. As soon as you don't feel safe, the fear comes, tremendous fear. And to make ourselves feel safe, we collect things. So there's your—it's normally translated as greed, but it's far better to think of it as acquisitiveness.

And then of course you have to protect it. Anything that undermines what you've collected, you have to push away. There's your aversion. And if it's bigger than you, you have to run for it. There's your fight or flight.

So that's what's coming out of this delusion of a sense of me, which of course is based on this body. The sense of me is grounded very much in this actual body that we inhabit. That's why anything that affects the body is of course very frightening—whether it's affecting us on a physical level with physical illness or a mental level with mental illness. The sense of being me is grounded in this body.

So what we have then is consciousness. Dependent on these habits, this fundamental delusion—dependent on the habits—there arises consciousness. Now this consciousness is not a knowing consciousness; it's a mirror. It's a screen upon which information arises. That's where it actually is.

Some of you know the five khandhas, the five aggregates as it's translated. The Buddha again splits us up into these to give us a cross-section of the human being at any given moment. At any given time, you have a body—your physicality—you have all your feelings and sensations in the body, you have all your perceptions, concepts, memories, and then there is consciousness. But you have to be careful with words in the scriptures, because here we have somebody who has made an insight for which the language of the time had no way of describing. What happens is you get the use of the same word to describe something mundane and a word describing something transcendent.

One of these is viññāṇa. It translates as consciousness. But in the khandhas, it is just the screen upon which something arises. With the arising of a habit, it must display itself on this consciousness.

Dependent upon this consciousness, we have nāma-rūpa—materiality and mentality. These terms are often translated in different ways, but if you think of it simply as your body and your mind, that gives you an idea of the first deconstruction.

The Buddha's big on deconstruction. What he's doing by deconstructing something that feels so substantial—"I am me"—the first deconstruction is to see that the body is one thing with its own processes and the mind is something else.

That's what we experience when we do this eating meditation. By driving your attention into the tongue, you're actually right up against where the mind touches the body. And that's all we can know—we can only know the point where the mind touches the body.

We can't know matter in itself. Even though we can feel our bones, we can't actually get into them. We don't actually know what a corpuscle is in the blood. We don't know what the liver's doing. There's a presumption that I am the body, but when you investigate it, we know very little about it through our direct experience. And then we find that actually we don't have that much control, because things go wrong and that's the end of it.

So that first split—believe it or not—that clarity about body and mind is the first insight of the process that leads us to liberation. And the next one is to realize that the one is always firing off the other. If you stand on somebody's foot, there's a mental reaction of anger. If you feel angry, the body gets hot. They're completely intertwined. You can't separate them in any real way, but you can, through your meditation, realize that these are two very different systems working with one another.

This becomes important in the longer term, particularly regarding rebirth, because it's the mind which separates from the body at death. Some people have that experience directly and they know. But that experience is not necessary for us to have an insight which takes us towards liberation.

Because of this consciousness dependent on body and mind, there are the six sense bases. Here it becomes obvious that the Buddha is talking about some sort of screen, because your consciousness is dependent on the sense base, and they are discrete experiences. You can only hear with your ears. No matter how hard you try, you'll never hear with your nose. This is another deconstruction—realizing that there are six sense bases, five being of the body, the sensual bases, and the other being of the mind. Emotions and thoughts must arise on that screen of consciousness for them to be known.

We have this concept of the subconscious in our psychology. That's there within the teaching, but it's never actually pointed to, because there's no point in knowing that there are things you can't know. You can't guess what's in your subconscious. You can only know what's there when it arises on that screen, that mirror.

Those six sense bases again deconstruct our experience, and this is much closer to our actual experience. The world we live in is given to us by those six sense bases. Whatever world we are creating now, the little universe we find ourselves in, is all dependent upon them. If you lose your sight, you lose one dimension of experience.

Moving on from that: dependent upon your sense bases, you have contact. This contact is the moment-to-moment experience where an object, a sense base, and consciousness come together. That's a moment of contact. When you're doing the practice of eating and burying your attention directly into the tongue, just tasting—that's the point of contact.

There's always that moment before feeling anything. What we do then is give it a quality as to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or in that shady area of neutral. Before that, there's no pleasant and unpleasant—there is just sensation, whatever it is. Then the next point is a definition of that sensation in terms of whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. That's the world we actually live in. We live in that duality, moving from pleasant, joyful situations to unpleasant, unjoyful situations. There's a small area of what we call neutral, but when you investigate a neutral sensation, you'll find that it shades off into one or the other, because that's what the mind does—it's constantly making this division for us.

And then, of course, you have this reaction. This is where the problem starts. Once something is pleasant, you want it; when it's unpleasant, you don't want it. Very, very simple. But right there is the escape route. To put the attention right there, at that moment where the reaction arises, is the point of liberation. From that point on, there's very little scope for escape. The next position, if we don't catch that, is one of identity. As soon as something is described as pleasant and we want it, the "I" comes in immediately. Unless you're extraordinarily attentive, you can't stop the next action, which is the empowerment of the desire.

There's a crucial point where we can see this reaction to something. That's possible just by being generally awake. You pass a coffee shop, you smell the coffee, and there's a desire. Now, that process of wanting and not wanting is also part of these *saṅkhāras*, part of the habitual actions we have concocted throughout our lives. That's why it's so difficult to change ourselves. Even though we can see quite clearly at breakfast this

process of desiring, and that it will take us towards some level of suffering, and we see it clearly, we still can't stop ourselves. We keep on overeating or doing something harmful.

So that's when the practice comes in—that's when this practice of renunciation begins.

Renunciation, which you might say is the core spiritual practice, mustn't be confused with what they sometimes translate as self-mortification. You're not trying to punish yourself. We're not trying to punish ourselves for stopping greed. We're not trying to kill greed. We're just trying not to indulge it. And that is a process of letting it go, allowing it to arise and for its energy to dissipate. That's what we mean by renunciation—we're renouncing that.

It's the same with the negative stuff. Renouncing, letting go of anger, letting go of shame and all the rest of it. It's a case of bearing with it, knowing it, feeling it, and letting it go.

Now when we say letting it go, that's not active on our part. We're not *letting* anything go—we're letting it *go*. If you think, "Oh well, I've got to let this go," and you get active about it, then you're putting that energy, which is a disguised aversion, into the system. And of course the devil keeps biting you back. So it's allowing things to arise and pass away, which is what we mean by letting something go.

This process of seeing something but then not being able to change our habits—I think that came to me very forcefully when I was thinking about smoking. I never did smoke myself, but it was very clear during the sixties that the tobacco companies were telling great big porkies and that smoking was actually killing you. The science came through, and then everybody began to wake up and realize that in fact smoking kills you, one way or another. But it was so difficult to get over. It wasn't possible.

But you would hear of people—like the father of a friend of mine who had a heart attack and stopped immediately. He had to first have a heart attack in order to stop smoking. So sometimes you just need that little kick.

Once we perceive the problem, then the practice begins. Then the process of renunciation begins. And that's why it takes us so long to become liberated. If it were just a matter of seeing the way things are, well, we can figure out how to do it. Unfortunately, we've also got to purify the heart. So it's known also as the path of purification. And that's what we read: this is the path to purification.

Remember that this *avijjā* is normally understood as wrong understanding. That's of course coming from the point of view of wisdom, and this process is moving us away from that not-knowing and delusion towards wisdom. But remember that from the heart's point of view, we start from the point of innocence. There was no time that we really, really meant to do harm. We might have done so, but fundamentally, there wasn't any real desire to do harm. It was always to do with this self-protection and this crimped sort of love.

Even when you think of people like Stalin or Hitler and all that—they did actually love their people. Hitler

loved his dog, things like that. He wasn't incapable of love. It was just crimped. It was just torn. It was just brought into this very specific definition. And of course, everything else became their enemy.

So remember that when we talk about *avijjā*, and it does come across in the literature as wrong understanding—which is true, and the Eightfold Path begins with wrong understanding—remember it's also referring to the heart in terms of innocence. Even though we create all these mistakes, and we've got all these problems, emotional problems and all that, and we mess people up and everything else, we're heading towards that original purity. So it's from innocence to purity.

And when that purity is conjoined with right understanding, that's when you have proper compassion, love, and joy. That's how it expresses itself through this medium, through this psychophysical organism. It expresses itself that way.

So going back to this Dependent Origination, which is only describing how we create suffering—we've got this point: I want.

Now, in our language, the "I" always comes first, right? "I want a cup of tea." "I want to go here." From the language point of view, from our personal experience point of view, this "I" always comes first. If the "I" always came first, there would be actually no escape. The identity draws us into a connection, an inner connection with something from which there is no escape. Once you've said "I" and you've empowered it, that's it—you've done it. You've created something: an action of speech, of thought, or of the body.

So it's because—and this is for me such a crucial insight that the Buddha had—it's because the "I" comes *af ter* the process, or in the middle of the process, that the escape happens. Otherwise, see, if it were pleasant feeling followed immediately by "I want pleasant feeling," there would be no escape. It's the fact that there is, first of all, the wanting that allows us to see where the escape is. And then there's the "I want." And then, of course, there's the empowerment.

If you were to say something like—you're passing a coffee shop, and you say to yourself, "I'd like a cup of coffee"—if you go back on that, in the proper process of psychology, it would be: smelling, seeing coffee. There's your contact. There would be pleasant. Very pleasant. Then there'd be wanting. And then there'd be "I want." And then you'd be into the shop, buying coffee.

So it's: coffee smell, pleasant smell—that's the contact. Coffee smell. Pleasant coffee smell. Want pleasant coffee smell. "I" want pleasant coffee. "I" get pleasant coffee. So there's an empowerment of that desire. That's how the actual process is working all the time, you see. And that's why there's this escape. But to see that escape, you've got to be completely awake. You've got to be aware of it.

So we all know it's there. In our daily lives, the idea is to maintain that sort of mindfulness so that we're quickly at the point before we become identified with it. And this can be difficult in areas where you're irritated by somebody. Normally speaking, you'd be out there quick, you know, reacting. But if we're there and we can feel that irritation growing in us, we can hold it—hold it there for a second—and raise the

attention towards what the person is saying. So we're stopping that reaction. And if you stop the reaction, you stop the identity.

When you go home, you make an effort. Once we see that process, it re-empowers us. It gives us our power back, you see.

Now, the next point of interest: apart from this, *upādāna* is translated as "grasping"—that's how it's translated. So it's craving, which obviously doesn't—what the word "craving" is telling us is that it's a wrong desire. But it's two stronger words, from tiny desire to something that is overwhelmingly desired. And then there's this process of identity.

The next word is *bhava*, which translates as "becoming." At that point, the self keeps on recreating itself.

So remember, that process isn't a one-off thing. It's constantly going over and over and over throughout the day. There are some times when it's not happening—if you're just resting and being silent, then that dependent origination isn't working. It's only working when desire comes up, or aversion, the opposite.

At bhava, the becoming, there are three things: the becoming itself, the will that allows something to manifest, and in the Buddha's understanding, the action and the will are the same thing. Just in ordinary physics, as far as I understand, when you throw a stone into the air, you cannot separate the force from the stone. It's the same with an action. You cannot separate the will from the action that you're performing. If you were to withdraw your will, then the action would stop. So at that point, several things are happening. The will produces a consequence—the beginning of the action, the process of the action, and the ending of it.

Now, that dependent origination is also posited as a three-life process, but for us it makes much more sense if we reduce it to moment-to-moment experience. There it is: underlying every moment of our lives is this delusion. Even if we have an inkling of it, even if we're aware of it in some way, it still remains as a habit of identity. And upon all these habits, all these programs running underneath this little being, you have a moment where some information comes in. It could be information from the outside—you hear something—or it's information coming from inside, some thought, some emotion arises. And as soon as that happens, the reaction comes in, the identity comes in, the empowerment comes in, and the whole process turns over. And every time it does that, it makes things worse.

If we can just stop it at the point of reaction, that's when the whole thing collapses. So there are two points of collapse. The first is to recognize when desire is there and to allow the desire to exhaust itself, which drains this underlying habit of its power. If we work on a habit that we don't want and keep working on it, keep draining it of power, eventually the habit runs, but we're not fooled by it. We're not sucked into it. And it's often a good thing to go for the big one, because if you go for the big one, it seems to drain all the others too. All the time we're growing in that spiritual energy of not being caught up in things that are unwholesome for us.

The other point is sakkāya. Recognizing that sense of self—that's how you know the process is activated, that it's there within us. This sense of self, as I think we went through this morning, this identity: if you bite your tongue for just one moment, you are the body. That's what we mean by identity. And the subtlest form of identity is this position we take when we are practicing vipassanā.

Here, whether we are aware of it or not, we've pulled ourselves out of the whole psychophysical organism. We've found a place within us, which one writer calls—a great book to read, by the way—the observation post. You've found this place, usually just behind the forehead, where you are centered, where you are positioned, and you're able to observe and feel everything that's being offered from that position as an object. Now, as soon as something is an object, you can't be it.

That's an important thing to keep hammering home. Even when you're sitting by yourself and you get a pain in the knee, you say, "There's a pain in it"—not "my knee"—"there's a pain in it." And you point to it and say, "Well, it's down there and this is up here." That separation, that distance, is disidentification. You can do that with emotions, you can do that with thought.

Now, this isn't the disidentification that comes from mental illness, because that just causes confusion. What this should do is ground you in the observer, the position of the observer. You're more grounded in that ability to observe, to feel, and to know what's going on.

Yet even that is a delusive self. How do you know that? Because you're aware of being the observer. If you're aware of being the observer, you can't be that either. Everything you're aware of, you can't be. So you have to go even one step beyond that.

But here we come across a real difficulty. As soon as you try to get rid of the observer, you create another person who's trying to get rid of it. We're into a real deep paradox. And here's where the Buddha's teaching is, shall we say, at its most clear. You don't worry about that at all. You just keep pointing your attention to what you're actually experiencing. And then, when the time is ripe, there is an experience of just pure awareness. At that point, the person knows: this is the real, everything else is not the real.

So that process of not identifying—what you can do, as I was talking to somebody today—is this: in your meditation, when you're very calm, when you're very peaceful, everything is very still, the mind's not wandering all over the place, and you have this very clear identity of the observer...

That image of the observer, the feeling of the observer, is actually also coming up on this mirror, on this screen of consciousness. That's what's happening. So awareness itself is becoming aware of itself because it feels its own presence on that screen.

When you look at your face in the mirror, it gives you some idea. If you haven't done the two-mirror trick, it's always instructive. You look in the mirror, you have another mirror looking at the mirror, and that's the one you look at because it's turned your face around. That's where you see how other people see you. For some people, it's quite a shock—so beware.

There's something about the observer, the feeling of somebody observing, that tells us something about the actual awareness itself. As it's put in some literature—and this is more Mahayana than Theravada—there's a sort of glancing back into the awareness. And once you've done it, ask yourself: What was there? What's it made of? What wasn't there? This gives us an inkling that awareness is something that transcends, something of a different order from the psychophysical organism we find ourselves in. People who have had out-of-body experiences would know this for sure as a real experience.

The process of vipassana is helping us. It's helping us in daily life to see this process of desire and not get caught up in it. And it's helping us in our sitting to begin to undo the veils of delusion we've fallen into through simple mistakes—quite understandably so. You can read about it, mull it over. But when you sit in vipassana, you forget all that, put it completely to the side. We have to have this clear confidence that intuitive awareness actually has the power to liberate itself. And that's really the paradox. It's the Buddha within that's doing the unveiling, and the disappearance of delusion is the process of awakening—awakening to the way things really are.

That's basically what we're in the process of. So there's hope, you see, somewhere.

I can only hope my words have not caused even greater confusion, and that you will, by your practice, liberate yourself from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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