Paṭiccasamuppāda: Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:56

The subject of this evening's talk is dependent origination. This is a technical topic in the Buddhist teachings, and I hope it won't be too technical for this group. If it is, I encourage you to remember the advice that Ajahn Chah gave Jack Kornfield when he came to meditate there. Ajahn Chah told him, "I hope you're not afraid to suffer, because there are two kinds of suffering: one that leads to more suffering and one that leads to the end of suffering." Even just listening to this topic leads to the end of suffering, so you'll be okay.

Before the Buddha was awakened, he started to reflect on where this human problem of suffering came from. He asked, "Why do we have this condition of illness, aging, and death?" He said, "Well, it's here because we got born." Then he asked, "Where did we get born from? Why did that happen?" He traced this sequence back through twelve different links that established the whole foundation of our vulnerability to suffering. He traced it all the way back as far as it could be traced, to the factor of ignorance or *avijjā*, a quality in the mind of not understanding.

After his awakening, he taught this sequence of links again and again to many groups at many times to show where suffering comes from. It also shows the way out of suffering. You could say that what dependent origination is really about is taking the second and third Noble Truths—the cause of suffering and the end of suffering—and explaining them in incredibly minute detail to show us clearly the way out. It not only shows where we're caught, it also shows the way to freedom.

In Pali, this sequence is called *Paṭiccasamuppāda*. The sutta I'm going to base this talk on is from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, and it's called the *Paṭiccasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta*—the Analysis of Dependent Origination. I chose this sutta because it's quite a straightforward reading of the links with the explanation of the factors together.

The Buddha actually regarded this as his most profound insight, and he said that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma, and one who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination—that these are more or less identical. His good friend and attendant for many years, Ānanda, once came up to the Buddha and in his light-hearted and friendly way said, "Oh, Venerable Sir, this teaching on dependent origination is so wonderful. It is profound, but it seems just as clear as clear can be to me. It seems easy and clear." And the Buddha said, "Say not so, Ānanda, because this teaching appears profound and it is profound." He's always just slightly adjusting Ānanda's understanding.

For me, this teaching is awesome. It's my favorite teaching of the Buddha's. It encompasses a range from the vastness of cosmology and a whole view of how we came to be born—a very global, high-level

perspective of why there's birth and why we find ourselves in this situation. But at the same time, it also provides a very minute and detailed look, moment by moment in our meditation practice, of how we get caught and how we get free. It really spans the whole range of our experience from the lofty philosophy down to the very pragmatic principles of Dharma practice.

It takes in the law of karma leading to our birth. It takes in the second and third Noble Truths. It takes in this mysterious union of mind and body through the activity of our consciousness and how they come together. And how from a completely unobstructed and primordially open space of awareness, we construct the limitation of this fiction of a separate self. All of this is within the twelve links of dependent arising.

One of my early introductions to this teaching was at Wat Suan Mok. I was a monk and I'd been involved in Dharma practice for a few years and had studied this and practiced it a little bit. But Wat Suan Mok is a very special place. It was the monastery created by Ajahn Buddhadāsa in Thailand. Ajahn Buddhadāsa was an iconoclast who read well outside the Theravāda tradition. He read in the Mahāyāna tradition, the Zen tradition, the Tibetan tradition, and had a very original view of Dharma.

He has a building in the monastery called the Spiritual Theater where he has reproductions of famous spiritual works of art. On the wall of this building is a very large painting of a beautiful Chinese Zen work of art depicting a Zen master sitting by the side of a stream enjoying the freedom of his awakening. He has several Theravāda works and a wall-high painting of a Tibetan image known as the Wheel of Life. In Sanskrit, it's called the *Bhavacakra*—Wheel of Existence, Wheel of Becoming, or the Wheel of Life. It's a very striking image.

When Sally and I heard some teachings from the Dalai Lama in England in the 1980s, he gave us a reproduction of this maṇḍala. After the talk, I'll put it up on the board so that you can take a look at it. In color and the height of a wall, it's a little more impressive. But I want to use this picture tonight to explain what dependent arising is all about.

I'll describe it a little bit as I speak, and then you can take a closer look later.

You may be able to see that the center of it is a circle—this is the wheel of life. This circle is held by a rather fearsome monster who has fangs instead of teeth, claws for hands that grasp this wheel, and a quite ferocious appearance. As decoration through his hair, he wears a band of human skulls. The wheel of life takes place within his grasp.

In the very inner circle of this wheel—it's several concentric circles—in the very innermost circle is a picture of three animals: a pig, a snake, and a rooster. These symbolize the forces in our mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. The pig represents greed—he'll eat anything, spending all day eating. The snake represents hatred because of its attacking quality. And the rooster represents delusion or stupidity. If you've ever owned chickens, you'll know exactly what this means. They're absolutely untrainable

creatures.

In the next circle, there's the evolution of the human being from a rather contorted and twisted lower form through many births to the evolution as an enlightened being, an awakened one or a Buddha.

The next outermost circle shows the realms of existence that beings are born into. Traditionally in Buddhist cosmology, in the Theravadan tradition, there are thirty-three different realms that beings are born into. The human realm is the fifth from the bottom, so we can't be totally conceited about our position in the scheme of things, but we do have the advantage—as Sylvia was talking about yesterday—that we have the capacity to understand and become free. In this image they've been simplified from thirty-three down to six.

The highest realm is considered the realm of the devas and brahmas, the realm of the gods. It's a life where everything is easy and pleasant. It's said that one spontaneously appears in those worlds with no going through a birth canal. One dwells as a being of light and everything is provided. One doesn't have to work hard to maintain oneself. The only suffering in that life is said to be that when a deva or a Brahma dies, the others don't really want to hear about it because it's kind of the only stain in this beautiful existence. So the deva has to go off to a corner and pass away in solitude. That's the only suffering.

Coming down a level from the Devas are called the Asuras, often translated as the jealous gods or the angry gods. These are people who have a lot of power, but maybe not so much wisdom. I usually think of them as like the Titans of industry—if you put Bill Gates and Larry Ellison in the same room, this is kind of the clash you'd get from the jealous gods, these great competitors in the software world.

Then is our human realm. The characteristic of our human realm is that we're able to experience the mind states, the kind of life of all the other realms, from the highest to the lowest. The human realm is uniquely positioned sort of in the middle of the happy realms and the unhappy realms, and we're open to all of the universal experience.

A step below the human realm in the traditional cosmology is the realm of the animals. Because we share the planet with these creatures, we know firsthand that there is at least one other type of being that is similar to human beings but not exactly the same. Sylvia also drew on in her talk yesterday that creatures don't really have the ability to develop their hearts and minds and to come to awakening the way that humans do. As much as we love our cats and dogs, we can't really train them in mindfulness. Of course, they may be pretty well developed in loving kindness, but mindfulness doesn't seem to be up their street exactly.

One down from the animal realm is the realm of hungry ghosts. These are pictured in this chart and in the mythology as beings who have very, very big bellies and very narrow necks. The idea is that as much as they try to eat, they can never fill their enormous belly because their neck is too narrow. Where the animal realm is characterized by delusion and inability to understand deeply, the hungry ghost realm is

characterized by desire, the force of desire and never being able to get enough.

The very bottom realm is said to be the hell realm. It's a realm characterized by very intense kinds of suffering—both hot realms, cold realms, realms of being stabbed and pricked, realms from which there is really no release at any point in one's existence in that terrain.

Now whether you choose to view this circle as actual beings existing in actual different places or not is not so important. The key about this teaching is that we all visit these places in our life and in our practice. I hope you can relate to this.

This came home to me when Sally and I were traveling to the retreat in Italy this summer. We'd flown on this overnight flight from San Francisco to Milan. To get up to near where the retreat was, we had to go through Milan Central train station. It was a rainy day, totally gray, cold for Italy in the summer, and quite dreary. We pull up to this train station and walk up these huge stairs to this cavernous open space that has rain falling outside. Quite grimy, actually.

It's an old station and not particularly clean, filled with smoke—because as you may know, in Europe there are still quite a few more people smoking than in the States. We'd been traveling all night, so we were tired. Our mind state was not the greatest. The food all looked like train station food, kind of greasy and unappetizing. There were no benches or chairs to sit down on, so it seemed like everybody was wandering around, toting these huge suitcases, trying to find someplace to rest.

We finally did find a bench by a public toilet, of which the aroma was quite strong. Our train wasn't due to leave for about two hours. After hanging out in this space for a while, I realized where I was: I was in the place of the hungry ghosts. Everybody was walking around with this kind of restless wanting energy—When's my train going to go? When can I get something good to eat? Where am I going to find a place to sit down?—all in the middle of this gray and quite gloomy setting. So we can tune in to the energetic quality.

The heaven realm is when our practice is really going smoothly. We have this sitting and a walking and another sitting that's just effortless. It's peaceful, we're present, and we're connected. We think this is the way it should always be. We don't realize we've temporarily been born in a heaven realm. But after being born in a heaven realm, we die from that realm and are reborn somewhere else.

Sometimes it's the hell realms—the state where the body is on fire, where the mind can't settle, where we're tormented by suffering mental states of fear or anger or restlessness. We know we're just in a place of great suffering, and struggle as we might, we can't find our way out. That's the feeling of being in the hell realm. But if we just persist, we also die out of that realm and take birth in one of the other realms.

So our practice—and in fact our human life—is a cycling through these different ways of being, through these different states of mind and body.

Then the outermost circle is the subject of the main part of our talk this evening: the twelve links of dependent origination, each one expressed as a particular image. When you look at this outside, you'll see twelve little images around the outside going from one o'clock up to twelve o'clock. Those are the links in order from one to twelve. So that's what I'd really like to talk about tonight—those twelve links and how they describe our situation.

The first link is ignorance. In Pali it's *avijja*, and it means not seeing things the way they really are. In the artwork, the image for *avijja*, for ignorance, is a blind person walking forward leaning on a cane—the state of not seeing.

When the Buddha was asked to be more detailed, in the suttas he describes what we are not seeing. He said we're ignorant of the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, of the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering. So fundamentally, you could say ignorance is of the Four Noble Truths—not seeing clearly how we get caught and how we get free.

That sometimes seems a little abstract, so you can also think of it in another way. Another way it's sometimes explained is we don't see the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. We tend to see permanence in things that will fade away. We tend to see lasting happiness where we're subject to suffering. And we tend to see a self, an I, where in fact there is not a separate self or I.

A fundamental way you can always remember this quality of ignorance is a belief in a self—believing that there really is an I within this set of mind-body circumstances that we're in. And the Buddha said this is as fundamental a source for suffering as can be found. There is no possibility of tracing things any further back than ignorance.

When we think about the fall from grace as represented by Adam and Eve in Christian or Judaic terms, the Buddha said you can't trace a beginning point that was initially pure. Rather, ignorance is as far back as you can go. He said, "No beginning can be found for ignorance, such as before this point there was no ignorance, but then it arose." So I take that to mean that as long as there have been beings, we have been clouded by ignorance.

The second link is called formations, and the Pali word is *sankharas*. What this really means in this sense is volitional formations—when we urge ourselves to do something out of a motive. Volitional formations happen through thoughts, through speech, and through body. Actions through body have stronger consequences than those of speech.

Actions of speech are considered stronger than those of thought. But this entire realm represents karma. Karma means action with intention or volition, so we could equally call these things karmic formations.

The image in the traditional art depicts a potter making clay pots, sitting with the wheel and throwing vessels. The pots represent the formations—creations from our own mind that we act out. When we act from motive, from volition or intention, we're usually expressing some will connected to

self-centeredness. So we often act from some kind of desire or aversion. Or we can act in wholesome ways, from motives of generosity or kindness.

The basic teaching is that our action is wholesome if the intention is wholesome. The karma or action is unwholesome if the intention is unwholesome—such as greed or aversion. When we act wholesomely, it brings consequences that create happy results in our life. When we act unwholesomely, it brings consequences that return suffering to our life. This is the fundamental teaching.

The Buddha connects these first two links by saying that ignorance conditions volitional formations. In Pali, these all have a beautiful ring: *pachaya* is the word for conditions. *Avijja pachaya sankhara*—ignoran ce conditions formations. This is such a profound concept.

Ajahn Sumedho says he likes to translate it as "ignorance complicates everything." When we don't see clearly what's happening, we don't act very skillfully. When we're burdened by fear, we often act in ways that manifest that uncertainty, that hesitation, that unclarity. When we're motivated by greed, we often act in ways offensive to other people. And delusion is an accompanying factor where we don't see the greed that's present. We don't see the aversion that's present. If we did, we wouldn't act from them. So delusion accompanies these unskillful actions.

Basically, when we're burdened with the sense of self, we act in the world unskillfully. We try to protect and defend our territory. We try to garner more things for this self, whether emotional things like love and praise, or material things like wealth, house, car, and so forth. This involves us in a lifelong struggle.

I thought this "ignorance complicates things" was really highlighted by the story of a bank robber who went into a bank and handed the teller a stick-up note saying he had a gun, demanding all the cash, and instructing them not to tell anybody. The tellers are trained to follow such instructions, so the teller complied and handed over the cash. The robber got it and left the bank, immediately going home. When he arrived, he found police waiting for him. He was arrested with all the cash from the bank.

He asked, "How did you track me down?" The police replied, "You wrote your stick-up note on the back of your deposit slip. We just read your name and address and came to your house." So ignorance certainly complicated his life.

When we're not aware of what's moving us, we act unskillfully. Sylvia Boorstein has a line I appreciate: "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." When we see clearly and ignorance is not at work, then we act impeccably with wholesome karma.

The third link in the chain is called consciousness. The Pali is *vijnana*. This is the knowing faculty, the faculty in our mind that receives all our experience. It receives our sense impressions, mental events, our own bodily events, external events. It's the receptive faculty of mind that knows the world.

The image in the art is of a monkey swinging from branch to branch. It illustrates how our consciousness

lights first on a physical experience, next on a sound, next on a thought, then on an emotion, then on another sight, always leaping from one thing to another. This doesn't necessarily mean we have restless or unmindful attention. This is simply what consciousness does—it's always flitting from sense door to sense door like a monkey.

When we say that formations condition consciousness, the classical interpretation—and I think this is what the Buddha meant—is that as long as karma is being generated from a sense of self, we end up being reborn. So the consciousness being discussed here, according to the suttas, is called rebirth consciousness. It explains why each of us finds ourselves in this particular form, in this particular life.

According to the teachings, you don't have to believe it. As my teacher Munindra used to say, "You don't have to believe in rebirth. It's true." You don't have to believe it.

At the end of the prior life, if there is still some form of individual will, some form of a belief in a self, there will continue to be urges in the psyche, latent in the psyche. And those latent urges at the moment of death will continue in the form of a consciousness that passes from one life and then becomes the seed of the next birth. The Buddha actually says that this consciousness comes into the mother's womb at the time of conception. And if there is no consciousness there, there cannot be a being even from the union of a man and a woman. So this is the way that rebirth is described in the suttas.

The Buddha said, "If consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, the new mind and body could not develop there." But when consciousness meets with the union of the father and mother and the egg and the sperm, then this combination of mind and body come together and this is the next link in the chain.

In Pali it's called *namarupa*. Literally it means name and form, the form being the body, name being a word that's given to the cognitive part of the mind. Technically, it includes factors like feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention. But you can just think of it as the cognitive part of our own individual mind.

When these two come together, a new being is formed in the mother's womb. The image in the art is of two people in a rowboat or a canoe rowing across a lake. This refers to the union of mind and body that is what we are as beings. We have these two aspects to our nature, the physical aspect and the mental aspect. It begins at the moment of conception and it grows up through childhood, adulthood, and then to death, the ending of that particular form.

Because we are a mind that is embodied, because we are this union of mind and body, the body provides what are called the six sense bases. That is, the organs through which we connect with the world, through which we have contact. Because we have a body, we see sights, we hear sounds, we taste tastes, we smell odors, we touch things, and we have mental events like thoughts, images, and emotions. So these are called the six sense bases that are connected with our taking birth into a body. And what they do for us is

they give us the ability to access the world.

I remember being on my first three-month retreat when another yogi came up to Joseph Goldstein. There'd been some teachings on dependent origination, and this yogi said to Joseph, "Joseph, why am I here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean at this retreat?" And she said, "No, no, no. I mean, why am I here as a human being? Why am I alive?" And he said, "It's because you wanted to see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think." And in a word, that's why we take birth—so we can have more contact, so that we can experience more.

From the six sense bases, then, we get this contact with the world. And this is the next link. In Pali, it's called *phassa*. The image in the art is of a house with six windows, the six windows representing the six sense doors. The house basically represents the body. Sometimes in that image, in some versions of this wheel, you'll see the monkey inside, which is consciousness peering out through the six windows, experiencing the world.

From the six sense bases, we experience contact of the six types: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and mind events. In the art, the image for contact is a man and a woman lying down in an embrace. What this symbolizes is our embrace with the world. We actually live in this intimate relationship with the world of form. We are experiencing it as our reality moment after moment after moment.

Sometimes—I don't know if you've felt this—in the quiet places in meditation, there can be an intense yearning to shut off this stream of experiencing because it comes to be felt as too much, too restless. But it's not possible to shut it off by willing it or wishing it. Because we're alive, we're in this intimate contact with everything else that's created in our realm.

Because of contact, we have feeling. Feeling—as Sylvia mentioned this morning in the instructions—the Pali term *vedana*, means that every kind of contact we have can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Through all these six sense doors, there are pleasant sights and unpleasant sights and neutral ones. There are pleasant thoughts, unpleasant thoughts, and neutral ones. So in all our contacts, we're constantly subject to this feeling tone, this quality of *vedana*. It can be pleasant, it can be neutral, but it can also be unpleasant, which means that having taken birth, we are subject to unpleasant experiences as well as pleasant experiences. That's our fate.

That's our ticket for this trip. Even the Buddha was not immune from that. He had back pains. He ate poisoned food that caused him to die and experience suffering, physical pain on his way to his dying. This is part of the package.

So the last few links that we've been looking at—the links of consciousness, of name and form, mind-body, of the six sense bases, of contact and feeling—are not things we have any choice about. Once we get propelled into a new birth, these things happen as karmic results. We are just in line for some package of these things due to having taken birth.

Now the plot shifts. The plot thickens a little bit.

Oh, the image for contact, by the way, is of a person with an arrow in his eye. It's a little bit gruesome. It kind of gives you shivers even to think about. But that's the image for contact, and it points basically to our vulnerability. Because of contact, we're subject to things like the pain of illness, the pain of injury, the pain of accident, and so forth.

Now, in relation to feeling, we can respond. We usually do respond to the pleasant things in our life and the unpleasant things in our life. The next link in the chain is craving. This is our old friend from the Second Noble Truth—tanha. And it makes us relate to the pleasant with the force of greed, to the unpleasant with the force of aversion or pushing away, and to the neutral with the force of blindness or not really seeing. Because the neutral doesn't really satisfy anything in us. So these are the reactions that we talked about the other day of greed, aversion, and delusion being really synonymous with craving.

The image in the art is of a wealthy man counting his golden treasures. You can sort of think of it as a miser who has this great lust and desire for the accumulated treasure that he's hoarded.

So craving is the place where now we start to want to look really closely in our practice, to look at these manifestations of pulling toward or pushing away or ignoring. This is where our own choices come back into play. This is where we can establish our practice.

And it's such an important place because we can't control our experience. Life will continue to present experience to us. According to the teachings of the Buddha, it's mostly in the form of karmic results. We can't control that. When you come in for a sitting period, you really can't control whether it's going to be pleasant or unpleasant, whether you're going to be mindful and concentrated and present, or whether you're going to be spacing out, whether the body's going to be at ease or contracted. The basic uprising of our experience is out of our control. But we can have a choice, an increasing choice, in how we respond.

So this is where we establish our practice. How do I respond to the experience that I'm given?

Now with craving, what happens is that we single out one little bit of our experience. We take one instance of contact, we single it out from all the rest of the field, we focus our attention on it, and we react to it with liking or disliking.

Let's take a simple example. You're sitting in meditation and things are fairly neutral, fairly calm, but suddenly a strong pain comes in the back. Okay, this is contact that's born of the sense of touch. In having a body, we will have physical sensations born of the touch sense. They can be pleasant or unpleasant. In this case, for the sake of argument, let's say it's a painful sensation. So the contact is through the touch sense door. The vedana or feeling tone is painful.

Now, how do we relate to that when it comes into our experience of meditation? Typically, for any of us, the first thing that will happen is the mind will be strongly drawn, the attention will be strongly drawn to

that experience. And we will incline toward it with our attention in some kind of way. The primitive or unreflective reaction is one of aversion. We don't like that painful experience. And either we want to push it away or more likely we sort of withdraw from it. We kind of create a distance between the I, standing back as an observer, and this unpleasant experience.

This is where craving is coming in. The force of craving has come into work.

It's wanting that pain not to be there, wanting ourselves not to have to experience it. And so we react to it by drawing away. This kind of bending away in the sense of the unpleasant, or if it's a pleasant sensation, it might be bending toward to take hold of. This is the distortion.

We basically have been given this mirror-like awareness, which purely reveals phenomena exactly as they are. Mindfulness is the discovery and strengthening of this capacity, this natural awareness that just illuminates all the sense contacts just as they are. Everything is held in that panoramic awareness where all the senses are functioning and alive.

But in this instance we've narrowed down our focus to just the pain in our back. We forget about the sounds. We forget about the fact that the knees feel okay. We forget about the fact that the mind was basically calm. And we focus the mind, we incline the mind away from that unpleasant situation.

This is the fundamental movement of craving, away from or toward. We also usually don't see that we're doing it. And that's the concomitant factor of delusion. We're blind to our habitual reactions, and that's how we get caught. This is really the start of the slippery slope. You may have noticed we're on our way to suffering. This is where it begins.

From craving, the next link in the chain is called clinging. In Pali, the term is upadana. Clinging is where we go beyond inclining the mind in that direction and we actually take hold of that facet of our experience. Again, we've just singled out one particular sense contact out of all the ones that are going on, but we grab hold of that one. In this case, to push it away with the pain in the back. That means we really focus our attention on it. We take firm hold of it as a meditation object or just something to react to. And we have, in the Buddha's terms, grabbed hold of that particular experience.

The image here is of a monkey who's climbed up a tree and is taking hold of a piece of fruit, something shiny and attractive. He's grabbing hold of it. This term is also sometimes translated grasping. Clinging or grasping, more or less synonymous. Clinging refers a little bit to the past holding that's carried on. Grasping is kind of the present moment taking hold of. But another term that expresses it well is fixation.

When we get fixated on some part of our experience, then we've narrowed the lens down. We're just grabbing hold of that with an emotional investment, with the investment of greed or aversion. Essentially what we're doing with fixation is we're trying to freeze the flow of impermanence.

Impermanence keeps bringing us pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, pleasant experience,

unpleasant experience. If we could just let that happen, there would be no problem. There would be no suffering. There would be ease. Sometimes it would be pleasant, sometimes it would be unpleasant. But we wouldn't be in conflict.

But because we don't know how to do that, we've had, the Buddha would say, lifetimes of conditioning. We try to freeze the flow and we say, stop this unpleasantness. I don't want it. I'll pull away. Or stop this pleasantness from changing. I want it to last. On and on and on.

One way to see if you're clinging in a moment of practice is to see if you're really aware of impermanence at all the sense doors. Or is there one where there's a sense of being stuck, where there's a sense of freezing or fixating on something in that moment? That's something you can use as a meditation instruction.

The Buddha said that we cling to sense pleasures, we cling to views and opinions, we cling to religious rules and vows, and we cling to the idea of a self. These are the forms of our holding. So in this instance, we hang on to back pain as something fearsome. We establish ourselves by maintaining a distance.

What clinging actually does is it gives a sense of solidness to an experience that is fundamentally not solid at all. Fixation tries to solidify what is impermanent, what is ephemeral, what is passing, what is very light and insubstantial. But when we make a holding out of it, we turn it into a thing. We reify it by saying, "Oh, that's a pain in my back," and we make something solid out of a very light sensation.

Clinging then matures into the next link, which is called becoming or *bhava*. Becoming starts to fix the self into a new identity, and I think of this state of becoming as identity seeking—finding a new identity. The image in the art is of a pregnant woman about to give birth. The sense of ourselves starts to get crystallized in relationship to what we've singled out and taken hold of.

For example, the back pain gets crystallized as a problem and starts to extend into the past—it's been here for a minute—and we begin projecting it into the future: it's going to be here a while longer. So we start to build an idea of ourselves as a person with a problem. Actually, this sense of self is misleading because it's only temporary.

Let me ask you this: can the sense of "I" ever come up without being related to some particular sense experience? Think about this for a minute. Often a pain in the back comes in and we say, "My back hurts." Or we feel happy and we recognize, "I am happy." Even if we're looking at a tree, we might say, "I know that tree, I see that tree." Or if we're really with the breath for quite a while, we might say, "I'm really clear. I'm a good meditator."

Is the sense of "I" ever established independently of one of these sense experiences? We'll leave that an open question. Take a look in your own practice and see. But we can tell that the sense of "I" is arising again and again based on these experiences, based on these changing sense objects. So in your practice, you can actually start to tune into the emergence of this sense of "I."

Part of the craving for becoming I often think of as a search for identity. A lot of fantasies have this quality. Fantasies sometimes attract us—of a job or a relationship or a vacation—because we're going to be someone new in that setting.

A few years ago, I became a big fan of tennis, and in particular, I really liked Pete Sampras. I think he's a fantastic player. Sally gave me, as a Christmas present, a pair of tennis shorts that was the Pete Sampras model for that year—a pair of Nike shorts that Pete happened to wear when he won the US Open. So I was really happy to get them. I'd put them on and go out to the tennis court and actually felt like I was channeling Pete Sampras. I'd look down and see those shorts on my legs and think, "Pete Sampras"—and then I'd step up and occasionally even serve an ace after that. It was an identity thing.

Back in 1988, Sally and I were living in England and were just moving back to the States. I was wondering what to do with my career here, having been a computer consultant part-time and a part-time dharma teacher in England. For some reason this image just came up as we were coming back: I want to wear a coat and tie and carry a briefcase. I have no idea why or where that came from. But when we returned to the States, I got a job where I could wear a coat and tie and carry a briefcase. I did that for a few years until I could leave and come back into the dharma world. It seemed to satisfy some karmic aspiration I had. Fortunately, it burned out that karma and I happily put my coats and ties in the back closet. But it's really interesting to see this kind of identity formation come up.

One of the ways it comes up in retreat is through these golden chains of identity, which are dharma chains. We might imagine ourselves going back to our friends or family and giving them the most uplifting dharma talk they've ever heard in their lives. It will convert them and they'll immediately come totally into practice. That's another kind of identity connection.

So from the sense of becoming, the next link in the chain is birth. In Pali it's *jati,* and this is the full-blown formation of a new self. Classically, the interpretation is actually the birth in the next life.

So the first part of the links was about how we got born into this life. The very last links in the chain are considered to be what happens when we die at the end of this life. If this urge for becoming, for further existence, is still active in us, then it's said that will lead to another birth. We will be born in a new situation. The image in the art is of a pregnant woman actually giving birth - the baby is born. So this is the solidification of the sense of self from clinging to becoming to birth. The self is just getting a little more solid all along the way.

We can look at this sense of self as it exists through the last couple of days. When you were listening to Sylvia's Dharma talk, when you came down to the dining room for Thanksgiving lunch, what kind of self was being born then? Do you remember?

I don't know what your experience was, but as I was listening to Silvia's Dharma talk, I felt very much a part of this unity of us as a Dharma family. I felt in that time, "I'm part of this Dharma family. These are

my Dharma sisters and brothers." As we went down for the Thanksgiving dinner, I continued to feel that really strongly. Then at the end of the meal, when we all went our different ways, that sense sort of broke up and went away from me. That was a form of a self that lasted for a while.

Then a little later, it was the self that loves pumpkin pie. And that lasted a while. There was the self who didn't particularly want to get up this morning, who didn't want to come to the sitting. There was a self who had a good sitting this morning. There was a self judging other people. Maybe there was a self who was good at the work meditation this morning - vegetable chopping or toilet scrubbing or whatever. A self who got afraid of the pain in the knees or in the heart. All these selves come, they last for a while, and then they go away.

Where are those selves now? They've died, haven't they? They've passed out of existence and another self is being born - one listening to a talk, maybe one whose back is getting a little tired again. How many selves are we in one day? We actually are a new self anytime we identify with, cling to, a new aspect of our experience. Then we live as that person for a while and that self invariably breaks up.

Sometimes in the passing there's relief. Sometimes in that passing there's real sadness. There was a kind of sadness when we came to the end, for me, of Thanksgiving lunch yesterday. And it was the passing of a really beautiful couple of hours, starting with the Dharma talk and the metta and the blessing. So sometimes the passing away is happy, sometimes it's sad, but there's always a sense of turmoil about it. There's a sense of movement and activity.

This is the last of the links - it's called aging and death. The image in the painting is of an old person walking along with great difficulty, bent over, unable to straighten up fully, infirm in body, painful in their movements. This term aging and death is shorthand actually in the Buddhist teachings for the truth of suffering and all the different forms of suffering. As soon as we're born, we're subject to illness, aging, and death. As soon as we're born, we're subject to sorrow and grief and wanting and fear and anger and aggression and all of it. So aging and death typify that.

These are the twelve links. And then when we get to aging and death, or we could say suffering, the circle starts again because we still haven't let go of ignorance. Because ignorance is still in place and we don't understand the cycle fully, the circle starts all over again, moving again through new kinds of contact, new feeling, new craving, new clinging, a new becoming, a new self.

This cycle goes up through all the heavenly realms of being, through all the most pleasurable parts of life, and then it goes down for each of us into difficult places - into places of loss, of physical pain, of embarrassment, of unhappiness, of suffering. We don't really have much control over it. We're sort of riding the waves of life and riding the waves of our own karma through all these different realms.

Whether you understand this as repeated rebirths in actually different levels of existence per the cosmology, or whether you want to understand it as the different ways we go up and down through one

life, the meaning is the same. This cycle, which is unending as long as we're in ignorance, is called the cycle of samsara. It is the cycle of bondage which always exposes us to future suffering until it's understood. The meaning is that we recreate the sense of I and mine over and over and over. And through that recreation, through clinging, we expose ourselves to suffering.

Is this the end of our fate? Is this all there is for us, this unbroken round of bondage and samsara? Fortunately not. And that's why this cycle is also used to explain liberation. It's not deterministic. It's not that one link causes the next, rather they condition it.

Where can we find freedom? The Buddha said that the place to find freedom is the link between feeling and craving. If it's pleasant, we don't have to react with holding on. If it's unpleasant, we don't have to react with pushing away. If we can simply rest with the pleasant and the unpleasant and not get involved in these reactive formations, we have interrupted the chain. We have seen with wisdom and we have understood clearly. And then no further suffering is generated. We have stopped the cycle of future suffering.

The key elements are these two factors of clear seeing, so that we don't react out of habitual greed and aversion, and of acceptance. Again, as with the Third Noble Truth, this factor of acceptance is of profound importance—the ability to be open to the unpleasant experiences as well as the pleasant in our life and not to hold to either.

This is the way the Buddha expressed it: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not lust after it if it is pleasing, one does not dislike it if it is unpleasing. One abides with mindfulness established and one understands as it actually is the freedom of mind wherein those unwholesome states of craving cease without remainder. Having thus abandoned favoring and opposing, whatever feeling one feels—painful, pleasant or neutral—one does not delight in that feeling or remain holding to it. As one does not do so, delight in feelings ceases. With the cessation of delight comes cessation of clinging. With the cessation of clinging, cessation of becoming. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering."

This is exactly where we establish our practice. In any form of sense contact, in every moment of our experience, if we can be fully with that moment without the reactions of greed or aversion, if we can see it clearly, we're free. Not only are we free in that moment, but then we're not creating the future cycle of bondage that will lead to more suffering. This is wisdom. This is clear seeing. This is also the place of nibbana. This is where the formations, the karmic formations, the volitional formations come to a stop. This is one of the ways that the Buddha often described nibbana: the cessation of volitional formations.

We're also at that point interrupting ignorance, because we're clearly seeing the arising of feeling and yet the not sliding into craving. So as we bring more wisdom in at this point throughout the chain, wherever we can see clearly this chain happening, we start to weaken the whole chain.

Joseph Goldstein had a wonderful image. He said you may have a strong steel chain of many links and you

pick one link and you start to bang on it. You may bang on that chain ninety-nine times and nothing seems to happen—still a solid link in the chain. You hit it the hundredth time and it breaks.

This is the impact of wisdom on this cycle of dependent origination. The first time we hit it, the ignorance doesn't go away. The second time, it doesn't go away. But we just keep applying that mindfulness and clear seeing again and again and again. And with each moment of mindfulness, ignorance is being undercut, is being weakened, and eventually it can be uprooted.

The good news is that wisdom can uproot ignorance, but ignorance can't uproot wisdom. So the purity of our being, the innate purity, is actually stronger than all these visiting obscurations. That's the good news of the Dharma. It's never too late. It's never impossible to be free.

And then the Buddha says, "With the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of formations. With the cessation of formations, the cessation of consciousness." And all through all the other links in the chain, including the end of craving, the end of clinging, the end of becoming, the end of birth. And that is the final freedom when all those have become completely ended. We become still inwardly through trust.

One Tibetan teacher, a professor at Naropa, said, "The entire Tibetan Buddhist path consists in nothing more nor less than learning to rest in the gap between feeling and craving ever more deeply and subtly."

So this really is the heart of the Buddha's practice, the heart of the Dharma.

When we rest in that gap, we are resting in Nibbana. We are resting in the unconditioned freedom that is truly our original nature. As long as we can trust in that, as long as we have faith, and don't mess with it, we're free. We're free.

So let's just sit for a minute and let this teaching settle.

The entire path consists in nothing more nor less than learning to rest in the gap between feeling and craving ever more deeply and subtly. This is where liberation awaits us, in each moment of choice, in each breath of awareness, in each opportunity to simply be present with what is without needing to grasp or push away.

May this understanding support your practice. May you find that gap, rest in it, and discover the freedom that has always been your birthright.

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