Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:45

The subject of the talk this evening is dependent origination.

Before the Buddha became enlightened, it's said in the suttas that he took some time to reflect on the origin of suffering. And he saw that it was, as he said, headed by aging and death. So he asked, where did aging and death come from? He saw that they came from birth. And he asked, where did birth come from? He said it came from becoming. And so he continued to ask those questions and trace the origin all the way back to this quality that he called ignorance. In Pali, the term is *avijja*. It literally means not knowing or not wisdom.

This chain that he discovered upon reflection, he called the chain of dependent arising and used it many, many times to describe how suffering is born—and how it is born not just once, but over and over again, moment after moment. So you could say that this teaching on dependent origination really was the elaboration of the second noble truth at an incredible level of detail. But it also expresses the third noble truth, the way to liberation, because by undoing the factor of *avijja*, the whole chain of suffering comes falling down. So it is both the teaching of suffering and the end of suffering.

In Pali, the term for this is *paticca-samuppada*. I once asked Andy Olenski, who's the director at the study center, what's the etymology of this term. And he said, well, it means something like things coming up together dependent on one another. This has a nice sense. It sort of has the sense in the broader meaning of everything arising in a kind of co-dependent way. And Joanna Macy, who's a great environmental activist, says that she bases her whole philosophy of interconnectedness and care for the environment on this teaching of dependent co-arising.

The most general form of the teaching the Buddha put like this: when this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases. It's basically the teaching that everything that comes into existence comes into existence based on earlier conditions and causes. And then those new things that have come into existence then become the ground for other things coming into existence. So it's also a pointing into the emptiness of everything. Nothing exists by itself. None of us exist by ourself. We came out of the world and being in the world we affect it and then we'll pass out of the world as well.

The Buddha regarded dependent origination as his most profound insight. And at one point in the suttas it says that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma. One who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination.

Ananda, who was his cousin and attendant for many years, once was reflecting on dependent origination and came to the Buddha proud of his insight, as he often did. He said to the Buddha in his very cheerful way, "This dependent arising seems very clear and plain to me." And the Buddha said, as he often did, "Don't say that, Ananda"—kind of always having to tamp down Ananda's cheerful, blithe happiness. And he said, "This teaching is profound and it appears profound." So the message was, don't forget it.

For me, this teaching is awesome. It's dazzling, and it has a lot of drama. It's one of my favorite areas of the Buddha's whole teachings. It touches things like the vastness of life, the vastness of the cosmos, and how we have wandered through it and continue to wander through it by taking birth through the working of karma. It talks about this mysterious way that the body and consciousness get brought together. And it's this fusing that makes for what we call a human being, this mysterious fusing. It's a clear explanation of suffering in its end, an amplification of the Four Noble Truths.

And it also describes how we take our intrinsic freedom and create bondage out of it. How we are basically in the middle of this completely open and unobstructed situation of phenomena arising and passing and being known—completely an unproblematic situation—and how out of that we generate an illusory sense of self and all the contraction and limitation and unhappiness that comes out of it.

I was practicing in Thailand. I was a monk at Wat Suan Mok, which was the monastery created by Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great masters of the last fifty years. One of the things I really appreciated about Ajahn Buddhadasa was how eclectic he was. He was a true iconoclast. And for many years, the general opinion of him in Thailand was that he was too far out to really be a respectable Buddhist. And so for a lot of years, he was sort of in the public doghouse, as it were. And it was only late in life that people really came to appreciate what a gem he was.

As an example of his iconoclastic nature, people would come to him as they did to many great abbots and they would offer to donate large sums of money if the abbots would tell them a good lottery number. And Ajahn Buddhadasa just refused to participate on that level. And one time he told a potential donor, he said, "Go ask the dog by the gate. He is as good a source as I am."

A lot of gifts didn't get donated to Ajahn Buddhadasa. He would not allow a Buddha image on the grounds of the monastery. In the place where the monks gathered, which was an outdoor setting, all he had to represent the image of the Buddha were three stones piled on top of each other—a big one, a medium-sized one, and a small one—simply representing the image of a person sitting in meditation.

I was fairly new at Wat Suan Mok when another monk offered to give me a tour of the place. He took me into a building near the front of the monastery called the Spiritual Theater. That name in itself was fantastic—I thought I was stepping into Steppenwolf. We entered this room, which was basically an empty building with four walls, an upstairs and a downstairs. All the walls were painted with replicas of spiritual art: some Theravadan creations, some replicas of Zen paintings, and some replicas of Tibetan art.

One whole wall that went from floor to ceiling, about eight feet tall, displayed a huge reproduction of a Tibetan piece of art known as the Wheel of Life. The Sanskrit term is bhava chakra. I'd never seen this particular piece of art before, and it was fascinating. Being eight feet tall, it was overwhelming.

The central feature is a huge, fearsome being holding a circle filled with life that represents existence itself. This being has big fangs for teeth, and his hands and feet, which extend around the edges of the circle, end in sharp claws. The being wears an ornament of skulls as a necklace across his head. All of life circulates within this center that the being holds.

This picture, my friend explained, represents the chain of dependent origination—a graphic illustration of pratītyasamutpāda. At the center of the circle are three animals: a pig, a snake, and a chicken. These represent the roots of the unwholesome. The pig is greed, the snake is aversion, and the chicken is delusion. If you've ever lived with chickens, you know how accurate that representation is—they are absolutely untrainable.

When I was living in the forest at that monastery, I would put my leftover rice on a little ledge on a tree for the squirrels. But before the squirrels could get there, the wild chickens of the forest would fly up and take the rice first. Every day I'd throw water at them or sticks to drive them off. Did they ever learn? Never. The next day they'd be right back, completely untrainable.

These, according to the picture, are the roots of the wheel of life. The wheel of existence is kept in motion by the central forces in the mind: greed, aversion, and confusion.

In a bigger circle around those are images of the different beings who take birth based on these forces. In Theravadan cosmology, there are actually thirty-one realms of beings—thirty-one levels of birth that one can enter in the cosmos through rebirth, ranging from the extreme suffering of the hell realms to the very great heights of bliss and equanimity of the Brahma realms.

This outer circle depicted those different realms: the heavenly beings of devas and brahmas who have no pain in life apart from having to die—and at that point, they're abandoned by their friends because they're not such good playmates anymore, and then they suffer. The realm of the asuras, who are known as jealous demons or angry demons, always said to be at war. They're quite powerful figures, but they're always fighting. I think of them like captains of industry—like Bill Gates and Scott McNeely going at one another.

The realm of animals, whose creatures are beautiful beings, but the realm is characterized by delusion because, as beautiful as the creatures are, they don't have the capacity to understand their own nature. They don't have the capacity to become free in that particular form.

The realm of hungry ghosts, where desire predominates. These are depicted as beings with very long, thin necks, tiny mouths, and great big bellies that can never be filled because not enough food can come through.

The hell realms of very intense suffering driven by aversion.

And finally, the human realm—our realm. One of the characteristics of the human realm is that our psyche is open enough and fluid enough that it can experience the quality of mind of any of the thirty-one realms, from the hell realms up to the highest Brahma realms. It's said that it's the only realm that has that capability, that kind of fluidity.

Of course, you don't have to believe in this whole cosmological picture and the notion of rebirth to make sense of it, because these realms can be understood as states of mind that arise in life and in meditation. There are the heavenly times in practice when everything's flowing easily. You're present without much effort. Things are seen clearly, arising and passing.

And there's a great sense of ease and relaxation. It's like the heaven realm.

Then sometimes we get to taking it for granted. We get a little overconfident. We get a little arrogant and we topple into the asura realm. And soon we start to struggle with it because our very thoughts about it have taken away some of that beautiful presence. So we're in conflict with ourselves.

And then we might fall into an animal spell of practice where we're just plodding along and there doesn't seem to be very much happening. It's all we can do to put one foot in front of the other. There's not much wisdom, but we just keep going.

When we fall a little further, we hanker so much to have that heaven realm back. Our minds are filled with yearning and desire. And occasionally we fall into the hell realms where the suffering is intense from very strong states of fear or anger.

The last circle in the wheel of life is an image of the 12 links—actually 12 images of the links of dependent origination. I'll talk about those as we go through the chain.

The first of the links is ignorance. The sense is that, as we've talked about before, we don't see things in life the way they really are. Classically, it's said we don't see the four noble truths. We don't see suffering, its cause, its end, and the way to its end. Because we don't see suffering, we're bound over and over. It's also expressed as not seeing the truth of karma. In not seeing the truth of karma, maybe we believe that nothing matters, that we can get away with things.

Ruth Dennison had a very beautiful statement on karma that you've probably heard. She explained it by saying that karma means you don't get away with nothing, darling. But at times we don't believe that. We think we can get away with things.

Perhaps the fundamental sense of ignorance—or the way that I like to remember it in a simple way—is the belief in an abiding self, not seeing the truth of anatta, a belief in ourselves as an abiding and enduring I. The Buddha said that this is as fundamental a source for suffering as we can find. You can't find anything before the sense of ignorance. But he also made an interesting comment that no beginning can

be found for ignorance, such as before this point there was no ignorance, but then it arose. So ignorance has a kind of beginningless or timeless quality to it in the past.

The second of the links is formations or sankharas. It's the same term that we ran into in the aggregates, the fourth of the aggregates, sometimes translated as volitional formations or, as Joseph called it the other morning, conditioned tendencies of mind.

The image of ignorance in this piece of art is of a blind person walking along with great difficulty, not being able to see. The image of formations is of a potter making clay pots. This is what we do with our tendencies of mind. We fashion them over and over again, and then they have a power that we give them.

You could say that these karmic formations are the impulses from our mind driven by volition or intention that we express through our thoughts, our speech, and our actions. If we look around the world, there are so many different personality types. You can see some people are driven largely by fear—that's the sort of predominant formation that comes. Some by desire, some by anger, some by confusion. These tendencies tend to govern or express themselves through our thoughts, speech, and actions.

As we develop on the path, we see in ourselves growing tendencies of generosity or renunciation—the opposite of greed—or of loving kindness or compassion, or of wisdom. All these forces, in whatever balance they are in our personality, create habits in the mind. They sort of wear grooves in the mind, and then our mind easily falls into that pattern because of the force of habit.

If we are someone who has often acted out of anger, anger becomes stronger in our mind. If we've acted out of loving-kindness, loving-kindness becomes stronger and we access it more easily. All these habits create tendencies in the mind, and in meditation we find that if we just leave the mind alone, it often tends to fall into this particular groove or this particular habit.

We strengthen them by believing in them, buying in, and going along with them for another ride. The habit maybe appears out of the force of past inclination, but we can strengthen it by buying in one more time, believing in it, encouraging it, furthering it, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome.

The connection between these first two is that ignorance conditions formations. Or conditioned by ignorance, formations arise. Basically what this means is when ignorance leaves us with this sense of self, the burden of self, we act out of that mistaken view of self, out of that need to protect, maintain, defend, feed, inflate, aggrandize the I. We undertake various actions based on tendencies of wanting, or fearing, anger, or confusion. If we look at the world, this is the history of the world.

It's a mass of actions based on the passions that arise around the false sense of self, of being self-centered in an unwholesome way.

Ajahn Sumedho has this beautiful line to explain this connection. He said, "Ignorance complicates everything." When we don't see clearly, life becomes complicated. It's the sense of self that gives rise to

our struggle and our sense of agenda, our resistance and our pushing forward.

There's a story of a bank robbery that illustrates this factor perfectly. The bank robber handed the teller a stick-up note that said, "I have a gun. Turn over the money in your drawer or I'm going to shoot somebody." So the teller did what tellers are trained to do and handed over the money. The bank robber walked out with a bag of cash, drove home, and when he got there, the police were waiting for him. He said, "How did you find me so quickly?" And the police said, "Well, unfortunately, you wrote your stick-up note on the back of your deposit slip. We just had to read your name and address."

This seems like a silly story, but when we act out of desire or hatred, we're doing the same thing. We're injuring the world in some way, but we're leaving our return address in the form of karmic impressions, and it comes back to haunt us.

Sylvia Boorstein, who also teaches at Spirit Rock, has a lovely phrase about this. She said, very simply, "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." When we see clearly, we act impeccably. But when we don't see clearly, when ignorance is present, our actions are confused, and this leads to unhappiness.

The third link is consciousness. Again, our old friend from the aggregates, the Pali term is vijñāna. This is the knowing faculty, the faculty of mind that receives impressions through the five physical senses and through the mind. The image in the art is one that I particularly like—a monkey swinging from branch to branch. You really get the sense with that picture of how consciousness is quite flighty. It lights on a sound, then on the breath, then on a thought, on a feeling, then on a body sensation. Consciousness is moving very rapidly from one thing to another.

Here, though, the particular sense in the classical understanding of dependent origination is consciousness as rebirth consciousness. That is, a being has died, but because impulses—volitional formations—are still continuing, there's a consciousness that continues beyond the death of the body. It carries the force of the unfinished cravings of that former life. So the rebirth consciousness is conditioned by the volitional impulses that still continue in us at the time of death—the self-centeredness that has not been exhausted at the time of death.

The next link is called name and form. The Pali is nāma-rūpa. Nāma basically means the cognitive mind. If you want to be technical, it's the factors of feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention—the factors of mind that let us make sense of the world, to name the world. You can just think of it as the naming faculty of mind. Form in this context is the body.

The image is of two people in a rowboat. It's really a sweet image because the two people represent the cognitive mind and the body, which are joined at birth. They're in a rowboat together on a sea. They're going to be together for the whole journey across this ocean of existence.

This is for those of you who've ever wondered how you got here. It reminds me of my first three-month retreat, when someone who was sitting the course came up to Joseph with those kind of wide eyes that

only a yogi near the end of three months has, and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean at this retreat?" And she said, "No, why are we here alive?" And Joseph said, "Well, you're here because you wanted to see and smell and taste and touch and feel."

This is the sense of the volitional impulses connecting through consciousness with the new body. If we have more wanting at the end of one life, there's no way to satisfy it except to join with a body. The body is what opens the window onto the phenomena of the existent world. So this is the sense in the classical interpretation of the origin of our mind and body.

The Buddha actually said that if consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, mind and body would not develop there. In another passage he said that conception depends on three things: the union of the parents, what he called the mother's season, and the third factor—the being to be reborn. This rebirth consciousness that, in the Buddhist view of things, joins with the sperm and egg at the moment of conception to form the new being, the mind and body of the new being.

And it said, as you probably know, that when one is fully liberated, as the Buddha was, there are no more volitional impulses to propel the rebirth consciousness forward. So there is no more birth for one who is fully awakened. The cycle of rebirth is said to stop for the Buddha or for the arhant.

Having joined consciousness with name and form, then the body is born and is endowed with the six sense bases. These are the internal bases of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and touch, and the mind—the cognitive mind, the six senses, and their objects. The image here is of a house that has six windows. Sometimes in the image, inside the house is the monkey, which is consciousness. It's like consciousness is in a house, and there are six windows that it can look out through to connect with the world.

Because of the six sense bases, then we have the next link in the chain, which is contact. We experience the phenomenal world of the five physical senses and the mind. Contact basically means our sense experience. Technically, it's made up of the organ, the external object, and the appropriate sense consciousness. There are six types of contact. The image in the pictures is of two people lying down in a passionate embrace. This is a really evocative image because it describes how we're so closely and intimately married to the world of experience through this phenomenon of contact—the inner and the outer coming together, again in this dependently arisen way, to generate the world of appearances.

At contact, we really enter the heart of this chain for the meditator. If you're not interested in rebirth, you can sort of drop the stuff up to now. Don't drop ignorance, though. That's important. But a lot of this is considered to be karmic result. The rebirth consciousness, name and form arising, the six sense bases—that's just happening automatically. It's on autopilot. There's nothing we can do.

But now the chain starts to get interesting for the meditator because contact brings along the phenomena that we have trouble with, the phenomena that cause suffering. Simple example: You're sitting and there's a strong burning sensation in the back. This is contact through the sense door of touch, the sense organ of

the body.

The next link in the chain is feeling, or vedana, one that we've talked about a lot. Sometimes we call it feeling tone. It just refers to the fact that all contact has a quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. There are six kinds of feeling connected with the six senses. The image here from the art is of a person with an arrow in the eye. This is kind of gruesome. But I don't know if you've experienced this yet, but sometimes when the mind gets quite still and the awareness is subtle and refined, the experience of any kind of contact feels stressful. Sometimes in meditation, one just wishes that there were not this constant impinging of arisings and passings, arisings and passings. This inherently difficult nature of contact is symbolized by that image.

So in our simple example, there's a burning sensation in the back. The feeling tone of it is considered to be unpleasant—still out of our control. These are karmic results.

The next link in the chain is craving. This is the same as the tanha that we talked about in the second noble truth, the source of suffering. There are six types of craving in relation to the six sense bases. The image here is of a wealthy man counting his treasures of gold. You have the sense of the hoarding or the delighting in the richness of possible sense experience, pleasurable sense experience.

With craving, the volitional part of our being comes back into the picture. We get reinvested in the process. For a while, we were just riding on results. We weren't doing anything. But with craving, we get active again. This suggests this is a place that we really ought to look very closely.

There's a very curious thing that happens with craving. That curious thing is that we separate out one appearance from the multitude that are arising in the moment and we bend the mind toward it. Why do we do that? There's this basic experience of great openness, great vastness, in which all the appearances are coming and going and being known by consciousness. Why don't we leave it like that?

But we don't. So in craving, the mind starts to bend or incline toward one of the experiences out of an underlying motive that's some combination of greed and delusion, or aversion and delusion. Remembering that craving includes both liking and disliking, craving is really for things to be different than they are.

At this point, the basic nature of our consciousness is starting to get distorted. Its basic nature has been called an empty knowing or a mirror-like awareness that simply reflects what is. But now we're bending it toward something that has some element of fascination, either due to its pleasant nature or its unpleasant nature. This is the initial distortion of mind—moving the inclination toward or away from. The delusion means that we don't see it. If we saw it clearly, we wouldn't do it because it's not happening out of wisdom. This inclination is the start of the slide to suffering.

So, for example, we've noticed that there's a burning sensation in the back. There's an unpleasant quality to the feeling. The movement of craving is that we start to bend away from it. We start to pull back from it.

The next link in the chain is clinging. The Pali is *upādāna*. In clinging, we actually take hold of what we have started to incline to—whatever aspect of experience is drawing us with its pleasant or unpleasant nature. So we're becoming more determined about our focus. Craving singles something out and inclines to it. Clinging really grasps onto it to the exclusion of everything else. It really comes to dominate our attention.

The image is of a monkey in a tree grabbing a piece of fruit—latching on to one object. It could be translated as clinging, grasping. Sometimes it's translated as fixation. I think this is a nice term because it implies how the mind gets narrowed around the particular thing that we've singled out. In a way, you could say that what we're doing with this fixation is we're trying to stop impermanence. It's as though all this flow of changing appearances doesn't do it for us. The impermanence gives too much space, and we want to pull something out of that changing flow and freeze it. That's what the grasping or the fixation does.

One of my teachers commented that if you're in touch with impermanence in a moment of meditation, it's a kind of good check that you're not clinging. This is an interesting thing to look at—to see how the perception of impermanence in a moment relates to clinging.

So once we have started to incline the mind to the back pain, we cling by really narrowing our focus, latching onto it as a very unpleasant object that we don't want to experience. We start to define our relationship by either pushing it away or pulling back. In that, what we're doing is creating a distance between the subject and the object based on the aversion. We think that will make us secure. So the clinging gives more and more solidity to that impermanent thing. It doesn't seem so likely to pass now because we've fastened onto it.

The next link is called becoming—sometimes translated as existence, but let's call it becoming. The Pali is *bhava*. In becoming, we start to generate the I thoughts about what we've grabbed hold of. The image in the art is of a pregnant woman.

So we start to attach the sense of I to what we have just grasped. Remember that the grasping is underlain by greed or aversion, some kind of liking or disliking. Then the thoughts come in: I hurt, or I have a pain in my back, or my back hurts, or this pain is killing me—something like that. The arising of the I thoughts in relation to the unpleasant.

We see in this movement of becoming that the sense of I has popped into being out of this vast openness because we've narrowed our attention to one appearance that's fascinated us by its pleasant or unpleasant nature. The sense of self is arising out of nothing through this clinging, through this grabbing and taking hold of.

This is a really interesting thing to look at in your practice. Does the sense of I ever arise just by itself? Or does it always arise in relation to a sense impression? A pain in the knee and we think, "My knee." A

feeling of happiness and we think, "I'm happy." The sight of a tree and we think, "I see the tree." A clear awareness of the breath and we think, "I see clearly."

Sometimes the I comes up around a craving for becoming, finding an identity, finding a place to fasten on and make some sense of security or some sense of delight. Sometimes identity is just about delight.

I'm a big fan of tennis. I love to play it, and I also like to watch. And the player that I've most enjoyed over the last ten years is Pete Sampras. He just, to my mind, has the most beautiful game possible. So one Christmas, my wife came up with one of her more inspired ideas for a Christmas present. Sampras had won the U.S. Open that year, and she bought me a pair of tennis shorts—the exact model he was wearing. I mean, not the same pair, but that would have been too much.

So I'd go out to play tennis in them, and I'd look down at my shorts and think, "Pete Sampras." It was like I was channeling him. It was like I had found my new identity being Pete Sampras. And I swear I could hit more aces when I was wearing those shorts.

Sometimes the becoming looks very golden. We have these great insights as we sit, and we think about sharing our dharma views with our friends or our partners or our family. We might think about co-teaching with the Dalai Lama somewhere. And there's such a beautiful feeling about who we would become if we could do that.

All these things can bring a sense of identity. It's kind of fun living in California because you see the proliferation of identity around money. There's this guy named Jim Clark who was one of the founders of Netscape in Mountain View. When he got into business, he was described in a book recently, his goal was to make ten million dollars—which is quite ambitious. But when he got to ten million dollars, that wasn't enough. Then he wanted a hundred million. And then he got to a hundred million, and that wasn't enough. He wanted a billion. And then he got there, and that wasn't enough. At the time the book was written, he had three billion dollars. But it still wasn't enough. He said what he wanted then was to have more money than Larry Ellison, another industry leader who had nine billion dollars.

So these kinds of things just become stepping stones for identity. We think that there's some security there. But they're just more becoming.

Becoming then leads to the next link, which is birth. In Pali, the term is *jāti*. This is where the I-thoughts have grown and coagulated, and we really have a sense of ourselves as being that person for a short period of time. The image in the art is that the pregnant woman has given birth. So the new baby is on the scene.

This happens very quickly—this movement from craving to clinging to becoming to birth can happen in the space of a few seconds, ten seconds. And we take on this new identity based on what we've identified with, based on what we've clung to.

So you can take a look back over the last couple of days and see how many different selves have arisen in your experience. Maybe there was the self at lunch yesterday who wanted two pieces of chocolate instead of just one. There was the self in the late afternoon who got really thrilled by the wind, or maybe stirred up by the wind and found an identity in that. The self who didn't want to get out of bed this morning. The self who was the vegetable chopper or the toilet cleaner. The self who became the good meditator by having a really clear sitting after breakfast. The self who's the owner of the bad knees that hurt after thirty minutes. The self who really enjoyed the beautiful sunset this evening.

Throughout the day we become all these different identities. We become the meditator or the owner or the doer or the thinker or the observer or the experiencer through the coagulation of I.

But where are all these selves now? All these selves that have existed over the last couple of days—what happened to them? They arose, and then they also passed, didn't they?

And that's the next link in the chain, which is aging and death. Everything that is of the nature to arise, including identity, also is of the nature to pass away. Aging and death is really used in the Buddhist terminology as a shorthand for suffering. It's not so pleasant to have our identities dissolving all the time.

when an identity dies, because we've constructed it out of a need for security. Often we're not willing to let go of it until there's another one to grasp. So even if the identity hasn't been a pleasant one, sometimes there's a satisfaction in the familiar knowing of who we are, and it becomes difficult to release.

This is the last link in the chain—the twelfth link of aging and death, or as we can understand it, suffering in all its different forms. But of course the chain doesn't stop with suffering, because typically, if we don't see with wisdom, suffering leads to or conditions further ignorance.

Suffering tends to strengthen our sense of self. It tends to lead to more wanting or more fear, more insecurity, more clinging. For most people, suffering actually strengthens ignorance rather than weakening it. It makes the sense of self stronger rather than less. And so we enter the chain again at ignorance and cycle through it all one more time.

This is bondage. Bondage is when we are tied to this cycle again and again, over and over, just walking through, living through the round of suffering, and it doesn't lead anywhere. Sometimes from a New Age perspective we have the idea that suffering is ennobling or must be leading in the right direction. The Buddha said this is not necessarily so. For many beings there is just a wandering over and over through suffering with no learning, no growth, no purpose.

This is the cycle of samsara. Being on this wheel, not understanding how we got on it or how to get off, but just rotating through all the different forms of suffering. Always changing, no resting place, but always underneath some sense of unsatisfactoriness, some sense of longing, of wanting, of fear, some form of craving that never quite gets quenched.

Whether you understand it as rebirth in the literal physical sense, or whether you understand it as rebirth of cycling through different forms of identity one after another, it really doesn't matter. The mechanism of samsara is the same. We create the sense of I and mine over and over through clinging, and the clinging involves suffering. We don't know where we'll take birth next. We don't know whether it's going to be one of the heavenly realms of easy, awake, effortless practice, or whether we're going to be dropped into one of the hellish realms of suffering, of being tormented by very strong and unpleasant mental states that we didn't ask for. But the cycle continues as long as ignorance is active.

But there's good news too. The good news is the chain is not deterministic. It's not fixed. And that's why the Buddha could teach a path. There is a way out.

So where do we find freedom in this chain? The key is to see the difference between our experience, which is presented to us, and how we respond to it, which is where we have a growing ability to choose. The experience is presented to us through contact and the feeling of that contact—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We don't have any choice about that. Even the Buddha had pleasant and unpleasant and neutral experiences throughout his life after awakening.

But the link between feeling and craving is where we have a choice. We can either resist the feeling and move into greed or aversion, or we can open to that feeling with acceptance.

This is from the Majjhima Nikaya: "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 of the body established, and one understands as it actually is the liberation of mind, wherein those unwholesome states cease without remainder. Having thus abandoned favoring and opposing, whatever feeling one feels, whether painful or pleasant or neither, 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."

The Buddha is basically saying whether we meet something pleasant or unpleasant or neither, if we don't respond with desire or aversion, we're basically free in that moment. The mind abides in a state of liberation.

One of the hardest areas to see this in is in thoughts or feelings about ourselves. I don't know if Ajahn Sumedho has hit this point yet in the Saturday tapes that you're listening to, but he talks about these judgments about ourselves as being a kind of personality view. When a view comes along like "I'm not a lovable person," or "I'm a really bad meditator," or "Everybody else is doing it so much better than I am"—these are some of the hardest things not to react to with conditioned greed or aversion.

But these are exactly the place where we can also find the greatest freedom through looking at this space between feeling and craving. These patterns are strong because we've believed in them over and over and over again, usually for years upon years. And because of that invested belief, they have this great power to

grab us and to become very sticky, to make us believe one more time in what they're saying.

If we can see this pattern, though, without buying in, we start to weaken it. By seeing it mindfully, we're actually starting to poke holes in it.

We aerate it. This could be a thought or self-judgment. It could be one of the particular tendencies of mind that come again and again. For me, it was fear. Fear came many times in my practice and caught me. I didn't like it. I was afraid of it. I reacted to it. I couldn't be easily with it. But after enough times of opening to it in the body and in the mind and through the thoughts, I started to make a friendlier relation with fear.

I went through long periods in practice where fear could come and I was completely equanimous. If it was there, it was fine. If it wasn't there, it was fine. When I was able to meet it with that kind of mindfulness, it really started to take the power away from the fear. It lost its punch. It lost its fascination.

When we do this over and over—puncturing the mind state or the personality view with clear seeing, without the reactivity—it starts to collapse. It starts to fall apart. The Tibetans talk about how the whole ego is built on these personality views stacked one on top of another, and as we puncture them one after another, at some point the entire ego collapses. The false sense of self-image altogether crumbles because there's no real foundation in it. The whole thing just comes tumbling down like a house of cards.

And then we see the truth that we are just in this vast openness with everything coming and going. And if we don't cling, nothing is a problem. Nothing is a problem. Pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations can come and go. Pleasant and unpleasant states of mind can come and go. If we simply allow them to, there's no friction, there's no holding.

There's a quotation from Reginald Ray, a Tibetan teacher, who says that 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. When we rest in this space, we're accepting our experience. We're not interfering with it out of struggle or agenda. We're not creating more new karma. We're not adding to the bondage. As we do this, the old karma weakens. It still passes through, but it's weakening as we do it. This is the influence of wisdom. This is what weakens ignorance.

We can add wisdom at any point along the chain. Anytime we become clearly aware of the movement. But for meditators, the particular place of interest is contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. Contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. Over and over and over again.

The good news is that wisdom eventually can uproot ignorance. But ignorance can't uproot wisdom. So basically the strength is on the side of freedom. And then as the Buddha said, with the cessation of ignorance, there is a cessation of formations. With the cessation of formations, the cessation of consciousness, on and on through the chain to the cessation of suffering.

I'll close with this quotation from an Indian teacher named Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who said that the essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful. And a questioner who was in the room at that point said, "But pain is not acceptable." And Maharaj said, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

This talk was given by Guy Armstrong at Insight Meditation Society on October 18, 2001. It is an offering of the Dharma. Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

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