

Dependent Origination is based on Not-Knowing and Innocence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 41:48

It's been a while since I've given a talk, much longer than twenty minutes. So after one and a half years, I've lost all my confidence. Even so, we'll have a go at fulfilling forty-five minutes, oh my goodness.

I just 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. Where 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 they said... 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 one substantiates all his teaching, and once we've grasped it, it gives us at least some map whereby we can see where our practice is going. And it's centred really on *dukkha*.

So this word *dukkha* — it means hard to bear, that's its root meaning. And then it becomes anything that is suffering. Anything that was originally translated as suffering. But in a sense, that doesn't get 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. So it's the whole gamut of human misery that this word *dukkha* is trying to capture. And he centres the whole teaching just on that fact.

So he really grounded: there is *dukkha*. I don't think the human being could ever deny that, that there is *dukkha* in that sense. But this *dukkha* must not be confused with life itself being unpleasant. The whole process — the being born, the growing old, the falling sick, the 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.

So he himself, of course, was born and his mother died at birth. And I often wonder, actually... I have a cousin whose my aunt died at giving birth. And I often wonder whether that remains in the psyche of the person, the loss of that mother, and produces something, some underground disturbance, which may have caused this existential crisis in his twenties. Anyway, that's just an interesting thought.

So he grounds all of his teaching on this word *dukkha*. And then he says, and then the next sentence is, of course, the cause of it. And he points to the specific quality of desire. Now, we're translating, remember,

this word *tanha*, which comes from the word thirst. So it's a wrong desire. It's a desire which is 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. And it's translated as ignorance, but that is an event which is not in the word. The word is simply not knowing.

And because we don't know and we're born into a situation, we make that connection that this is me. And that's your basic delusion. So if you can imagine as a baby, we come out and we have this catastrophe, you might say, of information which we can't make any head or tail out of. And then somewhere around four months, it seems, we start to distance and we start pushing the outer world outwards. The first one, first object being your carer, your mother usually.

And so by the end of three, the child is very clear: I am me and everything's not me. That's really... and of course it 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 said, oh, I like that. I'll have that. And that would take me... just shouting to mother. So, anyway, apart from that bit of teasing.

So there we have this: by the age of three, we have a very concrete idea of me, of me-ness. And that delusion now is underneath everything we do. We never lose that delusion. It's underneath the whole of our lives, this fundamental delusion. It's running underneath all the programs.

And what it's producing is the next phase, the *sankhara*. So because of this delusion, we produce certain habits. And the habits based on this delusion of a self are to do with our relationship to the world. So in order to substantiate ourselves, to make us feel more real, more safe, we collect things, we become acquisitive.

So that's where we get the greed and the lust and 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. So you can see that's the ground. As soon as you don't feel safe, then the fear comes, the 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. So anything that undermines what you've collected, you have to push away. And there's your aversion. And if it's bigger than you, you have to run for it. So 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 based very much on this actual body that we inhabit. And that's why anything that affects the body is of course very frightening. Whether it's affecting us on a physical level with a physical illness or a mental level with a mental illness, you see. And so that sense of being me is grounded in this body.

So what we have then is that consciousness. So 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 aggregates. Which the Buddha again splits us up into to give us a cross-section of the human being at any given time. So 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... need is consciousness — it's translated as consciousness — and you have to be careful with words in the scripture because here we have somebody who has made an insight for which the language of the time has no way of describing. And so what happens is you get the use of the same word to describe something which is... and a word which is describing something which is transcendent.

And one of them is this *vijnana*. This translates as consciousness. But in the *khandhas*, it is just the screen upon which something arises. So with the arising of a habit, it must display itself on this consciousness.

And dependent upon this consciousness, we have materiality and mentality. These things are often translated in different ways. But if you think of it just as your body and your mind, then that gives you an idea of the first deconstruction. So the Buddha's big on deconstruction. And what he's doing by deconstructing something... so feeling substantial, I am me, the first, shall we say, deconstruction is to see that the body is one thing with its own processes and the mind is something else.

And that's what we are experiencing 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. So in other words, 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.

It's like there's a presumption that I am the body. When you investigate it, we know very little about it by 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 is the first — believe it or not, that clarity about the body and mind is the first insight of the process of this insight that leads us to liberation. And the next one is to realize that the one is always firing off the other. So whenever the body, if you stand on somebody's foot, it has a mental reaction of anger, see? If you feel angry, the body gets hot. So they're completely intertwined. So you can't separate them in any real way, but you can through your meditation realize that these are two very different systems. The one working with the other, yeah?

And this is important in the longer term, which is to do with rebirth. Because it's the mind which separates from the body at death. And for some people, they have that experience, they know. But that's not necessary, that experience is not necessary for us to have an insight which takes us towards liberation.

So because of this consciousness, these... dependent on the body and mind there are the six sense bases. And here this is where it becomes obvious that the Buddha is talking about some screen because your consciousness is dependent on the sense base and they are discrete experiences. So you can only hear with your ears. No matter how hard you try, you'll never hear with your nose.

So it's that deconstruction of realizing that there are these six sense bases, the five being of the body, the sensual bases, and the other one being of the mind. In other words, emotions and thoughts have to arise on that screen of consciousness for them to be known.

So we have this concept of 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 that you can't know. So you can't guess what's in your subconscious. You can only know what's there when it arises on that screen, that mirror.

So those six sense bases again deconstruct our experience. So this is much closer to our experience. The world we live in is given to us by those six sense bases. So whatever world that we are creating now, the little universe that we find ourselves in, is all dependent upon those six sense bases. So obviously if you lose your sight you lose one dimension of experience.

So moving on from that, dependent upon your sense bases you have contact. So this contact is the moment-to-moment experience where an object and a sense base and consciousness come together. And that's a moment of contact.

Now, when you're doing the practice of eating, and you're burying your attention directly into the tongue, and you're just tasting, just tasting, that's the point of contact.

So there's always that moment before feeling anything. So feeling then, what we do then is we give it a quality as to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or in that shady area of neutral. So before that, there's no pleasant and unpleasant. There is just sensation, whatever it is. And then the next point is a definition of that sensation in terms of whether it's pleasant or unpleasant.

And that's the world we actually are living. We live in that duality of moving from pleasant, joyful situations to unpleasant, unjoyful situations. We live in that. And there's a small area there of what we call neutral. But when you actually go and investigate a neutral sensation, a neutral feeling, 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 into what's pleasant and unpleasant.

And then of course you have this reaction. So this is where the problem starts, this reaction. So the reaction is: once something is pleasant you want it, and when it's unpleasant you don't want it. It's very simple. But right there is the escape route. Right there, to put the attention right there at that moment where the reaction arises, is the point of liberation. Because from that point on there's very little scope of escape.

The next position, if we don't catch that, is one of identity. So we described identity before as being what you're experiencing. So as soon as something is described as pleasant and we want it, the I comes in immediately. And it's, unless you're super duper attentive, you can't stop the next action, which is the empowerment of the desire.

So there's a crucial point there where we can see this reaction to something. That's possible just by being generally awake. You can see, I mean, you know, you pass a coffee shop...

Now, that process of wanting and not wanting is also part of these *sankaras*, also part of the habitual actions that we have concocted, we have produced throughout our lives. And that's why, of course, it's so difficult to change ourselves. So 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 which is harmful.

So that's when the practice comes in, that's when this practice of renunciation. So renunciation, which you might say is the core practice, of this core spiritual practice, mustn't be confused with... sometimes they translate it as self-mortification. So you're not trying to punish yourself. We're not trying to punish ourselves to 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. And that's what we mean by renunciation. We're renouncing that. So it's the same with the negative stuff. So 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.

So now that process of seeing something but then not being able to change our habits, I think that 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 it was actually killing you and the science came through. So then everybody began to wake up and realize that in fact smoking kills you one way or the other... to get over. It wasn't possible.

But you would hear of people, like I'm thinking of the father of a friend of mine who had a heart attack and he stopped it immediately. He had to first of all have a heart attack in order to stop smoking. So sometimes you just need that little kick.

So once we perceive the problem, then the practice... then the process of renunciation begins. And that's why it takes us so long to become liberated. I mean, if it were just a matter of seeing the way things are, well, we can find how we do it. It's just, unfortunately, we've 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.

So remember that this *avijja* is normally understood as a wrong understanding. So that's of course coming from the point of view of wisdom. And this process is moving us away from that not knowing and the 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 capable of it. It was just crimped. It was just torn. It was just brought into this very specific definition. And of course, everything else was their enemy.

So remember that when we talk about *avijjā*, and it does come across in the literature as being wrong understanding, which is true, and the Eightfold Path begins with wrong understanding, remember it also referring to the heart in terms of innocence. And 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.

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? So, I want a cup of tea. I want to go here. So 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's 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 after the process, or in the middle of the process, that the escape happens. Otherwise, see, if it were pleasant feeling, I want pleasant feeling, there'd 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.

So if you were to say something like, you're passing something like a coffee shop, and you say to yourself, you know, 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. You'd be in there 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. So 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, you see. So 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. You see, normally speaking, you'd be out there quick, you know. But if we're there and we can feel that irritation growing in us, we can hold it, you see, 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. Yeah. And when you go home, you make an effort.

So once we see that process, it re-empowers us. It gives us our power back, you see. So the next point of interest, *upādāna*, is translated as grasping, by the way. So it's craving, which obviously, what the word craving is telling us is that it's a wrong desire. But it's gone from tiny desire to something that is overwhelmingly desired. And then there's this process of identity.

And the next one, the next word is *bhava*. So this translates as becoming. So 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. So there are some times when it's not happening. So if you're just resting and you're being silent, then that dependent origination isn't working. It's only working when that desire comes up, or the aversion, the opposite.

So at the *bhava*, there's the becoming, there's three things: there's the becoming, and there's the will that allows something to be manifest. And in the Buddha's understanding, the action and the will are the same thing. So 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. So 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 there, there's a few things happening. It produces a consequence. So the consequence is 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 actually reduce it to moment-to-moment, moment-to-moment experience.

So there it is. Underlying every moment of our lives is this delusion, right? 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 all these habits, all these programs running underneath this little being. And then you have a moment where some information comes in. So it could be information from the outside, you hear something, or it's information coming from inside, some thought, some emotion comes up or something.

And as soon as that happens, then 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. Every time it does

that, it makes things worse. And if we can just stop it at the point of reaction, that's when the whole thing collapses.

So there's two points of collapse. That one there, to recognize when desire is there and to allow the desire to exhaust itself, which drains this underlying habit of its power. So if we work on, say, a habit that we don't want and we keep working on it and we 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. Because all the time we're growing in that sort of spiritual energy of not being caught up in things that are unwholesome for us.

And the other point is the *avijjā*, you see. So recognizing that. That's how you know that it's activated, that it's there within us. And this sense of self, I think we went through it this morning about this identity that if you bite your tongue just for one moment, you are the body. That's what we mean by identity.

And the most subtlest form of identity is this position that we take when we are practicing *vipassanā*. So here, we have, whether we are aware of it or not, we've pulled ourselves out of the whole psychophysical organism. We found a place within us, which one writer calls, a great book to read, by the way, "Being in Time," which he calls the observation post. So you found this place up here usually just behind you, 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 there just 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 you say, well, it's down there and this is up here. That separation, that distance is disidentified. And 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. So you're more grounded in that ability to observe, to feel and to know what's going on.

Now even that is a delusive self. Because, 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. Because as soon as you try and get rid of the observer, you create another person who's trying to get rid of it. So we're into a real deep paradox. So here's where the Buddha's teaching is, shall we say, at its most clear. You don't worry about that at all, right? 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. And at that point, the person knows this is the real, everything else is not the real, okay?

So that process of not identifying, what you can do, I was talking to somebody today, what you can do in your meditation is when you're very calm, when you're very peaceful, everything's 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 the awareness itself is becoming aware of itself because it feels its own presence on that screen.

And when you look at your face in the mirror, it gives you some idea. If you haven't done the two-mirror trick, then it's always instructive to do it, right? Where you look in the mirror, you have another mirror looking at the mirror, and that's the one that you look at because it's turned your face around. And 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, which is telling us, there's something that's telling us about the actual awareness itself. And as it's put in some literature, and this is more Mahāyāna than Theravāda, there's a sort of glancing back into the awareness. And just ask, and then once you've done it, to ask yourself: What was there? What's it made of? What wasn't there? And that gives us an inkling that this awareness is something which transcends, is something of a different order to the psychophysical organism that we find ourselves in. And people who have, for instance, out-of-body experiences, they would know that for sure as a real experience.

So the process of *vipassanā* 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 see, to undo, shall we say, the veils of delusion that we've fallen into just by simple mistakes. Quite understandably so, you know, reading about it, mulling over it. But when you sit in *vipassanā*, you forget all that, just put it completely to the side.

And we have to have this clear confidence that this 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 that delusion is the process of awakening. Awakening to the way things really are. And that's basically what we're in the process of. So there's hope, you see, somewhere.

So I don't know how we're doing. Oh, it's not so bad. 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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