

Paṭicca Samuppāda: The Wheel of Dependent Origination

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 26:39

In the last attempt at describing the central teaching of the Buddha, I concentrated on how it works in daily life. After a reminder of what the links are in the wheel, I'd like to develop the historical process of the wheel, the process of habit-forming, the importance of the present moment, rebirth and its meaning, and finally to give some idea of what it is to be totally liberated, an Arahant or a Buddha, in terms of the wheel of dependent origination.

The links of the wheel of dependent origination are made in a circular form to show the inevitable rounds of rebirth. So long as there is ignorance, the first link, the wheel will always turn. Ignorance is the root cause—our not knowing why we are born, why we live and why we die. Because of this ignorance we attach to the sense world, the world of transient things, things that are not substantial or real in any permanent way.

Because of this wrong attachment we have built up a whole battery of dependencies, of conditionings that cry out for satisfaction and lead us by the nose to seek that satisfaction. Even though we don't know why we are born, or why we live or why we die—indeed why we suffer—we still crave for life and birth with all that that means. These conditionings are the product of past decisions and actions. These volitional conditionings or formations are the second link.

Once these two preconditions are there, the next five links come into being: the human being itself, with all its consciousnesses, its body and mind, the six senses, the ability through these senses to make contact with the world, and the feelings that these contacts produce in the body, perceived as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Once a human is endowed with these basic faculties, there is a reaction, a response to all the information coming in. This response is desire, whether it is a want or a don't want. And this desire becomes strong and produces an attachment, a grasping, an obsession, sometimes an uncontrollable craving. This leads to a decision, to an action, in order to fulfill that craving. We want to live. When death approaches, we clutch at life. A drowning man clutches at a straw.

But once these three links are activated—the desire, the attachment and action arising out of these motivations—we can be assured of becoming. This becoming means that the cycle will all be repeated again in the future. This future is just this cycle of birth, growth, a momentary peak, then decay and death. These are the twelve links, the twelve consecutive causes and effects that produce the whole phenomena

of birth and death.

If we now look at it from the point of view of *kamma*, we shall see this historical process more clearly. The law of *kamma* states that nothing happens without a cause. So it is the Buddha says: "Inconceivable is the beginning, O disciples, of this going on and on. The earliest point is not revealed." And just as the earliest point is not revealed, so an ending is incomprehensible. In fact, there is no ending. There is only escape, only liberation.

To be clear how this liberation is to be achieved, we need to have understood how it is we keep on becoming. In any given moment in our lives, ignorance and past volitional intentioned conditionings are always with us. The ignorance is a passive thing. The problem is we don't know what it is we are ignorant of. That's a tautology I know, but it needs to be said. If we did know what we were ignorant of, we'd soon find a way to dispel it. We'd become wise. But we can take a middle position and acknowledge that we don't know everything. This attitude at least keeps us open-minded, keeps us searching, and open to information that might disagree with what we believe.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha is very clear on this: "The fool, who knows he is a fool, can for that reason be a wise man. But a fool who thinks himself wise, that fool is a fool indeed." For fool, read ignorance.

Much of what we believe is simply blind acceptance of what we have been told, such as the belief that the human being is a complete whole and not a collection of integrated parts, or the belief that in the body and personality there is some substantial real everlasting soul or self or ego. This sort of belief based on ignorance, this delusion, causes us to behave in certain ways that reinforce that belief. Beliefs are self-fulfilling, since they perceive the world in a certain way, and that certain way blocks out any information that does not fit. This is what conditioning does.

If we take one of the great evils in the world today, racism, this mechanism becomes obvious. Racism is a worldwide phenomena. Anyone who travels will come up against it in all forms. Each ethnic grouping presumes the other to be inferior by its own standards. Very early on in life as children, the things our parents, friends and media say, the way they say whatever they say about the other so-called race, all conditions our childish, ignorant, not-knowing mind. The child simply does not know better. Later, that child acts upon that racist information and reinforces its own conditionings.

I remember as a child being taunted by other children. I was born in Italy. And when I went to school, my English was very poor, so the other children would make fun of me. One of the things they'd do is turn me round to look at the yellow stripe down my back, since all Italians, because of Mussolini's invasion of a defenceless Ethiopia and the later miserable war record, were supposed to be cowards. They were yellow.

Unfortunately, it didn't stop there. I was enculturated. By eight or nine, no one would have known me to be Italian. My English was English and my name was English. I looked and behaved English. Social

pressure pushed me to assimilate. I wanted to be accepted by my peer group. I internalized their hatred of Italy. I was ashamed of my Italian origin. I was ashamed of being out with my Italian mother. By the age of 11, I remember taking distinct delight in making fun of the first West Indian who came to the school. There I was, turning the wheel of racial hatred, even though I myself had suffered from it. My subconscious unresolved anger at those who made fun of me found its sweet revenge in perpetrating the same violence on another entirely innocent. The effects of our conditioning can be extremely subtle. We simply don't know.

There was a teacher I knew who blamed the inability of some Asians to draw in three dimensions on genetics. What this teacher was saying was that the skills that are obviously taught and learnt are already somehow pre-programmed by our genes, and that it was these genes that set one above the other, one race above another.

Whether this thinking manifests itself between different ethnic groups as racism, or between different classes of people in a society as classism, the Buddha made his position quite clear. The Brahmanical society of the Buddha's day had produced such a rigid caste system that it was impossible to move from one to the other. There was no social mobility. Each caste had a particular task apportioned to it. The Kshatriya caste, to which the Buddha himself belonged, were the warriors, rulers or governing class. Whether you had such capabilities or not, that's where you stayed if that's where you were born. You certainly couldn't do things ascribed to other castes, such as becoming a merchant or a priest. Any intermarriage did not produce a new caste or allow one caste member to move into another caste. The couple who married became outcasts.

Of course, that society came to its own class system and racist attitudes by way of its own understandings or rather misunderstandings. But the Buddha asserted that all humans are equal in their ability to escape from ignorance and suffering. He undermined the whole system by demanding that any person joining his order had to drop all notions of caste. Even the highest Brahmin, as soon as he joined, joined at the end of the armed round even after an untouchable who may have joined but minutes before.

Whatever our ignorance and conditioning were in the past, they are causes now in the present, causes which affect our thinking now. We can't do anything about them arising. But by exercising our awareness in daily life, we can begin to see and realize they are there. Once we begin to do that, we can at least stop them from affecting our actions.

This present ignorance and the present conditioned thoughts and states of mind have been caused by past craving, attachment and action. At the deepest level, it is these three—desire, attachment and action, working away and manifesting themselves as our conditionings—that cause us to come into life, that cause us to have and desperately want to keep the body and mind.

Just as ignorant delusion is always present in the mind, just as the volitional conditionings, all our habitual ways of thinking and behaving, are always ready to activate upon a given stimulus, so the two

motivations of craving and attachment, and specifically the will to act upon these motivations, are what create further becoming.

We can begin to see why the Buddha told Ananda off for thinking he had understood this teaching. We can see here there are wheels within wheels. The more we study the teaching, the more complicated it becomes.

So now we've got as far as saying that in any given moment of our lives there is an underlying ignorance. Because of this ignorance, we react to things with craving and attachment. These cause us to make decisions that produce actions. These actions, these becomings, build up our conditionings. All this, all our past, lies pregnant within us at any given moment. On a life level, it keeps us clinging to life, clinging to our bodies and minds.

In this way, the next five links—consciousness, body and mind, the six senses, sense contact and feeling—all arise. And they arise every moment of our lives. Unfortunately, as soon as they arise, they must go through the process of decay and death. In this way, the last two links are not only future results of being alive, but are ever present with us now. Every day begins and ends. Every moment begins and ends.

We can now begin to understand a little better what the Buddha meant by the doctrine of rebirth. Firstly, this must not be confused with reincarnation. Reincarnation presumes that in the body and mind there is a lasting being or substance that carries on unchanged. What the Buddha discovered was that such an entity did not actually exist. Everything that goes to make up the body and mind are so many pieces, so many parts. He divided all these pieces into five categorizations, the five aggregates.

These five aggregates of body, sensations, perceptions, all the volitional conditionings, and consciousness are all arising and passing away at any given moment of the day. In other words, this person or being is arising and passing away, being born and dying, every moment of its so-called existence. The human is this process of change. This change means that something has to end before something new can begin. We cannot carry within us the body of the baby we were in the body of the adult we are. That baby body disintegrated soon after birth to give way to the toddler body, and the toddler body gave way to the child body and so on.

Rebirth, in Buddha's understanding, is happening right here and now. Birth and death are always with us. It is part of our delusion to see ourselves as always coming into being and never dying out of it. For this reason, in our meditation, we are encouraged to see not just the beginning but also the ending of things.

In the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourses on the establishment of awareness, where the techniques of insight vipassanā meditation are described, the Buddha explains how to observe the breath. The meditator trains himself to be clearly aware of the whole passage of the in-breath, its beginning, its middle and its end. He trains himself to be clearly aware of the whole passage of the out-breath, its beginning, its

middle, and its end.

When we become more and more aware that all things, meaning ourselves, are constantly dying in the moment, great fear arises. This is the fear of ego at its own death. That's why we go into shock if our life is threatened. This ego, this essential delusion in us, only sees the arising, the birth, the coming into being, the growth, the continuation of things. It never really looks at the passing of things.

Our culture reinforces this conditioning, this delusion. We always know the new pop group, the new fashion, the new computer. We never know what happens to them in the end. They just disappear. Their decline and death is blotted out by other new pop groups, fashions, computers. The inability of our culture to face death, the fact that we hurry the burial, hide the dying, the sick, the deformed, the crippled, are all symptomatic of this ego-blindness, of this fear of decay and death, of our deeply delusive thinking.

All of these reactions to death are based on ignorance, for no one actually knows for sure what happens when we die. Because we don't know, we imagine. That's the delusion. Or we ignore. That's the ignorance.

But the Buddha, through the teaching of the wheel of dependent origination, is pointing to the now, this ever-present moment. For it is here and now that we shall capture this stark mixture of birth and death and unravel its secrets. By unraveling its secrets in the living moment and the dying moment, we will discover what happens upon physical death.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, all that happens upon physical death is that the mind, a different phenomena from body, leaves the body and seeks another. In this present moment, as you watch your in-breath and out-breath, you will experience sensations caused by the passage of air at the nostrils or the arising and falling of the stomach. You will see that as the breath comes and goes, consciousness arises with it. The more your meditation deepens, the more you will experience this consciousness as separate from the sensations of breathing. The meditator comes to know that mind is not body.

But even though this mind leaves the body, it is made up of parts itself, the five aggregates. There is no entity or soul to be found in these five constituents. A modern image has been used to explain this phenomena of the mind arising and falling, being born and dying. When one billiard ball is shot at another and they hit, the first ball stops and the other moves. What is it that is passed on?

Death is just a mental moment. It's not the end of anything. It's the beginning of birth. When we experience ourselves dying, dying now in meditation, we shall realize death for what it really is: just another moment in the cycle of becoming, just a point on the ever-turning wheel of dependent origination.

Having said this, let me hasten to add that belief in all this is not necessary for the meditator. In fact, belief as such is a hindrance. Whatever you may personally believe or feel about the teaching of rebirth, do remember that all doctrine in Buddhism is put to you as a theory, which is of little value till you yourself prove it for yourself to be true or false.

But at least here you can see that rebirth, not reincarnation, is part and parcel of the Buddha's understanding of how this world of unsatisfactoriness works. How this ever going on and on, this *saṃsāra*, turns and turns upon itself.

So where are we on the wheel of dependent origination? We've seen how our underlying ignorance has been the cause of our craving, attachment and intended actions in the past, which have in turn produced the conditionings that underlie the present moment. We have seen how the great attachment, our desire for sense pleasure, keeps us clinging to the body and mind, its consciousness, the senses, the sensual contact and the feelings we experience through this.

Now, of course, there's the reaction. In the present, suddenly presented with incoming data and new sensations, the old conditionings arise. Suddenly we are craving. We are becoming attached. We are making new decisions, creating new *kamma*, reinforcing the volitional conditionings. This is the dynamic of the wheel. This dynamic will always produce the future syndrome of birth, growth, decay and death. So long as we're on this wheel, this is inevitable.

We can see here that this wheel is a historical process. Things done in the past affect the present, and things done in the present affect the future. The future becomes the present. The present becomes the past. Tomorrow arrives, and today becomes yesterday. The wheel is also an ever-present process, wherein all factors affect this moment. By twisting the wheel upon itself, I've tried to give this by way of an image. It shows that every moment, the now, is a becoming, a coming into being, and with it arises consciousness and the rest.

Twisting it like this also happily gives us the mathematical sign for infinity.

Now that we have come to understand that this wheel is indeed self-propelling, that no beginning was ever designated by the Buddha, nor is an end to this process conceivable, we need to be clear how to escape from it and glimpse, if we can, the life of an arahat, the totally liberated individual.

First of all, we must be absolutely clear on what constitutes a fully enlightened person in terms of the wheel. It means that there are no more volitional conditionings that are born of desire and attachment. And it means that there are no more volitional conditionings left in stock that might fuel further actions founded on ignorance. Remember, this desire is the desire for sense pleasure, and it includes in it the wrong view of self, that this body and mind constitute a permanent substantial being.

Of course, we can't say what an enlightened being thinks about in detail, but we can say that no thoughts, words or actions arise out of this sort of desire or wrong view of self. Therefore, there is no accumulation of habits that will keep the wheel turning.

Does this mean that the Arahant thinks nothing, says nothing, does nothing? The more you become enlightened, the more you turn to stone? Far from it. If you ever meet someone who is highly spiritually developed, the first thing that strikes you is the presence of that person. But there's no stereotype.

Depending on past conditioning and experience, that person may be quiet or jovial, or as the famous Bodhidharma, who took Buddhism to the East and is renowned as the founder of Zen, ferocious.

But however that person is, all thoughts and words and actions will arise out of wisdom and not ignorance. The underlying motivation will therefore not be to satisfy personal desire, but love, compassion, sympathetic joy and peace. The general state of mind, those *saṅkhāra*, which once gave us so much trouble, are now peaceful and the arahat lives in equanimity.

So long as an enlightened person lives, so long will she or he function as an ordinary human being, with consciousness, body and mind, the six senses, contact and feeling. They will keep going till all remnants of *kamma* have been consumed. The Buddha himself lived for 45 years after his enlightenment. Never does he act out of sense desire. There is no becoming, there is no *kamma*, good or bad, being accrued, since now there is no ego which can accumulate it.

So how does an enlightened person behave? When we read the scriptures, we read how forthright and direct the Buddha was with monks who did wrong. When Suddhinna, a monk who was enticed by his family to make love with his former wife so that there be an heir, the Buddha rebukes him. "It is not fit, foolish man. It is not becoming. It is not proper. It is unworthy of a recluse. It is unlawful. It ought not to be done." The Buddha goes on to explain why this is so, calling him a foolish man no less than 15 times. It's a real tirade.

On the other hand, when he deals with Patacara, who has lost a family, he's full of compassion. When he talks to Potapada about philosophical questions, you can sense his gentle mirth. When he wants to search out somewhere pleasant to eat his meal, a pleasant grove, you can see he appreciates beauty. The fact that the kings of the time came to him for advice shows the sort of figure he cut in public.

All we can say of a fully enlightened being, a Buddha or an Arahant, is that all their actions arise out of wisdom and not out of ignorant self-gratification of desires. That their mental states are in one of the four modes, either of equanimity, sympathetic joy, universal love or compassion.

How does this square up with the law of *kamma*? Again, it is recognizing the two pools into which the stones of thought, speech and action drop. The Buddha was constantly affecting people around him. Indeed, he still is. But within his own mind, there are no ripples. There is no reaction, no conditioned response, no response at all that arises out of a wrong view of a self. Therefore, this self or ego or idea of a substantial personality is simply not there. Because the enlightened behave with wisdom, so they affect the world around them. And these effects move the world towards peace and harmony.

What happens then to a Buddha or an Arahant after death? The Buddha said it was indescribable. But an Arahant may be reborn in a higher realm till all his residual *kamma* is worn out. Then he passes into *parinibbāna*, total *nibbāna*.

So we have seen how the wheel of dependent origination fits together as a historical process and as an

immediate happening. We see how it includes the teaching of rebirth.

So where does all this leave us? Needless to say, it leaves us right here and now, spinning round and round. Whatever personal opinions we come to concerning rebirth or enlightenment, one thing we can test for ourselves right here and now is whether desire and attachment are truly the causes of our unhappiness. That we can test by the practice of *vipassanā* insight meditation and the daily effort to be mindful.

We can discover where the exit lies, where the escape is to be found — right there between feelings and the desire for them. How important it is to grasp this fact, to really realize for ourselves the difference between pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings and our desire or aversion for them. How important it is to realize that we lose nothing but suffering in giving up these desires and attachments. Indeed, that we can gain peace of mind, joy, and a boundless ability to be loving and compassionate once we do drop this self-centeredness, this continual desire to satisfy our desires.

How important it is to realize that this moment is all we have. We can only do something about ourselves, about our situation, in the present moment, the now. This moment now is the fruit of all our past, the seed of all our future. We only have this moment to change past direction, to create new direction. Let that direction be from darkness to light, and from light to light.

We must resolve to purify our hearts and minds. Here is a lovely verse from the verses of the sisters, the nuns, the *bhikkhunī*, who achieved arahatship. I recommend their reading. They are inspiring. Sundarī Nandā was a beautiful woman, it seems, greatly caught up in her physical beauty and sensual desire. She used the meditations on aging and death to overcome her great attachment, and eventually she won the goal:

"I, even I, have seen from the inside and outside this body as it indeed really is. I strive to know the what and why of it with unfaltering zeal and fiery ardour. Now I care no more for this body and all my consciousness is free of passion. Keen with unfettered zeal. No attachments. Calm and serene. I taste the peace of *Nibbāna*."

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful.

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