

Dependent Origination

[Acknowledge teachers, incl. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Modok Sayadaw]

Tonight I'd like to discuss an important teaching of the Buddha known as *paticcasamuppada* or "dependent origination." Before we get into the details, I'd like to provide a little context.

Those of you who have been attending for a while know that in our discussions here, we use the Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths as the primary structures within which all of the Buddha's teachings may be placed.

You might remember that the first part of the Noble Eightfold Path is *samma ditthi* or "Right View," which describes basic concepts about how the world works. Even a rudimentary understanding of these concepts will provide motivation to practice the other parts of the path: morality and meditation.

The first part of Right View is an understanding of *kamma*, the universal law of cause and effect. Briefly, we can summarize the law of *kamma* by saying that we live in an orderly universe in which particular causes bring about predictable results.

The other part of Right View is an understanding of the Four Noble Truths. To review those quickly:

1. There is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by craving
3. With the cessation of craving, suffering will cease
4. There is a path of practice that can bring about the cessation of craving

Dependent origination can be seen as a further elaboration of the doctrine of *kamma* and of the second Noble Truth. It describes in detail *how* craving causes suffering. On a broader scale, it describes the mechanisms by which the causally conditioned universe (*samsara*) is maintained.

Let's move on to the teaching itself. It is usually expressed in the suttas as a list of twelve causal factors (*nidanas*). The list is cyclic, so the final link feeds back into the first.

"And what is dependent origination?"

From ignorance as a requisite condition come volitional formations.

From volitional formations as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense bases.

From the six sense bases as a requisite condition comes contact.

From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.
From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging.
From clinging as a requisite condition comes becoming.
From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.
From birth as a requisite condition, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress,
& despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.”

SN 12.2, slightly modified from Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s translation

The chain is typically listed beginning with ignorance, but I’m going to start my attempt at an explanation in the middle of the the list, with Girl Scout cookies. When I see a box of Thin Mints, that is called “contact” (i.e., contact between my visual faculty (one of the six sense bases) and the box of Thin Mints). From this contact comes a pleasant feeling, perhaps conditioned by previous encounters with Thin Mints. This gives rise to craving: “I want some Thin Mints.” That gives rise to clinging: “I will take action to get me some Thin Mints.”

At this point, things get a little harder to follow: clinging leads to becoming, or, to think of it another way, to action/kamma. Kamma, as we know, leads to birth, or, for our purposes, the next moment. As a being that has been born, I will inevitably experience “aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair.” The confusion caused by these states will result in ignorance, the traditional first link of the chain. A being caught in the unpleasantness of conditioned existence won’t be likely to understand the nature of his predicament. He will act out of this ignorance, influenced by past kammic formations or habits. This gives rise to consciousness, which gives rise to mental and physical existence (sometimes translated a bit too literally as “name and form”). Mental and physical existence comes with the six sense bases, which allow one to perceive Thin Mints.

This cycle is happening constantly on a moment-to-moment basis. This is the process that creates the world.

So what’s the take-away here? What does this teaching tell us about our situation?

It tells us that we live in an *orderly* universe, but not an *ordered* one. The cyclic nature of dependent origination precludes the possibility of an unchanging prime mover or creator deity. This underscores the Buddha’s message that stopping this cycle of suffering is something that each of us has to do on our own.

The world is a bit like a house of cards, where the whole thing only stands because each part is leaning against another part. There’s no foundation: no stability anywhere. Every aspect of the world is characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the lack of a stable, independent self.

This leads to my final point, which is the relevance of this teaching to our meditation practice. The goal of meditation, especially vipassana meditation, is to see the world as it really is: characterized by the three marks of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. Seeing the true

nature of the world is the opposite of ignorance. When I read the passage from the Canon describing the twelve *nidanas*, I chose the “forward” version, but there is also a “backward” version describing how with the end of ignorance comes the cessation of volitional formations, and so forth, mirroring the Third Noble Truth. We can decrease our ignorance by directly observing the processes of dependent origination.

This isn't easy. Ajaan Chah describes the moment-to-moment operation of dependent origination as being like falling out of a tree. When you're lying there stunned on the ground, you're not going to know how many branches you passed on the way down. Your entire mental process might be summed up by a couple of choice expletives. In meditation, we try to slow down the mental processes and directly observe as much as we can of their functioning. If you go on retreat, you will be encouraged to also slow down your physical actions, which allows you to more closely examine your motivations and intentions as you act. Continuous, long-term practice in this manner will gradually chip away at ignorance and bring about the end of suffering and becoming.