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Understanding the Essence of Dependent Origination

Bhikkhu Brahmāli

As we read the word of the Buddha, again and again we come across the teaching of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). It soon becomes obvious that this teaching is a very important part of the Buddha's method of teaching. At the same time dependent origination is a difficult teaching to understand. This essay,¹ then, is an attempt to draw out the most important aspects of dependent origination in such a way as to make it more easily comprehensible.

To begin with, I will briefly go through each of the twelve factors of dependent origination to give an overall picture. I will then pick out some of the factors and explain only those in detail. I will also try to show how dependent origination fits in with the rest of the Buddha's teaching. When we understand how dependent origination fits into the teaching overall, it gives us a better sense of why this teaching is important and how it might be used as part of the development of the Buddhist path.

The first of the twelve factors is ignorance (*avijjā*). Ignorance refers to a distortion in our understanding, a not seeing of reality as it actually is, and it affects all beings except those who are fully awakened. Because of ignorance we engage in activities that have future kammic results. These activities (*saṅkhāra*) are the second factor of dependent origination. The most important result of producing *kamma* is future rebirth, the arising of consciousness at the beginning of a particular life. So consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the third factor. Consciousness always arises together with the other aspects of mind—feeling, perception and the

will—and usually also a material body. That becomes the fourth factor (*nāma-rūpa*). When we have mind and body, we also have the fifth factor, the six senses (*saṅyāyatana*). All experience happens through these six senses, and the senses thus allow us to 'contact' the world. Contact (*phassa*) therefore is the sixth factor. Perhaps the most fundamental part of what we experience through the five senses is feeling (*vedanā*). This becomes the seventh factor of dependent origination. Our experiences are usually either pleasant or unpleasant, and obviously we want the pleasant feelings to last and the unpleasant ones to disappear. We have desire both in regard to the pleasant and the unpleasant. So desire or craving (*taṇhā*), which is the eighth factor, is a natural consequence of feeling. Craving in turn leads to taking up, grasping or clinging. Our desires make us implement 'strategies' with the aim of fulfilling those desires. This is the ninth factor (*upādāna*). Once we grasp at things, once we decide on particular strategies to satisfy our cravings, then our life tends to take a certain direction. And because we live in a particular way, we make *kamma* according to that way of living. This is the tenth factor, known as existence (*bhava*). When we live in a certain way and produce the corresponding *kamma*, rebirth (*jāti*) follows as the eleventh factor. Through rebirth we experience what all beings must experience—we experience old age, we experience death and we experience all the suffering that comes with existence. Old age (*jarā*), death (*maraṇa*) and suffering (*dukkha*), or in brief just suffering, is the twelfth and final factor of dependent origination.

One of the important things to understand about this sequence of twelve factors is that each factor builds on the previous one and is dependent

1. This essay is an edited transcript of a talk given at the Buddhist Society of West Australia on 17th April 2009.

on the previous one for its existence. It is precisely because of this conditional relationship between the links that this sequence is called dependent origination. Take the last two factors: To experience old age, death and suffering, first of all we have to be born. Birth is a necessary condition for us to experience suffering in life; if we had not been born, we wouldn't suffer. In the same way, each one of the twelve links, starting with ignorance and ending with suffering, is necessary for the subsequent one to exist. This is a crucial aspect of dependent origination, and once we understand this the whole thing becomes much clearer.

The next thing which is very helpful is to acquire a good grasp of the significance of the two end points of the sequence. The significance of the last link is that it shows us the purpose of dependent origination. Each of the other links is just a condition that leads up to the last one; the last factor is what all the other ones are pointing to. So the purpose of this teaching is to show us why we suffer, to show us the causes for the arising of suffering. This in turn makes it a practical teaching, because if we understand why suffering arises then we have an opportunity to do something about it; if we understand the causal relationship then we can do something about those causes. This gives us the opportunity to both reduce the suffering in our lives and ultimately to overcome suffering altogether. Since we have seen that rebirth is the immediate cause of suffering, the only way to eliminate suffering is to end all future rebirth.

An interesting point here is that the last two factors of dependent origination are birth and suffering, or birth, old age and death. Now, birth and death taken together, when they are perpetuated through the mechanism of dependent origination, are nothing other than *saṃsāra*, which is the perpetual wandering on, around and around, from one life to another, from birth to death, again and again. The last two factors of dependent origination are thus essentially equivalent to *saṃsāra*. Looking at dependent origination in this way shows us how *saṃsāra* comes to arise; how there can be such a thing as *saṃsāra*. On the subject of *saṃsāra*, a brief word of caution: Please don't think of it as the world or the universe 'out there', as something different from us. *Saṃsāra*, rather, is

how we as human beings experience the world, our internal view, what goes on in our minds. Because it is a personal experience, *saṃsāra* will inevitably be slightly different for each one of us. But the common thread is that we experience a seemingly endless sequence of births and deaths, suffering without apparent beginning or end. So dependent origination shows us how *saṃsāra* comes to be and how suffering comes to be, these two essentially being the same. And again, knowing how suffering comes to be empowers us to do something about it.

To understand how to solve the problem of suffering we have to go to the other end of dependent origination, its starting point, ignorance. Once we understand the nature of the starting point, we understand the fundamental cause of dependent origination, and thus what drives it. If we were to remove the starting point, dependent origination would unravel, because each factor is causally dependent on the previous one. This means that if we eliminate ignorance then each subsequent factor is also eliminated, ending in the elimination of suffering. If we are not able to remove ignorance altogether, but we are able to reduce or weaken it, then we also weaken suffering, because that weakening of ignorance makes itself felt all the way through that chain. In this way, we can use the conditionality of dependent origination to our own benefit.

To be able to reduce and eventually eliminate ignorance, first of all we need to be clear about what it refers to. The Pali term usually translated as ignorance is *avijjā*, which might be better translated as delusion. The problem is not so much that we lack knowledge, as the word ignorance might suggest, but that we have a distorted understanding of how things work: because of our fundamentally deluded or distorted outlook, we don't see things as they actually are. This distorted outlook is nothing other than our inability to see the three characteristics of existence: our tendency to see things as permanent when in fact they are impermanent, to see happiness where in fact there is suffering, and to see things as self when in fact they are non-self. This is the basic delusion that we live under and it is this misperception which is at the root of this entire chain of dependent origination.

The good news is that ignorance/delusion is itself conditioned by other factors; it is not a

monolithic entity that exists independently of everything else. It is by understanding the conditionality of delusion that we can weaken it. When we understand the conditions that support delusion, we also understand what sort of practice we need to undertake to reduce it and eventually abandon it altogether. So what are the conditions that prop up and perpetuate delusion? They are nothing other than the five hindrances: desire for sense objects, ill will, dullness and lethargy, restlessness and worry, and doubt. This means that the stronger these five hindrances are, the more powerful our delusion is going to be.

Why is this so? Because the hindrances themselves distort how we see things. Consider what happens if we are angry: we tend to do things that we otherwise would not. Under the influence of anger we think that we should scold somebody or do something nasty to them. While we're angry, it seems the right thing to do: we think that this person deserves this, that that person needs to be treated rudely. Thus we sometimes end up doing something stupid. But once the anger is over we realize that we made a mistake: we shouldn't have been so harsh to that person, we should have been more understanding, we should have tried to understand their motivation. We feel regret and remorse. The point is that our anger distorts our outlook so that we do things which we otherwise would not. We can now see how anger connects up with delusion by distorting our understanding of the world.

Sense desire has a similar distorting effect. Why, for example, do people have extra-marital affairs? Often it is just because desire overpowers the mind. They don't really know what they are doing, and because of that they often bitterly regret it afterwards. They realize how much pain they have caused to their spouse, and often they pay for it by their marriage breaking up, and having to sell their house, and not being able to see their children. But at the time, that affair seemed the right thing to do. Their view of things was distorted by their desires.

Sometimes we can see the same pattern in a simple activity like shopping. Perhaps we see an item in a shop that is irresistibly attractive, and a desire so powerful arises that we simply have to buy it. Later on, when we are free from the grasp of

desire, we realize that it was a mistake, that in fact we had no need for that item.

So the five hindrances, particularly anger and desire, distort our view of the world. The stronger the five hindrances are, the greater is our delusion, and the more distorted is our outlook. The less we have of these five hindrances, the less is the distortion and the clearer is our view of the world. And because dependent origination is a causal chain, the effect of the hindrances feeds the whole chain all the way down to suffering. So the weaker the hindrances are, the less suffering we experience, and the stronger the hindrances are, the greater is the suffering. It follows that if we want to reduce ignorance and suffering in our lives, we have to reduce the five hindrances, that is, the defilements of the mind.

How do we reduce the defilements of the mind? In no other way than by practising the noble eightfold path. We begin walking this path by practising virtue. Because of that practice there are certain actions we cannot do, and because we can't do them we are restraining ourselves, restraining the hindrances, restraining the defilements. Over time such restraint weakens the defilements. We know that this is the case when we see that keeping the precepts becomes easier over time until it becomes practically second nature. Practising meditation—developing loving kindness, peace and all such beautiful states of mind—has the same effect because we are going against the hindrances, abandoning them step by step. So the eightfold path is nothing less than a mechanism for removing the hindrances. This in turn reduces delusion and therefore also reduces suffering. In this way we can see how the noble eightfold path and dependent origination fit beautifully together, forming an important part of the overall picture we call the Dhamma.

In fact, it can be useful to regard the Dhamma as a big jig-saw puzzle, where each teaching is one small piece. It is only when we put all the pieces together, when we understand how they fit with each other, that we can see the full picture. In other words, although the Buddha's teachings consist of all these individual bits and pieces—the five faculties, the five aggregates, the four jhānas, etc.—it is nonetheless a united whole. The better we

understand the Buddha's teachings, the more we understand how this jig-saw puzzle fits together. In the present case I am simply pointing out one particular way in which the noble eightfold path fits together with dependent origination.

So the noble eightfold path gradually reduces our delusion and therefore also reduces our suffering. If we keep practising this path, we will eventually eliminate suffering altogether. How is it that reducing the hindrances leads to the complete abandoning of delusion and suffering? As we develop the path stage by stage, we gradually weaken the five hindrances until the day comes when temporarily the hindrances are completely absent, and the mind is pure and radiant. Because the five hindrances are the main supports of delusion, once the five hindrances are completely absent the props of delusion have been removed. Since delusion is no longer propped up, it becomes weak at this particular point, and it is then possible to eliminate it altogether. That is why the deep states of meditation in which the five hindrances are completely abandoned are such powerful bases for attaining deep insight and understanding things as they actually are, that is, eliminating delusion. This also shows us why the deep meditations are the last factor of the noble eightfold path: it is only at this point that it is finally possible to make that breakthrough where we see the Buddha's teaching for ourselves. As long as the hindrances support delusion, no such breakthrough is possible. But when the props of delusion are removed—assuming that we already possess right view through a proper grasp of the Buddha's teachings—the mind can penetrate to the truth, the Dhamma, and thereby eliminate delusion. When delusion is eliminated, so is suffering, since they go hand in hand.² This is how delusion is the root problem and how that root problem can be solved.

Having discussed the two end points of dependent origination, we next need to consider how delusion translates into suffering. This

2. This is a simplified exposition compared to the usual one in the suttas. According to the suttas, when one sees the Dhamma and becomes a stream-enterer, one does not end delusion or suffering straight away—it takes at most seven lifetimes. However, if one continues the practice, the point eventually comes when both delusion and suffering are completely eliminated.

mechanism is what might be called 'the core driver' of dependent origination, since it shows us how *samsāra* is self-sustaining, that is, how delusion sustains the process of birth and death potentially without end. The 'core driver' is the process by which our response to feelings leads to rebirth. To understand the working of this core driver, therefore, it is necessary to understand the dynamic process that links the factors from feeling (*vedanā*) to rebirth (*jāti*).

We start with feelings. In Buddhism the word 'feeling' does not refer to emotion but to the 'felt tone' of a particular experience as pleasant or unpleasant.³ Experiencing things as pleasant or unpleasant is part and parcel of being a human being, or indeed any kind of being. The links of dependent origination preceding feeling show us how feelings arise from the interaction of body and mind; that is, once we have a body and mind we must also have feelings. Since it is given that we experience the world as pleasant or unpleasant, it is also given that we are going to have desires (*tanhā*) according to those experiences. Because we don't want displeasure, we crave to avoid unpleasant experiences and for existing unpleasant experiences to end; and because we want pleasure, we crave to acquire pleasant experiences and for existing pleasant experiences to continue. In other words, desire or craving is our normal response to experiencing feelings.

This leads us to the next link. Once we have desires we want to make sure that the craving gets satisfied, because not satisfying our craving is unpleasant. To do this we take things up, we grasp at things, and we follow certain strategies (*upādāna*). We get ourselves an education, we get a job, we get into relationships, we buy a house, we have children, we adhere to a religion, we have political views. Take religion: why do we become Buddhists, for example? Essentially it is a strategy to satisfy our craving, to help us find happiness in the world and decrease the suffering of life. Why do we have a home? Because a home provides us with an environment where we can enjoy pleasures. Our house is where we usually eat our meals, relax in

3. The Buddha also spoke of neutral feelings but they may be left out of the present discussion.

comfort, enjoy entertainment, and the place that we share with our family. It is also a place of safety from the world outside. Having a home is a very important strategy for satisfying our desires, and that is why people become attached to their homes. Another important strategy is getting a life-partner. Again, because a life-partner brings us a sense of happiness, we often attach to such people. But our strategies can also be of a loftier type. As Buddhists we may take up meditation and a more spiritual life-style. In this case our strategy is to develop our mental happiness. Of course, these strategies are usually not mutually exclusive—most Buddhists go for a mixture of the sensual and the spiritual.

This leads us to the factor of existence (*bhava*). Once we adopt certain strategies, we get established in a certain life pattern; we tend to exist in a certain way. Because most people's strategies revolve around satisfying their sense desires, they live a sensual existence. Their minds are preoccupied by the sensual realm; their consciousness is established in that realm. A meditator, however, who can access the pleasures of the mind in *samādhi*, will tend to value those experiences more than sense pleasures, and thus their mind inclines towards those states. The more profound their meditation, the more they 'exist' in the realm of the mind and the more their consciousness is established there. This mechanism also shows us why we have to be careful of anger and other negative states. The more we have of these dark states, the more we exist in that realm and the more our consciousness tends to be established in that darkness. So our existence is formed by the strategies that we implement to find pleasure and avoid pain. And once we exist in a certain way, in just that way we produce kamma. Thereby we establish and solidify our consciousness in line with how we exist.

The next factor is birth (*jāti*). Because we exist in a certain way and our consciousness is established accordingly, when we die our consciousness already exists in a certain 'realm.' When we are reborn our consciousness doesn't need to 'go' anywhere,⁴ because it has already been established in a particular 'realm' by the way we lived our past life.

4. It doesn't 'need' to go anywhere but it may enter a womb or get reborn through some other physical process.

The body falls away and consciousness continues in line with its past habits. That continuation is essentially what rebirth involves. If we have lived a life of enjoying sense pleasures and have inclined strongly towards sense pleasures, then, when the body falls away at death, our consciousness will still be established in sense pleasures and we will tend to be reborn in a sensual realm. If we are skilled meditators, however, when we die our mind is likely to be established in the peace of meditation. When the body falls away, the mind inclines to a peaceful realm, and that is our rebirth. This is how rebirth happens in accordance with kamma, in accordance with how the mind has been established in the life that has just ended.⁵

Now we can see how this whole process works: Because we crave, we implement strategies to satisfy the craving; because of these strategies, we tend to live in a certain way; because we live in a certain way, our consciousness gets established in that way and we are reborn accordingly; because we are reborn, we suffer, grow old and die in line with that new existence. This core driver is the mechanism that perpetuates *saṃsāra*.

What then is the relationship between delusion—the root cause of dependent origination—and the core driver? Delusion is the reason why we crave in response to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. We crave because we think we can gain mastery over our feelings by controlling our environment; we think we can somehow make things conform to whatever we want them to be. This sense that we have an inherent mastery over our feelings is a central aspect of delusion. It is not difficult to see why this sense of mastery is illusory. We all meet more suffering and pain—that is, more unpleasant feelings—in our lives than we want. Why is that? Because we do not have mastery over the course of our lives. The most obvious suffering we can't evade is illness, old age and death. The most

5. This is a very simplified explanation of how rebirth happens. In reality there are all sorts of complications: *kamma* from a past life ripening at the moment of our death; an unfortunate/fortunate death that alters our normal state of consciousness; remorse or elation at the time of dying over bad or good actions performed, etc. This is just meant as a general explanation of the process, not an exhaustive account of all the details.

frightening sort of suffering is the prospect of a bad rebirth. And in the end this too is beyond our control. The reason we cannot exercise mastery over events is because there is no self. Feelings arise because of causes and conditions, not because there is someone in charge of them. It is the delusion of a self that gives us the illusory sense of mastery and thus causes us to crave for pleasant feelings. Once there is craving, as explained above, we undergo rebirth and the consequent suffering. This is how delusion is the source of the craving which, in turn, causes rebirth. That is, this is how delusion constantly leads to renewal of suffering.

And how does the elimination of delusion affect the core driver so that suffering is also eliminated? Imagine for a moment that we have no mastery over the feelings in our body and mind. What would be the point of craving if we cannot really have the feelings we would like? If we lack mastery over our feelings, we are better off just ‘sitting back’ and watching as feelings come and go according to their nature. The irony is that this is also the way to experience the least possible suffering. By craving and trying to control we tend to just create more suffering for ourselves. And the Buddha said (for example in the famous *Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta*) that when we penetrate to the truth of non-self this is exactly what we see: we realize that, indeed, we have no mastery over our feelings, that craving is futile and in fact counter-productive. When we see this, when we eliminate delusion, we also give up craving.⁶ When we abandon craving we don't need any strategies to try to satisfy it. When we give up all our strategies, all our grasping and taking up of things, we no longer exist in a particular way⁷ and our consciousness is no longer established in anything. Since consciousness is not established in anything, then at death, when the body falls away,

6. Again, the full exposition from the suttas is a bit more complex. When one sees the truth of non-self, one becomes a stream-enterer, whereas the full elimination of delusion only happens when one becomes an *arahant*. In the present context, however, this distinction is not important because once one becomes a stream-enterer one becomes an *arahant* within at most seven lifetimes.

7. We don't “exist in a particular way” in the sense that we don't incline towards any sort of existence and therefore don't make any corresponding *kamma*.

consciousness does not incline to any particular realm, whether the realm of sense pleasures or a refined realm of the mind or any other realm. Then there will be no rebirth, and when there is no rebirth there will be no suffering, no old age and no death. This is how the elimination of delusion translates into the elimination of suffering.

For many, the ending of all rebirths might seem like a distant goal. But we should remember that, even if we don't make a complete end to rebirth, any reduction in delusion is a reduction in future suffering. When we reduce delusion by reducing the five hindrances, our craving is also lessened. When craving is reduced we will be more peaceful, and this will result in a more contented life here and now, and also in a better future rebirth.

This, in brief, is how dependent origination works. It shows us how delusion, via rebirth, is the root cause of suffering. It is important to realise that rebirth is an integral part of this scheme. Because rebirth is the immediate cause of suffering, if there were no rebirth there would be no problem to solve. The suffering we meet in any individual existence as human beings is insignificant; it is the potentially endless round of births and deaths that is the real problem. Once we understand the true nature of suffering, and grasp the fact that dependent origination explains how suffering comes to be, we will clearly see that rebirth is integral to dependent origination. What we need to do, then, is to practise the noble eightfold path to remove delusion. By removing delusion we end all future rebirth. When there is no rebirth, suffering comes to a complete stop.





May That Light Continue to Illumine the World !

Buddhists all over the world commemorate with a great sense of gratitude and joy on the full moon day of the month of Visākhā (Vesak) 2011, the two thousand six hundredth year of that event of cosmic significance, namely, the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha.

Siddhattha Gotama left the luxuries of the royal household with firm resolve in search of the greatest good that can be achieved. He spent many years experimenting with existing religious practices, including the most advanced forms of meditative mental culture as well as traditional austere practices. Finally he turned away from them, realizing that they were either obviously deficient or futile and did not lead to his desired goal. Realizing the futility of the austerities to which he subjected himself resulting in the weakening of both the body and the mind, he abandoned all the traditional practices coming from the sacred teachings of the past, and resolved to find a solution to the problem of existence in his own way. Shortly after this, whilst he was seated under the Bodhi tree, he managed to penetrate the deepest truths of life and realize the supreme and incomparable freedom from all miseries of existence. This event, according to Buddhist tradition, occurred two-thousand-six-hundred years ago on the full moon day of Visākhā.

One can call oneself a disciple of the Buddha, monk or lay, when one has confidence in the enlightenment of the Buddha, considers his teachings concerning the Noble Truths to be practically relevant to one's life, and recognizes that the community that he established follows the Noble Path prescribed by him. The term 'Buddha' itself signifies enlightenment or awakening, and the goal of every Buddhist is to awaken to the same facts about life to which the Buddha awakened. When the Buddha began his mission of sharing his awakening with those whom he considered capable of following his instructions and becoming enlightened like him, he made it clear that the truths he discovered were not based on the sacred traditions of the past. He insisted that his was an independent new vision, a direct knowledge, a science, a

light that dawned upon him. Throughout the Buddha's career as a teacher he insisted on the verifiability of the truths he taught. He appealed not to his own authority, to the authority of sacred teachings of the past or to the emotional tendency of people to have unquestioning and blind faith in him, but to people's good reason, understanding, observation and experience. In the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* he called upon his disciples even to carry out as rigorously as possible appropriate tests to verify his claim to be an enlightened one.

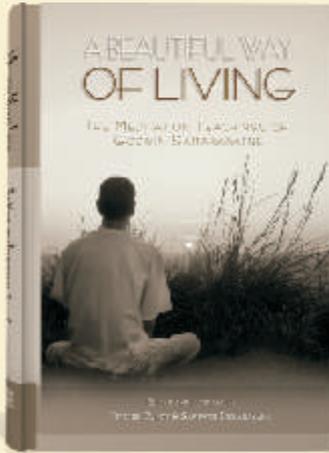
The Buddha, the teacher who shows the way to the attainment of ultimate wellbeing and happiness, introduced a method which in many respects is comparable with what we in the modern world characterize as 'scientific.' The discourse called *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta* contains what may be considered as an early statement of the scientific method of confirming a hypothesis based on observation and experience without rushing to a conclusion based on prejudices and preconceived notions.

The intellectual life of contemporary humans is largely governed by modern science, however, the very enlightenment which modern science claims with authority is sadly deficient in transforming human behaviour in ethically desirable ways. Despite the great achievements of modern science, peace, harmony and happiness seem to be ever receding like a mirage. A sense of insecurity prevails for which human folly itself is the fundamental cause.

Thus the enlightenment of the Buddha that we Buddhists commemorate on this full moon day of Visākhā—2600 years since that event and the year 2011 of the common era—is extremely significant. As collaborators in the effort of disseminating that enlightened message of the Enlightened One for over the past fifty years, the Buddhist Publication Society wholeheartedly wishes "May that light continue to illumine the world!"

Prof. P. Premasiri

NEW BOOKS



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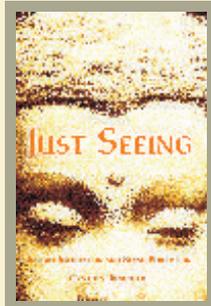
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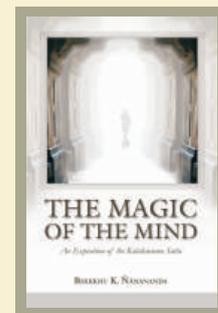
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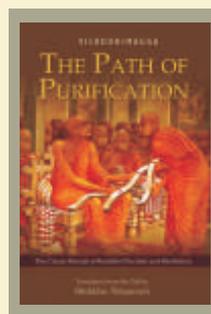
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