

Understanding the Essence of Dependent Origination

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As you read the word of the Buddha and get a feel for what he taught, again and again you come across the teaching of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*). It soon becomes quite obvious that this teaching is a very important part of the way the Buddha explained things. At the same time dependent origination is a difficult teaching to understand. This essay, 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, and very briefly, I will go through each of the twelve factors of dependent origination to give an overall picture of what it is about. 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 teachings. 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. But first of all I will briefly go through each of the twelve factors so as to set up a framework for the following discussion.

Take Twelve

The first of the twelve factors is usually known as **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 (*nāmarūpa*). When you have mind and body you also have the fifth factor, the **six senses** (*salāyatana*). 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**. Your desires make you 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 (*marañā*) 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 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 you

have to be born. Birth is a necessary condition for you to experience suffering in life; if you had not been born, you 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 you 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, is nothing other than *saṃsāra*. *Saṃsāra* 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, 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 properly understand what can be done about 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 you need to be clear about what it refers to. The Pāli 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 you are angry: you tend to do things that you otherwise would not. Under the influence of anger you think that you should tell somebody off or do something nasty to them. While youTMre angry, it seems the right thing to do: we think that this person deserves this, that that person needs to be told off or treated rudely. Thus we sometimes end up doing something stupid. But once the anger is over we realize that we made a mistake: we shouldnTMt 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. You can then 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. You donTMt really know what you are doing, and because of that you often bitterly regret it afterwards. You realize how much pain youTMve caused for your spouse, and often you pay for it when your marriage breaks up, you have to sell your house, or you canTMt see your children. But at the time, that affair seemed the right thing to do. Your view of things was distorted by your desires. Sometimes you can see the same pattern in a simple activity like shopping. Perhaps you see an item in a shop that is irresistibly attractive, and a desire so powerful arises that you simply have to buy it. Later on, when you are free from the grasp of desire, you realize that it was a mistake, that in fact you 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 you want to reduce ignorance and suffering in your life, you 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. You begin walking this path by practising virtue. Because of that practice there are certain actions you cannot do, and because you canTMt do them you are restraining yourself, restraining the hindrances, restraining the defilements. Over time such restraint weakens the defilements. You know that this is the case when you see that keeping the precepts becomes easier over time until it becomes practically second nature to you. Practising meditation TMdeveloping loving kindness, peace and all such beautiful states of mind TM 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.

The Dhamma as a Jigsaw Puzzle

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 BuddhaTM'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 you understand the BuddhaTM's teachings, the more you 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 reduces our delusion stage by stage 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 you develop the path stage by stage, you 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 you 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 you see the BuddhaTM's teaching for yourself. As long as the hindrances support delusion, no such breakthrough is possible. But when the props of delusion are removed – “assuming that you already possess right view through a proper grasp of the BuddhaTM'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. This is how delusion is the root problem and how that root problem can be solved.¹

Having discussed the two end points of dependent origination, we next need to consider how delusion translates into suffering. This mechanism is what might be called “the core driverTM” of dependent origination, since it shows us how *saṃsāra* is self-sustaining, that is, how delusion sustains the process of birth and death potentially without end. The “core driverTM” 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 “feelingTM” does not refer to emotion but to the “felt toneTM” of a particular experience as pleasant or unpleasant.² 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 you have a body and mind you 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 (*taṇhā*) according to those experiences. Because we donTMt 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 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,³ because it has already been established in a particular “realm” by the way we lived our past life. 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 you are a skilled meditator, however, when you die your 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 your 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.⁴

The Core Driver

Now you 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 *samsāra*.

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 frightening sort of suffering is the prospect of a bad rebirth. And in the end this too is beyond our control. The reason you 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, you 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 you have no mastery over the feelings in your body and mind. What would be the point of craving if you cannot really have the feelings you would like? If you lack mastery over your feelings, you 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 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 counterproductive.⁵ When we see this, when we eliminate delusion, we also give up craving.⁶ When you abandon craving you don’t need any strategies to try to satisfy it. When you give up all your strategies, all your grasping and taking up of things, you no longer exist in a particular way⁷ and your consciousness is no longer established in anything. Since consciousness is not established in anything, then at death, when the body falls away, 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 you reduce delusion by reducing the five hindrances, your craving is also lessened. When craving is reduced you 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.

Notes

¹ This is slightly simplified compared to the usual exposition 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 but it takes at most seven lifetimes. However, if you continue the practise, the point eventually comes when both delusion and suffering are completely eliminated.

² The Buddha also spoke of neutral feelings but they may be left out of the present discussion.

³ It doesn't need to go anywhere but it may enter a womb or get reborn through some other physical process.

⁴ 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. The above is just meant as a general explanation of the process, not an exhaustive account of all the details.

⁵ See for example the Buddha's instructions in the famous Anattalakkhana-sutta.

⁶ Again, the full exposition from the suttas is a bit more involved. 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 you become a stream-enterer you are guaranteed to become an *arahant* within at most seven lifetimes.

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