

Dependent Origination Through a Microscope

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The doctrine of Dependent Origination is fundamental to all of Buddhism in that it describes how ignorance produces suffering and rebirth; it is a detailed explanation of the first two of the Four Noble Truths. In order to appreciate it fully, one must study it, as it were, through a telescope, so as to see its operation across the space of a lifetime and beyond. Such "telescopes" have been provided in several excellent articles which have appeared previously in this *Journal* (1)

While this view of Dependent Origination is probably the most important one for Buddhists to comprehend, like many aspects of the Dharma, Dependent Origination can also be studied at other levels. I sometimes find it useful to view the twelve steps of Dependent Origination through a microscope, looking for signs of its operation in the split seconds between moments of thought in daily life. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Step One: Ignorance produces karma-formations. First let us consider ignorance. It may be of the simple type (lack of understanding) or the compound type (delusions, fantasies, ideals, and all manner of actively distorted forms of understanding). In either case, when we act upon it we leave behind a wake, trail or residue, since we are not acting in complete harmony with the flow of That Which Is. It is as if we were swimming in a rapidly flowing river; when we act in ignorance we try to swim upstream. This action leaves a wake, by which our struggle may be told, and we are easily swept down upon the boulders behind us. Enlightened action is like swimming downstream: it leaves no wake for we swim at the same speed as the water flows. We can easily maneuver to avoid the rocks and snags and brace ourselves to encounter those that are unavoidable. Ultimately we reach the other shore, for it is the nature of rivers to eventually carry things to their banks. The "wake" is the karma-formations produced by putting ignorance into action, i.e. it is the result of unenlightened action. Thus we may view the first step of Dependent Origination as stating that ignorance produces the residue of unenlightened action.

How does ignorance produce this residue? I believe the answer is simple: we engage in unenlightened actions because we don't know any better. I have never met a person who has purposely left a trail of suffering behind him or her for the sheer perversity of it. It is done because of either simple ignorance (such as obliviousness to the consequences of our actions) or compound ignorance

(e.g. people hurt others because they have been hurt themselves and believe others deserve punishment, or they believe in some dogma or ideal which says that the way to do some good requires the hurtful action, etc.) .

Step Two: Karma-formations produce rebirth consciousness. What does unenlightened action (our microscopic form of karma-formations) produce that looks like rebirth-consciousness that tends to rebirth other than the sum total of all our "worldly" or false consciousness? Let us return to our analogy of the river. When you swim against the current you are made keenly aware of the river as a "thing" distinct from another "thing" called "you." "It" pushes against "your" chest; "it" pulls "you" downstream. In other words, unenlightened action sets up the false and dualistic consciousness of actor, action, and object. But think of what it is like to swim with the current: are "you" moving, or is the "river" moving, or is it the river bank that moves? What guides you around the rocks and into the safe eddies--is it "you" or "the river"?" It is not so easy to set up a dualistic consciousness now, for "you" and "the river" are one flow.

Each unenlightened action thus establishes more firmly the false sense of duality and separation between ourselves and the universe.

Step Three: Rebirth-consciousness produces the psychophysical form. Rebirth occurs not only from one life to another, but also from one moment to the next in this life. At this level it is the self or illusion of ego that is reborn. In this way step three may be seen to mean that the false consciousness of separation produces and maintains our habitual illusory notion of a self. After all, the concept of a separate self is just the crystallization of the proclivity for seeing things in terms of actors, actions, and objects, then we naturally arrive at the conclusion that there is a "me" who "does" the "things" that "I" "do" to "the world." We then compound this particular delusion by giving fancy philosophical or psychological names to this "me" so as to discuss it as yet another object for us to act upon. Hence we arrive at the notion of the separate self or ego which causes us so much trouble and which we seek to transcend through religious practice.

Step Four: The psychological form produces the six senses. Just as on the telescopic level the reborn being brings forth the senses, so on the microscopic level, the ego or self feels that it possesses or controls the senses. Since the experience of sensation accompanies "us" wherever we go and can be altered by changes in our sense organs, we are led to assume that the senses belong to us. That is, they are a function of our body, which is, in this dualistic view, a part of our self.

Step Five: The six senses produce sensory contact. "Contact" implies that there is something out there for this self of ours to contact. That is, the first four steps produce the notion that, not only is there a me that "does things" to "things," but also that, in so doing, I experience sensory contact with something

out there that is substantial, permanent, tangible, and reliably "there." In other words, I develop a sense of "reality." This happens because there are regularities in our perceptions; they become predictable (if one overlooks certain of their more subtle features) and communicable to others in fixed, defined words. When one looks closely at this regularity of perception and at the socially consensual nature of reality, one can see that they are approximations, and a certain amount of "randomness" and "measurement error variance" must be postulated in order to maintain the concept of constancy and regularity. Similarly, a very careful discourse between two friends will reveal certain differences in the nuances of their perceptions. But the approximations we make are good enough for most of our practical purposes and so we are lulled into the easy habit of assuming that there is a "reality" which has consistent, reliable, and durable properties.

Step Six: Sensory contact produces sensation. In the process of our interactions with "reality" we experience the sensations of pleasure and pain. These are two rather insistent consequences of the "contact" of my "senses" with "reality." In fact, they have been part of my experience for as long as I can remember and they seem to occupy a great deal of my attention. In this way of thinking, one will eventually tend to regard these sensations as being essential to one's humanity. After all, one may reason, what would life be like without them? One might as well be a turnip!

Step Seven: Sensation produces desire. This step doesn't need any translation to be seen on the moment-to-moment level. Since pleasure and pain are perceived as universal, essential, and somewhat amenable to my control, I'd be an idiot not to desire more of the former and less of the latter, right? Pleasure is, after all, so--pleasurable, and, since life is going to be one if not the other, it might as well be nice. I think this line of argument is familiar enough to most of us.

Step Eight: Desire produces clinging. Here is another step that needs little explanation for us to see it operating in front of our noses. Quite simply, the wish to achieve pleasure and to avoid pain is habit-forming, and we call this habitual desire and aversion "clinging" or "attachment." This principle is so pervasive that half of modern psychology is based upon the details of its operation as seen in the theories of learning and conditioning.

I sometimes find it interesting to view attachment as an addiction. For instance, I was not born with an innate need for chocolate; I never desired it at all until I tasted it once. However, having made "sensory contact" with it on one occasion and having liked it, I desired that my interactions with reality should produce the experience again. Having found that to be possible, I formed the habit of wanting chocolate and also the subsidiary habits of doing certain things that will tend to produce more chocolate. This habitual desire is clinging; you could also say I had become addicted to chocolate. One can tell if attachment is

present because, like any proper addiction, there are withdrawal symptoms if you can't get what you're hooked on. If the store is out of my favorite brand of chocolate I may feel disappointed. Of course, this is a rather mild withdrawal pain compared to what I feel if, for instance, my best friend dies. But the mental pain (which we may call "suffering"; see step 11) follows just as surely, and by its presence I may know that attachment or clinging is operating. Otherwise, there would be a simple enjoyment and gratitude when eating chocolate but no disappointment when the store was out of stock; there would be empathic joy when being with my friend and a gentle sadness at his death but no grief or loneliness. Non-attachment does not make one into an unfeeling robot. Non-attached emotions are simple, gentle, and passing. Clinging produces desperate, "hard," or destructive feelings, just like all true addictions do.

Step Nine: Clinging produces the will to rebirths. Recall that rebirth can be from moment to moment. This step can be read as saying that attachment becomes what keeps us going; it keeps us doing things to get what we want and avoid what we dislike; it keeps us making unenlightened actions. Put bluntly, like any good junkie we spend a lot of effort trying to get the next fix. And what does all of this goal-directed behavior produce?

Step Ten: The will to rebirths produces birth. Here we have come back to step three, but in the next cycle of operation of the mechanism. Note that this step, like many others, connects backwards and forwards to many of the other steps. Thus, although Dependent Origination is often depicted visually as a circular chain or wheel, it is in some ways more like a web. So from here, we can see that the operation of Dependent Origination is endless unless the web is broken by true training. These endless cycles of ignorance, unenlightened action, self, desire, and attachment are what have formed our world as we know it. To answer the question posed at the end of the last section, all of this striving has produced the mess we now find ourselves in. On the microscopic level we can look upon the whole world as we know it as being the product of the unenlightened actions of trillions of people and other critters, each following dictates of his or her attachments over countless eons of time, and all operating within the constraints of the various laws of the universe.

Step Eleven: Birth produces decay, suffering, and death. Suffice it to say that the world we have produced, when lived in with attachment, entails suffering. Our "reality" and our "self" do not happen to be permanent as we'd like them to be; our addictions do not happen to be satisfiable; all of the thinking outlined in the above ten steps doesn't happen to be realistic. So we condemn ourselves to suffer the anguish that comes from not getting what we want or from our anticipated or actual failure to avoid what we dislike. Suffering thus includes all those feelings of disappointment, rage, grief, rejection, frustration, depression, anxiety fear, jealousy, and so on which plague our lives. It does not, however, include simple physical pain or empathetic sadness.

Note that suffering, as defined here, cannot occur without the habits of desire and aversion which we call attachment. How can there be disappointment without the desire for a pleasure which does not come about? How can there be anger without the aversion to being deprived of what we desire or to being frustrated in our efforts to obtain it? The same goes for grief, rejection, depression, fear, etc. This is the second Noble Truth of Buddhism: the root of suffering is attachment.

Step twelve: Suffering produces ignorance. Suffering, of course, is itself painful. When we are caught in dualistic thinking our response to pain is to seek to escape from it. But not knowing the true Origination, we seek escape by means other than cutting the root of attachment. As we have seen, all such other means are ultimately futile. Thus we end up seeking some other pleasure, adding another situation to the list of things that "we'll never let happen to us again," or trying to force our fellow man to "behave himself." Struggling to avoid suffering, in our ignorance we compound ignorance. Moment by moment, day by day, lifetime by lifetime we try to escape suffering by engaging in further unenlightened acts which bind us more tightly to the web.

Depressing, yes? Not really. The nice thing about a web is that once you break any strand the whole thing tends to collapse. Here is where the tremendous value of Buddha's Enlightenment can be seen: the Third Noble Truth says that by curing attachment we can cure suffering and the Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path that tells us how to do it.

Different people find different strands of the web more vulnerable to their attack, so begin where you can. Look at it with a telescope and bring what seems to be theoretical and far away down to earth; look at it with a microscope and see the significance of what seems to be too small and fleeting to bother thinking about. And whenever you see a strand that ensnares you, know that within the training of the Eightfold Path lies the means to cut it.

Notes

1. See Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, "*The Law of Dependent Origination*," Volume 12, nos. 9 & 10 (September-October 1981) : pp.2-9; and Rev. Master Daishin Morgan, "*Dependent Origination*," Volume 11, nos. 11 & 12 (November-December 1980): pp.28-40.