

The Law of Dependent Origination

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Homage to the Buddha,
Homage to the Dharma,
Homage to the Sangha.

In the history of the final attainment of one of Buddhism's great saints, the Venerable Phra Ajahn Mun, is the following piece of information: "from evening, to late that night, the night of full final attainment, Venerable Ajahn contemplated the Law of Dependent Origination, both during walking meditation and sitting meditation, in both its serial and reverse order, backwards and forwards again and again, traversing and re-traversing the great domain where ignorance and desire have been massing to create various aspects of suffering within the mind. (1) This was the most critical point of the battle in which he struck the death-dealing weapon of great-mindfulness and great wisdom against ignorance, which is renowned for its most skilful tactics. Ignorance is clever, not only in its defensive maneuvers, whereby it is adroitly evasive, but also in aggressive strategy, whereby it can launch a surprise attack upon its opponent with devastating results. What else, of course, is to be expected of one who has been reigning over the Great Kingdom of Rebirths and Re-deaths from time immemorial, with the minds of sentient beings within its powerful grip? But in the life-and-death struggle with the Venerable Phra Ajahn Mun that night, the powerful and crafty monarch of the Three Realms [the Lord of Ignorance] was helplessly dethroned. He was toppled and fell before the relentless strikes of the great weapon of great-mindfulness and great-wisdom [which is known as the sword of Buddha's Wisdom]. His theretofore unchallenged authority, in the case of other worldlings, was challenged by the Venerable Ajahn, and he was finally and absolutely defeated. "(2)

Too many people know of suffering's existence but they do not know its cause, nor do they know its cessation. The serial and reverse orders of the Law of Dependent Origination are in fact suffering's cause and the cessation of suffering. For, although Zen is often said to be a moment—a blinding flash—of understanding, Zen (which simply means 'meditation') is as much dependent upon the Four Noble Truths as is any other school of Buddhism. And those who practice meditation must go through the existence of suffering, suffering's cause and the cessation of suffering *before* they can learn to use, to its full advantage, the Eightfold Path—which is really how to stay in the state of cessation of suffering. So we should look at the Law of Dependent Origination as the Second and Third Noble Truths, with the moment of enlightenment—the moment of full acceptance—as that moment in which the full understanding of the Law of Dependent Origination is reached. Too many people have past-life experiences and do not realize that what they are seeing, hearing and feeling is, in fact, a reenactment of what took place in their own case concerning the Law of Dependent Origination (i.e. because such and such happened, such and such took place).

In the translator's notes at the end of Venerable Ajahn's biography we find the following: "The Law of Dependent Origination shows the conditioning and dependent nature of the uninterrupted flow of manifold physical and psychical phenomena of existences which we conventionally call the ego, or man, or animal, etc." This flow will be constant if one does not meditate deeply enough to find out its cause. When one sees what happened in one's past existences, one is able to trace many things. But it is constantly going backward and forward, backward and forward that eventually reveals the complete cause. And this again is just as much true with Zen as it is with any other school of Buddhism.

At some time in the past someone accidentally made the course of karma and, at least in all cases that I have seen, karma has been caused through very slightly saddened love. Because of this, the chain of Dependent Origination is formed: the rebirth-producing volitions or karma impregnations cause the conditioning of the future rebirths. Through the karma impregnations from past lives our consciousness in the present life is conditioned. Through this consciousness are conditioned the mental and physical phenomena of a human being (i.e. body and mind) or that which makes up our so-called individual existence. Through these mental and physical phenomena our five physical senses and our consciousness are conditioned, and these physical senses and consciousness are conditioned by the impressions that these karma impregnations have made upon us. And because of these impregnations, our feelings are conditioned, and because of these feelings, craving and clinging re-arise and thus the whole process of rebirth and re-death constantly continues.

Because of the slightly saddened love which did not understand real love, karma came about. But his slightly saddened love was not the sort of love that is found in the Unborn, the Undying, the Uncreated and Unchanging. Rather it is the 'me' type of love-- 'I' am hurt, 'I' am saddened. To say 'slightly saddened love' is wrong but it is a term that everyone can understand. If we say that we were hurt because what we believed to be love was spurned, we are closer. If we had known true love, the love of the Unborn and the Undying, then such a mistake would not have been made. Getting past this slightly saddened love is one of the most challenging barriers in training. It is so easy to mistake a really beautiful and genuine attachment for love. A person who is truly attached to helping his fellow men may well believe that this is genuine love and, when those fellow men are hurt and not as grateful as he thinks they should be, then he is hurt and starts making karma. A Bodhisattva can make the same mistake. He can see people who are turning away from the Teaching and try to chase after them because he loves them and wants them to have the Teaching, but this too is an attachment. In the true love that is the Cosmic Buddha's love, there is no attachment: if someone comes, that is good; if he goes, that is his decision. There is complete free will in this.

In the time of Shakyamuni Buddha the unbelievers were allowed to depart just as they were in the time of Phra Ajahn Mun who died in 1949. Any time someone tries to tell the Truth and get beyond the Love and Light Heresy, (3) there will be unbelievers. In this present day and age when social work has largely taken over or, at any rate, deeply over-shadowed the right occupation of the priest, it is hardly surprising that we find the "love and light heresy" flourishing with such strength in this country. But it is deeply important to know that this is an attachment, however exquisite it may appear to be. I strongly suspect that the love and light heresy is responsible for far more karma than any other single heresy, although I have no statistics to prove it. This type of ignorance brings the karma process into being—which produces consciousness, craving, clinging

and the whole process of rebirth. Because we are conscious, because we have a body, a mind that can think and five senses, we continue the rebirth process. But here we have to remember with great care that the body and mental mind with which we are blessed are also the means by which we can get away from our present cycle of rebirths and re-deaths and get back to that exquisite state which we held before the ignorance took over. For it is through the aegis of this physical body that we are enabled to be here today and to sit in this hall for sesshin. And it is through the transcendence of thinking (i.e., the “neither trying to think nor trying not to think” of the Dogen’s *Rules for Meditation*—just sitting without judgmental thought) that we find the way in. By transcending body and mind, which is the way of Zen, we can break this particular chain.

As we begin this sesshin we need to look at the ‘coming from’ and the ‘returning to.’ Only if we deal with what comes up on past-life understanding completely rather than on a very shallow level and make sure it is not repeated, only if even the most beautiful things are seen in their true form without spurning them and without clinging to them (just understanding them and therefore being unbound by them), will we transcend thought and transform mentality into Buddha Mind. For it is by transcending our human mind that we find the Mind of Buddha. By dropping our own personal likes and dislikes, by losing our personal attachments, by being willing to give up the material rewards of this world (“Look what a lot I have done for charity; look what a lot I have done for society”), by giving up the results of our attachment to doing good and even to wanting everyone to be with the Cosmic Buddha, we can truly transcend thought and *live* in that place where the love of the Unborn, the Undying and the Uncreated exists. And only in that place can we do *real* good, completely ceasing from evil and doing good for others. In any other place all we do is continue the attachment to ignorance.

So, looking at the chain of Dependent Origination, the place to start during this sesshin is with the fourth and fifth steps: transcending this body and transcending this mind, for you will start the rebirth process all over again if you do not do this. If body and mind are not allowed to fall away naturally, then, as Dogen says, you are doomed to another round. And who knows if you will be human the next time around? Too often people lecture on the Law of Dependent Origination and go all through it as an analytical study instead of realizing that the place to stop is at step number four. One must start *doing* something about transcendence, about knowing ignorance for what it is, and about knowing the Love and Light Heresy as the most dangerous and most insidious of all ignorances. I am frequently barraged with appeals to help this or that organization. If I had a money tree that gave me millions and millions I would not be able to satisfy those huge, gaping holes. But if I truly do something about myself, if each of us truly does something about ourselves, then we can and will be able to give genuine help, even if only by the fact that some of us are not constantly being reborn and adding to the collection of karma.

During this sesshin, examine and reexamine forwards and backwards. Look at everything that happened in your past lives and in this life. Look at everything that you do and find out if perhaps there is not some bit of attachment there. Are you *sure* you are doing it for the right reason? Please look with great care. And then, having had a good look, consider what happened to the Venerable Phra Ajahn Mun after his great understanding. His biographer says:-

“After a while, when the thunderous sound had died down, what remained of him was the absolute purity of the Dharma which bathed his body and mind and enveloped all the

worlds. To him it was so breathless a wonder that it was indescribable to others. Whatever loving-kindness and interest there had been in teaching others now momentarily disappeared. This was because of the realization of the fact that Dharma at this level is so subtle, profound and wonderful that it would be practically impossible for most people to understand. [To know and feel the love of the Cosmic Buddha, which is your true inheritance, is something so far beyond *anything* that a human being who has not experienced it can imagine that it might do harm to even try to express it. For a moment he hesitated to offer the Truth to others, being content with experiencing the wonders of the Dharma alone. He was overcome by gratitude towards the Buddha, who realized the whole truth and who proclaimed it for the sake of Deliverance.... Through respectful gratitude he was moved to an insatiable recollection all night of the virtues of the Buddha and his excellence. But so profound is the Dharma that to teach it would be inviting harsh and hostile criticism from the unbelievers and, as a result, efforts in that direction would hurt rather than help others. [This is how he felt at the time. It was not until after he remembered that the same thing occurred to the Buddha Himself and that, if the Buddha had not preached what He knew, he, Venerable Phra Ajahn Mun, would not now have found the way that he decided he would teach others.] He decided to bring the Buddha's message once again to those who would listen to it in earnest and with respect. There would be no point in teaching those who would not listen or who would listen without respect or interest [or would merely listen out of curiosity], taking the Dharma for granted and treating it as merely commonplace. [The Supreme Dharma, the love of the Cosmic Buddha, is only won after a series of very painful ordeals on the part of those who would go back and look at the mistakes of the centuries.] It was therefore useless 'dissolving' the priceless Dharma 'in the ocean' as one would dissolve a worthless thing. It was for the sake of those who are willing to listen that the Dharma was proclaimed. A physician prescribes a remedy for his patients with a view to curing them of their suffering and pain. But as long as they prefer living with their disease they turn a deaf ear to the physician's advice."

If you wish to listen to my advice during this sesshin go back and forth on what you have found out about yourselves over the years, on what you know of the karma you have inherited. It is not enough to go through it all once. You must see every single tiny root of suffering's cause if you would know the full cessation of suffering. This is absolutely imperative.

Homage to all the Buddhas in all worlds,
Homage to all the Bodhisattvas in all worlds,
Homage to the Scripture of Great Wisdom.

Notes

1. The Law of Dependent origination states that ignorance (step 1) conditions karma-formations (2), which condition consciousness (3), corporeality (4), five senses plus mind (5), impression (6), feeling (7), craving (8), clinging (9), process of becoming (10), rebirth (11), and old age and death (12). —ed.

2. From *The Venerable Phra Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta Thera*, compiled by the Venerable Phra Ajahn Maha Boowa Nyanasampanno, Bangkok, Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya Press, 1976, pp.114-115

3. The belief that love is all, that enlightened man is not bound by the law of karma, that one need not face and accept one's humanity (one's human birth as well as one's particular karmic stream which contains the myriad aspects of previous existences). This belief can lead to gross irresponsibility. For a further explanation see the article entitled "Cultivating the Willingness to Train" in the March-April 1981 *Journal of Shasta Abbey*.

Note from Rev. Seikai: I have made editorial changes for the sake of clarity and conformity to common usage; for instance, changing Acharn, as it appeared in the original, to the commonly used Ajahn—meaning, in Thai Buddhism, Teacher. Also, Rev. Master Jiyu freely uses the term "Cosmic Buddha" which one would not find in the teachings of Ajahn Mun or any other Thai Buddhist teacher. In Thai Buddhism, the concept of nirvana would be the nearest equivalent to such an English turn of phrase, meaning, in essence, the relinquishment of all craving and attachment which leads to touching the indestructible, the unchangeable.