

# DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

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To my master,  
Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is not meant to be an introduction to Buddhist training. The discussion presupposes that the reader has some experience of training in meditation and the Precepts. Also, this is not a scholarly work. Buddhist teachings are only helpful to people insofar as they relate to the essential human need to which religion addresses itself. I tried never to wander from the awareness of this need in writing the articles that make up this book.

Throughout this book the reader will encounter terms such as “the Eternal,” “True Reality,” “True Life,” “the Unborn,” “Buddha Nature,” “Immaculacy,” “the Unchanging,” and “True Refuge.” Buddhism—as my master so often said—is a religion, not a way of life. Religion is about our relationship to That to which all of these terms (and many others) point. If the use of these terms is worrisome, I suggest putting questions about the Eternal on the “back burner” for awhile. The same can be done with other concepts which present special difficulties for some Western students of Buddhism, including the idea of past lives. One can approach these questions with an open mind, do Buddhist training and see what happens. I know these things to be true for myself, but I also know that I had to experience them in many aspects over many years. The childlike faith that expresses itself in an open mind and an open heart is the foundation of all true training and understanding in Buddhism.

This book contains references to the teaching of my master, Rev. Master Jiyu Kennett. Words cannot express what I owe to this wise and compassionate woman. I asked her once how I could express my gratitude. She said, “There is only one way: you have to pass it [the way of Buddhist training] on.” I hope that this book can help pass on her profound spiritual legacy. Rev. Master Jiyu died in 1996. Her great Heart is still very much with all to whom she was such a refuge during her lifetime.

I am indebted to the lucid exposition of Dependent Origination by Ven. Nyanatiloka in his *Buddhist Dictionary*. The explanations of the temporal and cause/consequence analyses of the steps of Dependent Origination in this dictionary were most helpful to me.

This book is published and distributed through the generosity of many people. In particular, I would like to thank Rev. Meiten McGuire, Rev. Alexis Barringer and David Laraway for initiating and seeing through the effort needed to publish. I would also like to express my thanks to the other monastic and lay members of North Cascades Buddhist Priory for their support of this project.

The last chapter of this book was written in order to give a sense of the deepening of my perspective on the teaching of Dependent Origination as a result of continuing training. I hope this helps convey the fact that it is the on-going training that matters. The points emphasized in this last chapter were clarified during the course of a recent, prolonged retreat. It was my privilege to share this retreat with a fellow monk, Rev. Mokugen Kublicki, and to benefit throughout from her example, her wisdom and, above all, her generosity of spirit. It is a wonderful thing to be the beneficiary of the kindness of another human being and I am deeply grateful to Rev. Kublicki.

I would like to express my thanks to those whose generosity has made it possible for this book to be published and distributed without cost to the reader. This is a traditional way of offering Buddhist teaching.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy, Head of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, for his encouragement in the publication of this book.

## Introduction

The teaching of Dependent Origination is a detailed explanation of the first and second of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths: "Suffering is intrinsic to existence" and "The cause of suffering is craving rooted in ignorance." Out of the rich variety of our experience the teaching of Dependent Origination selects a few elements that are essential to spiritual training. Its intention is to show the necessary relationship among these elements. It shows us how our choices entail consequences that are of great importance to us. This practical purpose is paramount in each step of this teaching.

Dependent Origination portrays the life history of a stream of karma. It divides this life history into three periods. The first of these is the period comprised by all existences prior to this present life. The second describes the present life of a human being who is continuing to accumulate suffering. The third shows the course of future existences given the present state of the person concerned.

The term *Dependent Origination* (or *Dependent Arising*) is a translation of the Sanskrit term *Pratitya-samutpada*, meaning "depending upon preceding (or, in some cases, coexisting) conditions." The emphasis upon the causal relationships within our experience is fundamental to Buddhism. For if we know that our present state of mind and all the circumstances of our present life are founded in past (and even present) choices, then we know that we have the most important role in the determination of the spiritual future of our stream of karma: even the most powerful negative habits and delusions, which were created over a long period of time, can be transformed and converted over time. The teaching of Dependent Origination is a magnificent tapestry within which both the causes of suffering and the causes of spiritual conversion are displayed.

### **The Steps of Dependent Origination**

On ignorance depend willful actions.

On willful actions depends relinking consciousness.

On relinking consciousness depend body and mind.

On body and mind depends the functioning of the six senses.

On the functioning of the six senses depends sense experience.

On sense experience depends feeling.

On feeling depends craving.

On craving depends clinging.

On clinging depends becoming.

On becoming depends rebirth.

On rebirth depend old age, death and the continuation of suffering.

With the cessation of ignorance and craving in any lifetime, clinging ceases.

With the cessation of clinging, becoming ceases.

With the cessation of becoming , rebirth ceases.

On the cessation of rebirth depends the cessation of old age, death and suffering.

## 1. The Karmic Inheritance from Past Existences.

A striking point about the first step of Dependent Origination is that it clearly shows the essential elements of past-life memories when they take place as a result of training in meditation and Precepts. We will expand upon this point after examining the meanings of the terms employed in this step.

*Volitional activities depend upon ignorance.*

The word *ignorance* is a translation of the word *avijja*. I have found it helpful to think of ignorance in two complementary ways. One way emphasizes the fact that ignorance, understood as a "not knowing" about something fundamentally important, is itself the consequence of previous mistakes. In this aspect, ignorance is not knowing that transitory experiences and relationships cannot ever provide the true and enduring Refuge that all beings seek and that must be found in the seeming darkness of pure faith. The deeply habitual tendency to mistake external things for this Refuge is undermined and converted through the practice of meditation, which is in reality simply the opening of the heart to its True Refuge. It is this aspect of ignorance that we emphasize when we recognize that all beings are at all times doing the best they can, even when great suffering results from their actions. A good synonym for ignorance in this aspect is *confusion*: if we *knew* better—if we were not confused—we would *do* better.

The other aspect of ignorance emphasizes the fact that ignorance is volitional. We *choose to ignore* That which is real when we confuse passing experiences for our True Refuge. Even when the karmic habit-energy of confusion is present, there is simultaneously present a deep intuitional knowing of the Eternal. Again, the effort of meditation is the effort of being still and receptive so that we can discern the "still, small voice" of our True Refuge amid the voices of karmically-inherited greed, hate and delusion.

I would like to emphasize that we may make many choices without being clearly aware that we are doing so. Often, the aspect of ignorance as an ignoring of something important is only revealed



when we see the consequences of our actions. Suppose one is driving down the road, sees a recent accident between other cars, gawks at the sight, loses control of one's own car and hits a telephone pole. It may only be upon waking up in the hospital that one recalls clearly the moment in which one felt the need for extra caution in passing the site of an accident, but simultaneously chose to indulge curiosity instead. That intuitive sense that it is good to do, or to refrain from, such and such can be *very* quiet and unobtrusive. Yet we ignore it at our own risk. The "still, small voice" need not be—and, for most people, probably rarely is—literally a voice. It manifests in infinite numbers of ways. It may be as simple as a plain lack of interest in some activity that is spiritually unwholesome. Or it may be a strikingly clear and powerful intuition or vision. Whether we *know* we are hearing it or not, it is always present. Meditation greatly deepens our awareness of this Reality and helps us see the choices that we make from moment to moment.

It is this latter aspect of ignorance that is emphasized in the first step of Dependent Origination. However, it should be understood that these aspects are both always present within ignorance. The aspect of not knowing emphasizes karmic consequence. The aspect of willful ignoring emphasizes karmic cause. For the wheel of cause and effect is kept rolling only through volitional action, the exercise of free choice.

The term *volitional activities* is a translation of the word *sankharas*. There are three kinds of volitional activities: volitional activity of body, of speech and of thought.

Our suffering and our enlightenment are equally the products of the use of our will. Suffering indicates the misdirected use of the will at some time in the past; the experience of enlightenment indicates the compassionate use of the will. There are spiritually wholesome and unwholesome volitional activities. Unwholesome activities of body, speech and mind are described in the Ten Precepts. The Precepts describe bodily actions that result in suffering (such as slandering) and unwholesome mental attitudes (pride, anger, judgmentalism). Wholesome volitional activities include acts of generosity and compassion, kind speech, and the cultivation of the

mental attitudes of respect and gratitude (another way of describing the attitude of meditation).

Volitional activity is one of five aspects of the flow of our experience that are especially emphasized in Buddhist teachings. These five aspects are called the five *skandhas*, a term that simply means *group* or *factor* or *aggregate*. The last term is usually used as the English translation. Another word sometimes used is *heap*. No English word is really adequate for giving a sense of the meaning of skandha. However, the word *aspect* has, I feel, a considerable advantage in that it emphasizes the fact that the skandhas have no separate reality in themselves. This point is of the utmost importance, for there is a very great difference between looking at the flow of our lives through five helpful windows and asserting that that flow is somehow composed of these five factors as a building is composed of four walls and a roof. The skandhas are useful modes of analysis, not building blocks. The skandhas, then, are identifiable aspects of one unity. They are not metaphysical entities. The emphasis is always upon the unity and the constant flow (impermanence) of our experience.

Since the skandhas are five aspects of our experience which are functioning as parts of an indivisible unity throughout our lives, the essential question is not whether or not we will do volitional activity, but rather what *kind* of volitional activity we will do. It is a consequence of being born as humans that from moment to moment we must exercise choice. The spiritual delusion of quietism is in fact an effort to avoid volitional activity altogether—which, of course, is nothing but a form of volitional activity. The more one trains in Buddhism, the more one becomes aware of the extent to which volition is present within even the subtlest attitudes and forms of awareness. Spiritual training is the effort to use volition in the wisest possible way.

The enlightened use of volition is always to look up, to go forward in faith through both darkness and light, knowing that there is the Eternal and that It is the True Reality. The deluded use of volition is always, to some extent or other, a looking down, an act of despair. We are not necessarily fully aware of our faith when we

exercise it. Similarly, we are not always fully aware of despair when we exercise it. The enlightened use of volition is *willingness*; the deluded use of volition is *willfulness*, the indulgence of greed, hate and delusion.

The word *karma* itself means *action* and refers, in Buddhism, only to volitional action. The understanding of volition as one of the five inextricable aspects of our experience reveals that as long as we are alive we have to make choices. And the law of karma states that each of those choices is going to have consequences. The more deeply we penetrate this simple truth, the more we wish to live the wisest spiritual life possible.

When people who have been training in Buddhism have experience of their karmic past, the points in that past that are emphasized are exactly the points emphasized in the first step of Dependent Origination. As Rev. Master Jiyu often said, we are shown our karmic past so that we can avoid repeating its mistakes. Therefore, the memories that arise are memories of volitional activities in which beings caused suffering to themselves and others. As a part of that memory, there is almost always a deeply intuitive sense that the being who committed these acts did so out of ignorance. There was a genuine confusion about the wisest and best course of action—a "not knowing" which led to mistakes. Insight into this "not knowing" enables us to see the purity of intent that underlies even the greatest mistakes. There was also, in some way, an element of not paying sufficient attention to something which was calling out—however quietly—for attention or care. This is the aspect of ignorance as an *ignoring*. Thus it is that willful action depends upon ignorance.

The re-experiencing of the attitude of mind at the time of death is also a common element in memories of past lives. This attitude shows the consequences of volitional activities rooted in ignorance. The dying attitude often involves self-judgment, either in the form of self-blame or in the form of self-justification. In either case, there is the clinging to the illusory self. The teaching of our karmic inheritance always embodies in particular ways the general truth that if we make external things and goals our reality, we can expect them to remain

our reality at the time of death. Thus beings blind themselves to the glorious and infinite True Reality of the Eternal, which is the birthright of every living thing.

Our true spiritual need at the time of death is the complete and joyful willingness to let go of all illusive separateness and melt into oneness with the Eternal. If during this present life we find our hope, our Refuge, our love and our consolation in the Eternal, then the karmic consequence of this life of faith at the time of death will be either complete cessation of the stream of suffering, or its considerable diminishing. <sup>1</sup>

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1. For an example of the application of this teaching in the cleansing and conversion of past karma, please see Rev. P.T.N.H Jiyu-Kennett, Roshi, *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death* (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey, 1993), pp. 41-49.

## 2. The Basis of Suffering in Our Present Life.

In its first step, the teaching of Dependent Origination shows how beings in past existences acted out of ignorance. In consequence, beings died in states of confusion and despair. This state of mind at the time of death represents an unresolved spiritual question, or problem, which will find a new form in its quest for resolution.

The next six steps in the teaching show the way in which suffering is re-created in a new form of existence. These steps are described as follows:

*Relinking consciousness depends upon willful actions.*

*Mind and body depend upon relinking consciousness.*

*The six senses depend upon mind and body.*

*Contact with the objects of the senses depends upon the six senses.*

*Feeling depends upon contact with sense objects.*

*Craving depends upon feeling.*

We will again look at the terms used in these steps and then discuss the basic point that these steps express.

Consciousness (*viññana*) is one of the five skandhas.<sup>1</sup> In this context—*relinking* consciousness—the word "consciousness" represents the fact that a new mind and body was conceived, and this conception was the basis of birth in this present life.

The term *mind and body* is the correct English rendering of *namarupa*. Translators with a penchant for scholarly literalness have used the words *name* and *form* for *nama* and *rupa*, respectively. The problem is that these words do not clearly communicate the meaning of *namarupa*. *Mind and body* provide the average native English speaker with a much more straightforward idea, as some Oriental Buddhist writers have pointed out.

In speaking of *mind*, Buddhist writers are thinking of four of the five skandhas: perception (which includes thought), feeling, volition and consciousness. In speaking of *body* (the fifth skandha), Buddhist writers are thinking of the six senses and the basic constituents, or

properties, of matter. As I said in the previous chapter, the five skandhas are merely five important aspects of our constantly flowing experience—five useful windows through which we can look at our experience. In any moment of normal experience, there is some awareness of the presence and functioning of the body, which provides the base, through its senses, of simultaneously-experienced perception, feeling and consciousness. And in each moment, choices are being made.

Note that there are *six* senses in Buddhism. These are the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell plus the thought sense. This is just pointing out that the flow of our thoughts is no different from the flow of all our perceptions. There is no ego that creates or experiences either thought or any sense perception: there is *just* the flow of thought and perception.

The term *contact* (*phassa*) is one of those Buddhist words that would benefit by being connected to a prepositional phrase to reveal its meaning: for example "contact with sense objects." Perceptual *experience* is possible only when there is contact between our senses and their objects. Or, to put it another way, if one has normally functioning senses, one cannot *avoid* contact with the objects of the senses, and this necessarily produces perceptual experience.

*Feeling* (*vedana*) refers to that quality of our experience that is more or less pleasurable or painful.

*Craving* (*tanha*) is desire, wanting.

We can now discuss the general point being made in these steps of Dependent Origination.

*Relinking consciousness depends upon willful actions.*

Beings in the past lived and died under the influence of ignorance. This ignorance was deepened by non-Preceptual action and lessened by Preceptual action. If, at the time of death, a being is still in the grip of ignorance, then an unresolved spiritual problem provides the karmic impetus for rebirth. "Relinking consciousness" refers to the fact that our present life began at the time of conception

as the result of this spiritual need: our present life is "linked" to previous existences.

*Mind and body depend upon relinking consciousness.*

This means that the coming into being of this psychophysical process which I view as "my" mind and body is the consequence of an unresolved spiritual problem. There is an element of inevitability in this: I cannot, just by wishing—or willing—it to be otherwise, avoid the full consequences of the fact that there was, at the time of someone's death, this unresolved problem. This present mind and body, with all their abilities and limitations, are the expressions of a spiritual need and provide the only vehicle we have—and the one appropriate for each of us—for the resolution of that need.

This *inevitability* of karmic consequence is also emphasized in the following three steps:

*The six senses depend upon mind and body.*

*Contact with sense objects depends upon the six senses.*

*Feeling depends upon contact.*

Where there are mind and body, there are functioning senses—the "gates" of experience, the modes through which the world is expressed in individual consciousness. Where there are functioning senses, there is necessarily the interaction with sense objects which produces the constant flow of thought and perception. And an inextricable part of this constant flow is the experience of pleasurable and painful feeling. Such feeling is far more diverse than bodily painful or pleasurable feelings. It includes all our fears, joys, loves, hates, sorrow, despair, hope: where there is *any* sensory experience, there is feeling. The memory (a thought) of the person who struck us may be accompanied by anger or fear. The sight and bodily sensation of the bright, warm sun might be accompanied by pleasure or, if we have a sunburn or are sensitive to bright light, pain. The vision of a Buddha might inspire fear in a hungry ghost, indifference in an animal, loathing in a demon, longing in one human, devotion and love in another. The quality of feeling is always just karmic consequence—perhaps the consequence of having a particular kind of body, perhaps

the consequence, as in the last example, of one's spiritual training or lack thereof. What was "sown" through volition is "reaped" in feeling. The *kind* of feelings we have depends upon many volitional factors; but *that* we have feelings is unavoidable.

So the question from the point of view of Buddhist training is "What do we *do* on the basis of our feelings," for the teaching of Dependent Origination points out in the next step that feeling is the springboard of choice in addition to being its consequence:

*Craving depends upon feeling.*

*Craving* refers to the fact that some feelings are enjoyable and we tend to want more, while some are unpleasant and we tend to avoid them. At its simplest level, desire is harmless and, in fact, beneficial. When the body needs food, for example, the feeling of hunger arises. That is a signal of a developing need. The *wanting* of food connects the need with the object (food) and activity (eating) that will satisfy it.

It is possible, however, to want that which is *not* beneficial or to have a power of wanting that causes one to live a driven, fear-ridden existence. This comes about due to the confused indulgence of impulses of like and dislike. Thus, *indulgence* of like and dislike—including the more sophisticated varieties represented by asceticism, stoicism, idealism and cynicism—reinforces that ignorance which is the underlying root of the spiritual problem needing resolution, the question longing for its answer.

When we undertake spiritual training we "stand against the world to train in wisdom."<sup>2</sup> The "world" is the realm of like and dislike—discrimination based in feeling. In training in meditation and the Precepts, we take a higher rule and one that is based in faith that there *is* That which transcends all our passing pleasures and pains, including the most heavenly and sublime and the most hellish and miserable. The stillness of meditation is the place wherein we find that there is much more to life than either the indulgence or the suppression of desire.



The teaching of Dependent Origination is showing, in the steps that we are discussing in this chapter, both the limits of our humanity—we cannot *avoid* perception and feeling—and the dangers of living in such a way that these limits become chains of bondage. What is needed is the positive acceptance of our limits. This expresses itself in doing the best we can within them—which is just another way of describing training. For example, rather than complain about the fact that we have unhappy and desolate feelings, we can train ourselves with the faith that, since feeling is karmic consequence, the merit of training will gradually improve the quality of feeling. This is the positive use of greed and may not satisfy every idealist's view of Buddhist attainment, but it does have the advantage of starting from an acceptance of the limits within which humans are operating.

Interestingly enough, even misdirected and obsessive craving reflects a kind of faith. This is the faith that this psychophysical process which we call our mind and body is the true reality. Great Master Dogen calls this "a mistaken viewpoint of body and mind."<sup>3</sup> Meditation undermines this misplaced faith, for meditation is the opening of the heart to the True Reality of the Eternal. The more this Reality dominates our experience, the more mind and body are seen to be "void, unstained and pure": these thoughts and perceptions are not mine, they are not me; these volitional impulses are not mine, they are not me; this consciousness is not mine, it is not me; this body is not mine, it is not me; these feelings are not mine, they are not me. In fact there is no "mine" and no "me"—there is just the flow of existence (Great Master Dogen's "Uji"),<sup>4</sup>the reflections coming and going endlessly within the Great Jewelled Mirror of the Eternal.

Faith in the Eternal (or whatever one wishes to call It, Him or Her—it does not matter) is the proper fulfillment of the misplaced faith which provides so much of the power of craving. This is why the spiritual life has its own kind of longing—"That passion," in the words of the great Buddhist monk Shantideva, "which makes for the cessation of passion."<sup>5</sup> It is through this longing that we begin to know the Eternal. This longing differs from ordinary greed in that, whereas greed, or craving, is always directed at that which is passing, the

longing for the Eternal steadfastly turns from transitory objects. This is the "nada, nada" of St. John of the Cross,— "not this, not this," or "nothing, nothing."<sup>6</sup>

The willingness to do what needs to be done in the faith that the Eternal is the true Reality of all our experience (whether we *see* this at all times or not) replaces indulgence of like and dislike in the life of the Buddhist trainee. Feeling will always exist while we have human form. But what we do does not have to be governed by like and dislike. In the next chapter we will look at the way in which suffering flows forth inexorably from craving as there comes to be an increasing insistence upon loving what one likes and avoiding what one dislikes.

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1. The word "consciousness" as used here and in other contexts in Buddhism does not refer to a soul or self that endures and is reincarnated. Rather, Buddhism teaches that our actual experience shows us a moment-to-moment and lifetime-to-lifetime flow of events. Present events arise from, and are conditioned by, but are not identical to, preceding events. One moment of consciousness is conditioned by preceding moments of consciousness and is distinct from them.
  2. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C.
  3. See "Genjo-koan" in Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd. ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), pp. 172-173.
  4. See Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, pp. 165-171.
  5. Paraphrased from *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, trans. Stephen Batchelor (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works Archives, 1979), p. 35, verse 43.
  6. See "The Ascent of Mt. Carmel:" *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.D.C. and Otilo Rodriguez, O.D.C. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1973), pp. 66-67.

### 3. The Four Aspects of Clinging.

The two previous chapters discussed steps in the teaching of Dependent Origination which describe the roots of suffering in past existences and its re-creation in our present life. The next step is formulated as follows:

*Clinging depends upon (develops out of) craving.*

The word *upadana* is usually translated as *clinging* or *grasping*. Each of these words has its merits. *Clinging* connotes the desperate holding on to transitory experiences, goals and relationships and the fear of letting go. *Grasping* may connote more of the willful, often intent, striving which typifies extreme *upadana*.

Clinging is the intensification of craving, or desire. The development from the latter to the former may be expressed simply as the movement from "I want" to "I *must* have." This sense of urgency and necessity, often with respect to things that have no obvious relation to survival and that may even be extremely unwholesome, embodies an increasing admixture of delusional elements as it becomes more intense. This can be seen as a kind of "hardening of the spiritual arteries" and, not surprisingly, it often manifests more and more as people age unless they do something to counteract this deepening of willful insistence.

Craving, as discussed in an earlier chapter, develops out of repeated indulgence of like and dislike. For example, sometimes we feel hunger: in itself this is just feeling. The desire that is based on this feeling has the purpose of keeping the body alive and well. This is different from being obsessed with desires for particular foods when one is already full and in good health. The movement from the simple experience of hunger to the state of clinging was accomplished over time by repeatedly indulging impulses based on like and dislike. Clinging is willfully insistent desire and causes damage to oneself, and sometimes others. More serious complications can develop even within this simple example. Suppose, for example, someone's karmic past—in this life or in the inheritance from previous existences—includes serious bouts with starvation. One may then have inherited

deep-seated fear with regard to food and one might then go to great lengths to accumulate it, store it and consume it. Such activities could conceivably become the focus of one's life. Words such as "obsession" and "addiction" describe such clinging.

From ancient times, Buddhist teaching has identified four main forms of clinging. My own preference is to view these as four *aspects* of entrenched greed. For in my experience, if one finds one aspect of clinging one will tend to find that the others are in some manner and some degree present.

The first of these aspects is clinging to sensual enjoyment. In order to understand the potential range of this aspect, it is important to remember that, in Buddhism, the experience of the senses includes the flow of thoughts. One can be as attached to beautiful thoughts as to beautiful sounds or sights. Obviously, the problem here is not inherent in either the immediate experience or in our appreciation of its beauty. The problem lies in the *attachment* to passing experiences. When such attachment develops into obsession, great suffering surrounds even the most beautiful sense experience. We are all familiar with stories of great artists and musicians who destroy themselves in their pursuit of beauty. A more common example is found in the addiction to drugs, which is also an expression of a longing for beauty and serenity and joy. Unfortunately, the means used to this end are terribly damaging and this points out (though few see it) the necessity of turning toward the Eternal, the real source of all tranquility and enduring joy.

In this aspect of clinging, we can see that clinging can also be called "worldly love." Worldly love is not separate from that Love which flows forth from—and returns, through faith and training, to—the Eternal. Worldly love is, as Rev. Master Jiyu often said, the saddening of this Love, its tingeing with disappointment. And, at the same time, this Love of the Eternal can never truly be distorted or damaged in any way. There is a common misconception that, in letting go of worldly attachments, one will become unloving and cold. What actually happens is that one comes to understand the real nature of love, which goes far beyond a passing emotion or bond of

attachment. Worldly love is easily disappointed and, when this happens, can turn to hate and grief. True spiritual love longs only for the welfare of *all* beings because all are within the Eternal and all have the potential for Buddhahood.

It is important to distinguish between the natural appreciation of the experiences of the present moment and the desperate grasping after enjoyment. The Buddha taught the Middle Way in which one learns to make helpful use of the experience of the senses so that anything can catalyze recognition of the Eternal. This Middle Way avoids both the extreme of willful indulgence of greed and that of ascetic aversion toward the experience of our normally functioning body and mind.

The second aspect of clinging is clinging to wrong views. This is the deeply habituated attachment to ways of approaching life which attempt to shore up one's efforts to find satisfaction in external things. This is really the functioning of fear within our attitudes. For whenever there is clinging, there is the fear of not getting, or of losing, that to which we cling. Wrong views always express the inability (and unwillingness) to understand and accept the truths of impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness of passing things and the non-substantiality (no-self) of our experience. But wrong views are not usually intellectualized: they are attitudes that permeate all one's activities. They can seem quite intractable, but this is only because of the deep fear that underlies them. As one learns to open oneself to the Eternal in meditation, this fear gradually erodes. In time, stubborn, hardened attitudes soften and convert into flexible, accepting, sympathetic attitudes.

The next aspect of clinging is clinging to rites and rituals. This is clinging to religious form while being afraid to penetrate the immense Unknown to which the form is pointing. When carried far enough, this aspect of clinging leads to the excesses of religious fundamentalism, sacrifice of animals (to which the Buddha specifically objected in the society of His day) and idolization of religious leaders.

In a legendary exchange between Great Master Bodhidharma and the Emperor of Southern China, the Emperor asked the great monk what merit he (the Emperor) had accumulated in building many temples, supporting many monks and doing similar activities. Bodhidharma replied that the Emperor had accumulated no merit because the actions were done for the selfish motive of obtaining reward. The point is simply that the true spiritual worth of our actions derives from the purity of heart with which they are done—expressing generosity and gratitude just because one longs to do so. This is also why the sixth Ancestor taught that all true merit is within the Dharmakaya ("Truth Body"—another name for the Eternal) rather than in external things and actions. This does not mean, of course, that one should stop one's efforts to do good. But it does require a constant effort to look within the stillness of one's own heart, rather than to anticipated rewards and the approval of others, for the true meaning of one's work and offerings.

It is worth noting here that even formal meditation, an invaluable help to spiritual life, may become an object of attachment. This is also true of an excessive concern with following the letter of rules and an attachment to quiet conditions of training. Formal meditation, the rules and Precepts, and peaceful conditions of training are all essential parts of Buddhist training. But they are so important because they express the pure and simple longing to do the best one can in one's return Home to the Eternal. They can be treasured and used with gratitude and respect without clinging.

The last aspect of clinging is clinging to a delusory permanent self. The delusion of self is the delusion that our present body and mind, or some part thereof, is what is ultimately real and valuable. Clinging to this delusion generates the terror of death and the fear to live wholeheartedly in the present moment. There are many ways in which people seek an enduring refuge in things which manifestly do not endure. The clinging to this delusion of a self supports this misdirected effort. The sense of separation from the Eternal which this engenders fuels in some a desperate pursuit of fame and gain. Others sink into a more passive state of despair.

Fortunately, the same law of karma that states that certain kinds of volitional action result inevitably in suffering also states that other kinds of volitional action result inevitably in liberation from suffering. Buddhist training is the deliberate avoidance of the former and cultivation of the latter. The house of ego was created and it can be dismantled. It took time to create powerful attachments and it takes time to weaken them and convert them to positive spiritual qualities. Within training nothing is wasted or lost—all greed, hate and delusion are converted into compassionate acceptance, love and wisdom. Patient endeavor, faith and the continuing effort to embrace and respect one's own humanity are all necessary parts of Buddhist training and they work together to gradually transform the passions.

Through training, the aspect of clinging to transitory enjoyments is converted into the grateful recognition of the Eternal within all aspects of daily life. Clinging to wrong views is converted into the fearless certainty that comes from acceptance of the way things really are. Clinging to religious forms is converted into the freedom born of wisdom which knows the true intent and use of forms. Clinging to a delusory self is converted into the joy and peace that come with knowing that our true Refuge—our True Self—was, is and always will be with us at all times and in all circumstances.

The step of the teaching of Dependent Origination that we have examined here shows how desire deepens when it is blindly indulged. This is cause and effect, not fate or chance. Buddhist training shows us another path, one that equally depends upon cause and effect. In the next chapter we will continue to examine the working of causality in our present life and in possible future existences.

#### 4. Becoming

The next step of Dependent Origination is expressed as follows:

*Becoming depends upon clinging.*

The word *bhava* is usually translated as *becoming*, though in the authoritative *Chinese-Sanskrit-English-Thai Buddhist Dictionary* it is rendered as *being*.

Words such as *becoming* and *being* seem to convey a formidable philosophical meaning. However, the meaning is really quite simple, though its implications for spiritual training are vast. The word *bhava* refers to those aspects of life that, under the influence of clinging, move beings headlong in the direction of the continuation of suffering. *Bhava* includes both actions influenced by clinging and the inevitable present life consequences of such actions. These consequences include the deepening of both clinging itself and despair. And so this step in the teaching is saying that as long as there is deep-seated attachment (clinging) there will be the continuation of the stream of karma.

Through the influence of clinging, the spiritual need which is seeking resolution is only intensified and made more desperate. Turned outward toward passing experience, which cannot possibly offer a true and enduring refuge, the karmic stream is impelled at the time of death to blindly grope for new form within which to continue its search for peace.

This step in the teaching of Dependent Origination thus presents us with the sobering fact that while any clinging remains, the continuation of the stream of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, is an inescapable necessity. But note that this necessity only holds while clinging continues. With the cessation of clinging, becoming also must cease. While we persist in clinging, we have no choice as to whether the stream of our karma will flow on: it has to do so. But we *do* have a choice at all times as to whether or not we will persist in clinging. And as soon as we let go of all clinging ("Om to the One Who leaps beyond *all* fear!"<sup>1</sup>), becoming ceases.



The understanding of the fact that becoming depends upon clinging underlies the attitude of the Buddhist priest toward the dying and recently dead. For regardless of what anyone may have done in the past, no one can preclude the possibility of a deep change of heart at any time. And such a change can completely alter the course of the person's karmic stream in the twinkling of an eye. The ceremonies and exhortations that accompany the dying and death of a Buddhist are intended to strengthen faith so that suffering and confusion need not continue into future lives.

I have emphasized here that we can choose not to *persist* in clinging. For there is a stubborn holding on (as the very word "clinging" implies) present in clinging which represents a misdirection of the will. As the will is realigned toward its true Object, which is the Eternal, that stubborn persistence in greed and delusion is converted into willingness, acceptance, patience, firm and steady effort and compassionate recognition that there is no self to be protected and aggrandized.

*Becoming* refers to the life-process impelled onward by clinging. Within *all* lives, suffering is present. Some people who have studied Buddhism intellectually have come to the conclusion that the cessation of becoming—the end of the stream of karma—represents a nihilistic religious ideal. The Buddha explicitly denied both the teachings of nihilism and eternalism (the eternal existence of a separate self). The end of the confusion of suffering is not the end of the True Self—the Eternal. Beings persist in clinging and thereby continue the rolling of the wheel of sorrow from life to life because they mistake the changing appearance of existence for their True Life. When one knows within one's blood and bones that, regardless of what may happen to one's changing body and mind, one's *True* Life is in the Eternal, one has at least begun the transcendence of the opposites of nihilism and eternalism. Rev. Master Jiyu called this True Life "the Immaculacy of Nothingness" and the longer I train the more I appreciate the magnificence of this description.

The cessation of becoming is thus identical to Parinirvana—final cessation of all suffering at the time of death of someone who has

entirely cleansed the karmic stream. While Nirvana is usually described by what it is *not* in the Pali Scriptures, one can find it described in the Mahayana Scriptures in terms of positive qualities. Thus, while the three qualities of changing experience (*trilaksana*) are *dukkha* (suffering), *anicca* (change) and *anatman* (the illusoriness of self), those of Nirvana, as described in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, are happiness, eternity, the True Self and bliss.<sup>2</sup> Deep within ourselves we know that the fulfillment of all longing lies in re-union with That from which we have felt (but have, in fact, never been) separated.

*The gift of the Light of the Lord is everywhere;  
The palace of the Buddha Nature is within ourselves.  
The deep, true heart wants to go quickly  
So that their happy meeting will occur soon.*

—from an ancient Chinese Buddhist text

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1. Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity* (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 85.
  2. See Kosho Yamamoto, trans., *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana-Sutra*, 3 vols. (Ube, Japan: Karinbunko, 1973–1975), Volume 1, pp. xxx, 53–55 and 177–179; and Volume 2, pp. 562–569. See also Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 3rd ed. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: The Buddhist Missionary Society, 1977), pp. 499–511.

## 5. Rebirth: The Lower Realms.

The next step of Dependent Origination is expressed as follows:

*Birth depends upon becoming.*

*Becoming* refers to the inexorable necessity of the continuation of the stream of karma in which deep-seated attachment (clinging) is still present. *Birth* is that important step in which a new form manifests the confusion (and the merit) which is the legacy of past existences.

In the earliest teachings of Buddhism, five realms of rebirth are described. These are divided into two higher realms and three lower realms.<sup>1</sup> All realms of rebirth are characterized by *dukkha*—suffering (or the inability of transitory experience to satisfy the deepest longing of the heart). In the lower realms, however, the consequences of past actions are experienced with a very heavy weight of suffering.

The three lower realms are the realms of animals, hells and hungry ghosts. Rebirth in these realms is the karmic consequence of volitional actions in which there is a preponderance of indulgence of the three poisons of delusion, hatred and greed.

Rebirth in the animal realm is the consequence of indulging delusion. The chief characteristic of the animal realm is lack of intelligence and the complementary domination of instinctual drives. Within the animal realm there is continual killing and being killed, and sexuality exists as an urge which is completely obsessive when it is biologically activated. The more complex animals are also more intelligent and this development of intelligence is, in spiritual terms, the capacity for a sympathy which extends beyond oneself and one's immediate family and social group. Humans who indulge the animal side of themselves—"behave like animals"—vent spiritual desperation through the outlet of lust. This is in fact a willful directing downward and outward of spiritual energy which wishes to gather and rise to the Eternal ("offering up"). The ultimate principle of delusion, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," is inevitably coupled with the glorification of animal lust and power. Its consequence is the dimming

of the light of intelligence and the entry into the dark world of desperate killing and being killed.

Rebirth in the realm of hells is the consequence of indulging hatred. Hatred is the wish to do harm. It is the urge to hurt and destroy. The hells are states of unrelieved anguish, pain and despair. If, in Western religion, hell is everlasting separation from God, then in Buddhism, which recognizes that no such separation is in fact possible (since the Eternal is the True Reality of *all* existence), the hells are the painful *delusions* that there is such separation.

Rebirth in the realm of hungry ghosts is the consequence of indulging greeds which develop into addictions. The world of hungry ghosts is portrayed as a place in which water, which gives life and satisfies thirst, turns to fire when the hungry ghost tries to drink. The word *tanha*, which is usually translated as "craving," "attachment" or "greed," literally means "thirst." And this metaphor of water turning to fire shows how addiction becomes a torment so that, in the very act of attempting to satisfy desire, desire increases and ruins all capacity for true satisfaction.

In Buddhism it is said that the effect is born within the cause. That is, in the volitional act the consequences already are to be found. I have found this to be of the utmost importance in thinking of the realms of rebirth. The lower realms can easily be viewed as realms of punishment for past sins. This view is common enough and Western people are used to thinking of hell in such a way. Such a view is *very* misleading. It is in fact completely untrue. In Buddhism, it is much more correct to say that the realms of rebirth are the natural and inevitable revelation of the true nature of various actions.

For example, the human being who indulges animal lust and power must block out higher spiritual awareness to stay at the animal level. Rebirth in the animal realm is the natural fruition of such action—that which is *willfully* blocked in the act is felt to be lost in the consequence. There is no judge who condemns anyone to such a rebirth, nor in fact is there an enduring soul or person that experiences such rebirth. There is just the flowing out of consequence from cause. And consequence exists, *and can be seen*, within the cause.

Thus we are *responsible* for all that flows forth within the stream of our karma from our volitional actions. "Responsible" means "able to respond," that is, "able to *do* something" about a state of affairs: if we do not want certain effects, we must pay attention to the attitude which imbues our actions, for in that *attitude* the potential effects can be seen.

In the hells, the despair of imagined separation from the Eternal is a great anguish. This becomes terror, guilt, the *conviction* that one is unclean and damned. But where does such conviction originate? The Eternal is the Reality of all existence—all beings are Buddha. The indulgence of hatred is a volitional denying of this Oneness of all existence. And so within the very act of hatred is seen the source of that conviction of separation. The consequence is simply the natural unravelling of the full implications of the cause; it is the *revealing* of what the cause *really* is (as opposed to what we *think* it is when we indulge it—so much for "righteous" anger).

In the world of hungry ghosts, the form of suffering is all-consuming desire: desire which cannot be satisfied. Here the revelatory nature of karmic consequence is especially clear, for the primary consequence of the indulging of greed is the *strengthening* of greed. The hungry ghost attitude is one of a sense of powerlessness in the face of the all-consuming passion. Indeed, addicts speak of the addiction as if it were a separate being who controls their will and life. But where did this sense of powerlessness originate? There was originally a sense of something missing, of an emptiness that seems to require filling with some experience. The *compulsive* attempt to fill that emptiness in particular ways comes with time as the habit-energy of karma develops through repeated acts of indulgence. But this compulsive power is secondary and is revelatory of the initial sense of inadequacy.<sup>2</sup>

These lower realms are, equally with the higher ones, embodiments of Compassion. Each realm is an opportunity for training. The deepest Truth—that the Refuge of the Eternal is always present—is to be found within these realms. Within the dark and painful confusion of animal preoccupation with food, self-

preservation and reproduction there arises the longing for the contentment, safety and light of the Eternal—the true light of intelligence. Within the anguish, fear and pain of the hells, one can develop acceptance and sympathy—the spiritual qualities through which the illusion of separateness is dissolved. Within the craving and doubt of the world of hungry ghosts one can grasp the will to begin to treat one's own body and mind with compassion, thereby beginning to find a greater Compassion.

Because these realms of rebirth are not just realms of physical rebirth, but are also aspects of all karmic consequence of delusive volitional action, we do not need to look to extraordinary experience for proof that the Eternal is to be found within each of the lower realms. We need only look closely at our own experience.

When we think of these lower rebirth realms as states of mind, we see that we can be "reborn" at any moment in such a realm. And we see that, through efforts rooted in faith, we can climb out of the lower realms. There is something magnificent and awe-inspiring in this, and it serves as a caution to those of us with a tendency to meddle in the lives of others. People do not need others to be their saviours, for the consequences of their own actions are at all times pointing toward the Eternal. "Thou must go alone; the Buddhas do but point the way."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Later, a fourth realm, that of the *asuras*, or warring demons, was added. Originally, however, the realm of the asuras was part of the heavenly realm. The heavens and the human realm will be discussed in the next chapter.

2. The realm of *asuras* can be viewed as the more active and aggressive counterpart of the realm of hungry ghosts. In both cases, the problem is one of runaway greed. In the asuras, the greed is lust for fame, power and wealth. The asura seems to derive power from his greed; the hungry ghost seems to be made powerless by his greed. The end result of obsession is in both cases the same and, not surprisingly, the two often go hand in hand.

3. As found in Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 7.

## 6. Rebirth: The Higher Realms.

In Buddhism, rebirth in the lower realms is viewed as the consequence of the dominant influence of greed, hate and delusion in one's karmic inheritance. Furthermore, each rebirth realm is experienced in microcosm when we pass through various states of feeling—for feeling is purely karmic consequence. Within each of the lower realms of rebirth, and each transitory state of feeling, the Compassion of the Eternal is expressed in opportunities for training.

The two higher realms of rebirth are the heavenly realm and the human realm.

In the *Dhammapada* is found the following verse: "Some people are born again [into the human realm]; evildoers go to hell; righteous people go to heaven; those who are free from all worldly desires attain Nirvana."<sup>1</sup> This verse shows clearly that rebirth in the heavenly realm is not the goal of Buddhist training. In Buddhism, the term translated as "heaven" is *deva-loka*—literally, "realm of gods." There are numerous heavens and each is identified with some form of enjoyment. The gods are celestial beings who still suffer from greed, hate and delusion. Heavenly states are transitory, not eternal. In the above quotation the "righteous people" who are reborn in heaven are people who do good and are attached to the results of their good actions. Such attachment influences toward rebirth the same as any other attachment.

Buddhism early categorized heavens in a way that reflects the tendency to pass from sensual attachments to spiritual attachments. Thus, the lowest heavens are those in which the desires associated with the senses are gratified. The lord of the sensual realm is Mara, the personification in Buddhism of self-deception. We are never more susceptible to delusion than when we think everything is going our way. We can then easily forget that all experiences and states of mind are transitory. When we do forget this fact, we inevitably become full of self. Beings in heaven are not necessarily wise and good—they can be very foolish. Thus, in the offering of merit at the Festival of the Feeding of the Hungry Ghosts, we offer merit for the "evil and wicked in heaven." The seemingly privileged state of beings in heaven is



merely the consequence of past good actions. Unless there is a continual training in selflessness, the merit of past good deeds will one day be exhausted and one will sink into rebirth in a lower realm.

The higher heavens are realms of rebirth corresponding to enjoyable meditative states. As one author writes, "Any properly trained monk...can in his meditation enjoy not only the rarified atmosphere of the gods but still more rarified atmospheres inaccessible even to them." <sup>2</sup> The early Buddhists came to think of many of the gods as existing in spheres corresponding to various meditative states. The higher levels of heaven thus came to be identified with corresponding levels of meditation. There are heavens of "subtle form" and "formless" heavens. The word "form" here is a translation of *rupa*, meaning "body." The heavens of subtle form correspond to meditative states in which one experiences partial detachment from physical desire and enjoyment. The formless heavens correspond to meditative states in which such detachment is complete. This detachment is experienced when the "turning within" of meditation allows the natural Light of the Eternal to replace confusion, fear, anger and worry in our experience. While this Light is not transitory, our *experience* of It is. And it is easy to become attached to qualities of feeling—tranquility, bliss, contentment—associated with such experience. Such attachment is as much a mistake in training as is any other attachment: no transitory experience can be given the place of the Eternal in our hearts without the creation of more suffering.

After years of training and the attainment of some measure of certainty and peace, one can experience a good deal of resistance to going again into the darkness of the unknown in order to go deeper in training. In effect, one wishes to stay in heaven. That which enables us to make the step of faith when all conditions ripen is the willingness to respond to a call from great Compassion. The object of Buddhism is not any static attainment of self. It is, rather, the complete letting go and transcending of all illusion of self. It is the welling up of Compassion which gives us the motivation and the courage to keep embracing and walking in the Great Way of the Buddhas and

Ancestors. This is the real meaning of the monk's homeless life: there is no more a "home" in even the most beautiful meditative experience than there is in family relationships and material security. Our True Home is the Eternal—Nirvana—and to become one with It we must endlessly walk on in the bright darkness of pure faith—having, knowing and clinging to nothing.

The traditional life story of the Buddha exemplifies this point well. In the life immediately prior to the human rebirth through which He realized full enlightenment, the Buddha-to-be was a celestial being in the Tushita heaven. Out of compassion for all living things, He renounced heavenly life and was reborn in the human realm, there to become the great Teacher who points the way to the Eternal. In general, one can say that in order to have full experience of the Eternal we must, out of an entirely selfless motive, let go of attachment to whatever transitory object is most precious to us. For one person this might be status in the eyes of others; for another it is wealth; for another it is a particular relationship; for another it is a career; for another it is being useful to other people. None of these objects of attachment are wrong in themselves. But none can take the place of the Eternal in our lives. For That which we call "the Eternal" is not a particular part or aspect of existence. It is the true Nature of all beings, the Life which neither comes nor goes and within which, as reflections come and go in a mirror, our transitory life is lived. In giving up our imagined heavens, we come to find the Place of the Eternal, Heaven within the Heart.

The realm of humans can be characterized as one in which beings are best able to comprehend the fact of changeableness. Such comprehension depends upon two factors. First, states of body and mind must be of short duration. Second, there must be sufficient intelligence. Heavenly lives are prolonged states of enjoyment; hellish lives are prolonged states of utter misery; the lives of hungry ghosts are prolonged states of craving; the lives of animals are occupied with survival, and intelligence is very dim in most of them; *asuras*, like hungry ghosts, are obsessed with desire. Humans experience all of these states of mind and body to some degree. But in humans they

tend to be of shorter duration. Thus, human life is neither constantly enjoyable nor constantly miserable. Of course, human life is difficult enough in itself. But in comparison with the other realms of rebirth, the human realm represents an unexcelled opportunity to renounce greed, hate and delusion and turn toward the Eternal.

Human rebirth is regarded by Buddhists as the highest realm of rebirth for the purpose of spiritual training. Within the human world one can hear and practice the Buddhadharma. One can *also* make unwise choices and get into big trouble: the potential goes both ways. Our human life is, therefore, a kind of spiritual crossroads. It represents the greatest opportunity for enlightenment and for delusion.

Rebirth in the human realm is viewed in Buddhism as the consequence of the dominant influence of Preceptual action in a karmic stream. In other words, a karmic stream has to embody some movement toward genuine selflessness in order for rebirth in the human realm to be possible.

Rebirth in any realm is entirely the consequence of past volitional actions of thought, word and deed. Once we have experienced a particular rebirth, the question of importance is, "How can I make best use of my present situation in order to turn toward the Eternal?" In the human world of ordinary daily responsibility, the question is answered by the willing doing of that which needs to be done as the offering of all things to the Eternal. In the heavenly realm, it is answered by the willingness to move forward out of compassion rather than attempt to stay in what is, after all, a transitory state of enjoyment.

In the next chapter we will examine the nature of suffering inherent in transitory existence and the relationship between suffering and the development of true faith.

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1. E.A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1955), p. 59.
  2. A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), p. 152.

## 7. Old Age, Death, Suffering and Faith.

In the two preceding chapters, we examined the realms of rebirth. The next step in the teaching of Dependent Origination is expressed as follows:

*Birth gives rise to old age and death,  
together with tribulation, grief, sorrow, distress and despair.<sup>1</sup>*

All that arises (birth) must pass away (death). All beings live their lives within these limits. All beings know pain and sorrow during their lives. *Old age and death* limit our body and mind absolutely. *Tribulation, grief, sorrow, distress and despair* express the unavoidability of suffering.

There are other aspects of our life that are equally consequential upon birth. There are youth and health as well as old age and disease; joy as well as sorrow; hope as well as despair. Why then are the difficult and unpleasant aspects of our existence emphasized here?

When we are young and healthy it is easy to ignore the fact that we will inevitably grow old and die. When we love and are loved in return, it is easy to ignore the fact that we will one day inevitably be separated from the ones we love. When we are not feeling pain, it is easy to forget that we, along with all beings, must sometimes experience pain. Buddhist training begins with some degree of recognition and acceptance of these facts. The Buddha's First Noble Truth is that *dukkha* is inextricably linked to existence. The word *dukkha* refers to suffering; to pain; to the fact that transitory experiences cannot satisfy the deepest longing of the heart; to all that is hard to endure in life.

Only when we clearly perceive the full consequences of our actions do we readily forsake some cherished folly. Most of us habitually try to find some real security in the world of the transitory. The teaching of Dependent Origination shows us the way in which such clinging results in rebirth. And in this present step, it shows us that the kinds of expectations underlying that infatuated attachment are seriously out of touch with the sobering realities that inevitably *must* be experienced by anyone born into this world. The things that

happen to us which are painful and difficult to endure are the full flowering of karmic consequence even though, as we shall see, many particular events may have no direct causal relation to particular past volitional actions.

These difficult and unpleasant aspects of existence are emphasized in this step of the teaching of Dependent Origination because we cannot begin to break the ancient cycle of confusion, craving, clinging to worldly existence, birth, suffering and death until we begin to let go of illusory views of worldly happiness. This gateway of acceptance—for such it is—is not easy to enter, but the inexorable facts of existence described in this step of the teaching point us continually to the necessity of seeking entry. This is not a negative or pessimistic teaching. The Buddha taught that it is as great an error—and as productive of further suffering—to hate and attempt to spiritually resist these conditions of existence as it is to attempt to ignore them by drowning awareness in enjoyments. The Buddha's Middle Way is a way of compassionate acceptance through which the Changeless is revealed within the changing. Great Master Kanchi Sosan wrote the following words: "If you want to follow the doctrine of the One, do not rage against the World of the Senses. Only by accepting the World of the Senses can you share in the True Perception."<sup>2</sup>

If we do not want the ancient round of suffering, old age and death to continue, we must look to the conditions of ignorance, desire and impulsive, willful action which cause rebirth. For only when rebirth ends will all suffering also fully end. This point of view, which is the basis for the Buddhist monk's renunciation of the world, is all too easily misunderstood, and I have attempted to clarify the meaning of renunciation in chapter 10 of this book. Suffice it to say that the sober comprehension of the suffering of existence and the determination to do all within one's power to stop the rolling of the wheel of ignorance and desire express a deep faith in a Goodness in life which underlies all that we normally think of as good or evil.

The law of karma has been seriously misunderstood by some people as a form of fate or predestination. Nothing could be further

from the truth. The ideas of fate and predestination assume the existence of an inscrutable and implacable force, entity or being which—or who—establishes the course of events in a manner that is blind to human choice and understanding. The law of karma, however, enables us to understand how the present state of our body and mind is founded in preceding conditions, and how future states of body and mind can be influenced by our present choices. No one is favored over anyone else in this process. Everyone can influence his or her future for the better by training sincerely in the present. Sometimes the law of karma is seen functioning in the outflowing of a particular feeling from a particular volitional action. For example, someone gets mad, kicks the dog and feels guilty and ashamed afterwards. Sometimes such specific consequences might be related to causes in a much more distant past. For example, a person living long ago commits a terribly cruel act. Centuries later someone—the inheritor of the karma—experiences great difficulty with feelings and thoughts of unworthiness and self-condemnation. Eventually the karmic connection is revealed in meditation: "I feel this way because that being did a terrible act and subsequently judged himself to be evil. I have inherited these same tendencies and the feelings that express them." But there is a more general functioning of karmic consequence and it is this functioning that is emphasized in the step of Dependent Origination that we are examining here.

Suppose I am living in an area of the country in which it rains a great deal. One year record rains fall and flooding occurs all over the countryside. Then the dam upriver breaks; the waters sweep me and thousands of others into oblivion. This is the kind of event that happens a great deal. Earthquakes, floods, falling meteors, invading hordes, tornados, plagues, fires, disasters of all kinds happen to all kinds of beings constantly in our world. It is stretching the law of karma beyond its limits to see any particular volitional cause of the calamity of flood that hit me and many others in this example. After all, I did nothing to cause the rains to fall and the dam to break. Such things quite literally "just happen" in this life. And they can happen to

anyone at any time. No amount of prescience or other intuitive ability can prepare us to avoid every possible disaster and danger.

And yet there is a sense in which the functioning of the law of karma is clearly evident in this last example. But it is not present, as said above, as the action of fate or predestination. It is present simply in the fact that we have been born into the *kind* of world where such things do "just happen." This is the way it has always been and always will be. We can be careful and prudent, and this is necessary. We can also recognize the wonderful extent to which there is harmony within the seeming chaos of events. Yet, in the end, we are all subject to these general conditions of difficulty and danger. And this is the consequence of being reborn in this world.

The spiritual implications of the positive acceptance of this simple fact are far reaching. One implication is that we come to know that though we may influence in many ways the circumstances of our existence, the ultimate solution to the spiritual problem of how to find true and enduring security and peace can never be achieved by external means. We have to find that Source of security and peace that lies within our own Heart. This is the purpose of religion, the essence of which is the turning in faith toward the Eternal. Buddhists call the practice of this essential religious act *dhyana* ("meditation") or *samadhi*.<sup>3</sup>

A related implication of this acceptance of the general karmic consequential nature of the difficult conditions of our existence is the lowering of expectations about how the world "should" be and how people "should" behave. The tragedy of existence is intrinsic to it, not something added by some action of malicious intent. At some point in our lives we are all touched by tragedy. There is no living being who is not so touched. If we become bitter and cynical as a result of such experience, we only add to the sum total of the world's sorrow. If we desperately try to set all the world's seeming wrongs to right, we only add our own disquiet and despair to that of others. The Middle Way is the way of bowing with dignity, patience and humility within tragic change. *Then* one can realistically and compassionately assess the situation and do something positive to fill a need. If we thus relent in

our demands and soften our hearts, we catch ourselves bowing to the Eternal within many seemingly unlikely situations.

Great Master Dogen warned against *trying* to avoid birth and death. "Should you be able to find the Buddha *within* birth and death, they both vanish."<sup>4</sup>This is a further implication of the acceptance of the dukkha of our existence. Sitting still within our own hearts in genuine acceptance, we try neither to continue the rolling of the wheel of suffering *nor* to avoid the consequences which we are presently reaping from our karmic inheritance of volitional actions. "Birth and death" describes karmic consequence. "Finding the Buddha within birth and death" refers to this positive acceptance and the understanding that flows forth from it. The signs of such understanding are respect and gratitude—gratitude even (sometimes *especially*) for the most difficult experiences of our life. For it is in these experiences that we are thrown back upon the power of faith which lives within every heart. This faith knows that there is That within birth and death which absolutely transcends birth and death. It knows that however great our difficulty, confusion and pain may be, there is That which is our eternal Refuge. Thus it is that in awakening to the Eternal birth and death vanish *as obstacles*. Our True Life, the Life of the Eternal, is then known to be the Reality of all existence, including all that is hard to bear and to accept. Nothing is outside this Flow of Immaculacy. The very impossibility of resolving our spiritual problems by controlling, manipulating and rearranging external conditions provides the incentive to make this leap into faith. Thus, old age, disease, death and sorrow are expedient means by which the Compassion of the Eternal leads us into the deep, still waters that underlie the transitory, and sometimes stormy, conditions that exist at the surface level of life.

These things cannot be deeply penetrated by the intellect alone. Each of us must move toward acceptance in our own way, as the positive fulfillment of the spiritual purpose that underlies our entire karmic inheritance. The conditions of existence in this world in which we have been born present us with the opportunity to develop and deepen faith and acceptance *or* doubt and despair. The freedom of



choice is real and the consequences of exercising it are inexorable.  
How fortunate we are that the Buddhas and

Ancestors have clearly pointed the Way!

To do something by ourselves, without copying others, is to become an example to the world and the merit of doing such a thing becomes the source of all wisdom: do not criticise; accept everything.<sup>5</sup>

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1. “Jara-marana” is old age and death. The other terms translate “soka-parideva-dukkhadomanass-upayasa.” See *A Dictionary of Buddhism: Chinese-Sanskrit-English-Thai* (Bangkok: Chan Patana, 1976), P. 292. This dictionary was prepared by the Chinese Sangha of Thailand.
  2. “Trust in the Heart,” in E.A. Burt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1955), p. 229. Also see “Sandokai” and “The Most Excellent Mirror—Samadhi,” in Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity* (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), pp. 60 and 63.
  3. Often *dhyana* refers more specifically to formal sitting meditation and the various spiritual states that are most commonly experienced in sitting meditation. *Samadhi* seems often to emphasize more the “one-pointed” or “centered” absorption of meditation.
  4. See Great Master Dogen, “Shushogi (What is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment),” in *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd ed. rev., by Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 155.
  5. Great Master Keizan, “Kyojukaimon (Giving and Receiving the Teaching of the Precepts),” *ibid.*, p. 272.

## 8. The Rolling Wheel of Becoming.

Many centuries ago, Buddhist monks in India analyzed Dependent Origination in great detail. The books of the *Abhidhamma* (section of the Pali Canon dealing with philosophical analysis and exposition of the teachings) contain hundreds of pages devoted to this exposition. While specialized purposes of advanced training can be well served by study of analyses, contemplative Buddhist practice places emphasis on experiential and intuitive realization of the spiritual truths embodied in the teaching of Dependent Origination. In this chapter, I would like to briefly discuss the way in which Dependent Origination comes to be intuitively understood. In the next chapter, I will review some of the ways of looking at the teaching in overview.

One of the limitations of analysis is that, as one becomes increasingly involved in it, one also tends to increasingly "lose sight of the woods and see only the trees."

The spiritual purpose of the teaching of Dependent Origination is to help beings free themselves from the wheel of birth and death. If we want to "see the woods," we must bear this purpose in mind.

The teaching of Dependent Origination embodies the most practical of all religious teachings. We suffer; our volitional actions are causally related to our suffering; we would like to free ourselves from suffering; we therefore must change our actions. We can do any amount of intellectual study of the Buddha's teachings. But unless we have come to a point in our lives at which our fundamental responsibility for our own suffering is being positively accepted, the teachings will remain spiritually impenetrable.

This taking of responsibility is called "raising the Mind that seeks the Way." It is important to understand clearly what this acceptance of responsibility is and what it is not.

For years Rev. Master Jiyu spoke of the importance of "just doing one's own training." For years I would hear this and somehow *not* hear it fully. After some big mistakes, I finally *heard* it. To "just do one's own training" is to accept that it does not fundamentally matter

how our suffering originated, who did what to whom in the past, or what *might* happen in the future. What does matter is that, in this present moment, I can choose to act on the basis of past greed, hate and delusion, or act with the mind of meditation. If I am careless of my present exercise of volition, I will perpetuate suffering. And this will involve both self and others. The point here is the simple necessity of putting the brakes on the rolling wheel of birth and death by not carrying forward, through present action, the causes of suffering from the past.

This acceptance of responsibility is not guilt. Guilt is self-blame based on clinging to the past. Nor is it callousness: to "just do one's own training" is the only firm foundation for compassion; it is not a callous lack of compassion. In Buddhism, the primary way in which we can do good for others is by not doing that which drives (or entices) others further into delusion than they already are. The wheel of sorrow is easy to start and hard to stop. Those who know this are mindful of their own attitudes and actions and the effects which they might have upon others.

The individual steps of Dependent Origination, and the relations among these steps, are the "trees" of our proverbial metaphor. The "woods" is the rolling of the wheel of sorrow and the great spiritual need to do whatever is required to stop it. One can approach the "woods" by examining the "trees"; we can also glimpse the *meaning* of individual "trees" in being aware of the "woods" as a whole. Many of the most profound truths are seldom apprehended with clarity. More often, they are intuitively known; and, as our training continues, we sometimes sense that our understanding of them is deepening even though we may seem to be a long way from even a single lucid thought about them. In just going about our daily meditation and training, we are working constantly on stopping the rolling of the wheel of becoming. And in the natural course of events, the process sometimes highlights for awhile various crucial aspects of causality. At these times we have insight into individual steps, and/or the relations among various steps, of Dependent Origination. But most of the time, we live with a more subtle, "backburner" awareness

of the rolling wheel of suffering, cause and effect, the wise and unwise employment of volition, the inexorability of consequence, the transitory character of existence, and so on.

The fact that something is not clearly perceived in intellect is no proof that it is not practically understood. Since the point of Buddhism is the cessation of suffering, anyone who is moving through training in the direction of cessation is—whether he or she knows it or not—manifesting some level of understanding of Dependent Origination. In the same way, a fluent speaker of English manifests understanding of the language when speaking even though his grasp of grammatical theory may be negligible. It may be very helpful to study grammar at some point, just as it can be helpful to the trainee to study Dependent Origination. But anyone who has halfheartedly studied a foreign language knows how easy it is to learn all the rules and remain unable to carry on a simple spoken conversation. So in Buddhism what really matters is the doing of training in ordinary daily life.

In the next chapter, we will look at Dependent Origination in ways which reveal the main features of relatedness among the various steps of the Teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed explanation of the Precepts in this light of responsibility, please see Great Master Keizan and Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, *Kyōjukaimon and Commentary in An Introduction to the Tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen)* (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> . The word “intuitive” here is used to indicate the “knowing with blood and bones,” which is also what is meant by faith.

<sup>3</sup> The Third Noble Truth of the Buddha. Synonymous with Nirvana, the Eternal, Buddha Nature, etc.

## 9. Overviews of the Teaching.

In this chapter, I would like to discuss briefly two helpful ways of grouping the steps of the teaching so as to reveal its simple and profound spiritual content.<sup>1</sup>

The first traditional way of grouping the steps shows the functioning of cause and effect through past, present and possible future existences. This grouping is as follows:

On ignorance depend volitional activities.

**DIVISION I  
PAST EXISTENCES**

On volitional activities depends relinking consciousness.

On relinking consciousness depend body and mind.

On body and mind depends the functioning of the six senses.

**DIVISION II  
PRESENT EXISTENCE**

On the functioning of the six senses depends sense experience.

On sense experience depends feeling.

On feeling depends craving.

On craving depends clinging.

On clinging depends becoming.

On becoming depends rebirth.

**DIVISION III  
POSSIBLE FUTURE  
EXISTENCES**

On rebirth depend old age, death and the continuation of suffering.

Division I shows the roots of suffering in past existences: under the influence of ignorance, beings did volitional actions which resulted in the continuation of confusion into this present life.

Division II shows that the existence and specific form of this present body and mind provide the basis for all experience; that painful and pleasurable feelings are an inextricable part of all experience; that attachments (cravings) and aversions can easily grow out of these feelings and that the willful indulgence of greed, hate and

delusion again, as in past existences, manifests as willful actions (becoming) which propel the stream of karma toward rebirth.

Division III shows that, unless something is done in this present life to stop the rolling of this wheel of suffering, a mass of confusion will again be left at the time of death. This mass of confusion will be inherited by beings in future rebirths, and these beings will be subject to all the vicissitudes and pains of existence.

This threefold division of the Teaching of Dependent Origination is the single greatest aid for seeing the spiritual purpose of the teaching (the clarification of the nature of transitory existence so as to enable beings to free themselves from ignorance and craving). Throughout this series of chapters I have relied upon this analysis of the teaching.

A second way of analyzing the steps of the teaching of Dependent Origination does so according to whether a particular step emphasizes karmic cause or karmic effect. In this way of analysis, the steps appear as follows:

On ignorance depend volitional activities.

**CAUSE**

On volitional activities depends relinking consciousness.

On relinking consciousness depend body and mind. On body and mind depends the functioning of the six senses.

**CONSEQUENCE**

On the functioning of the six senses depends sense experience.

On sense experience depends feeling.

On feeling depends craving.

On craving depends clinging.

**CAUSE**

On clinging depends becoming.

On becoming depends rebirth.

On rebirth depend old age, death and the continuation of suffering.

**CONSEQUENCE**

From this way of grouping the steps of the teaching, we can see at a glance two ways of using the will in training. All of the steps marked “cause” are steps in which a volitional choice is involved. All the steps marked “consequence” indicate aspects of life which, once the causes and conditions upon which they depend are activated, cannot be changed. For example, while craving depends upon feeling, this dependence is of a type very different from, say, the dependence of the six senses upon body and mind. In the latter case, there is no element of choice: the six senses function simultaneously with body and mind as aspects of body and mind. Nothing we do can change this fact. In the case of the relation between feeling and craving, however, craving is dependent upon feeling through the volitional dwelling upon like and dislike. Thus, through spiritual training, craving can be reduced even while feeling continues to function normally as an inextricable aspect of sense experience. This example may seem to be technical, but the point being made here is really quite simple: the steps marked “cause” show where choices are being made; the steps marked “consequence” show what must flow forth from those choices. If we do not want certain consequences, we must deal with their causes. To use another example, it is futile and self-defeating to seek to deny and stop in our present life the processes of old age and death: these are inevitable consequences of birth. If we wish to stop the flow of suffering through continuing births and deaths, we must deal directly with the volitional activities which cause birth and death. And the right use of the will with respect to all of the steps marked “consequence” in the above list is in the direction of all-acceptance. Thus, to expand the present example, we can accept and bow to old age and death, rather than futilely wasting precious time and energy in efforts to deny and resist them. And that time and energy can then be used for the training that undermines craving, clinging and becoming—the conditions leading to rebirth, and thus to old age and death in possible future existences. Note that in this last example, I am speaking of old age and death as aspects of our present life. This points up the fact that, while the threefold division of the steps of Dependent Origination into past, present and possible future existences is useful and coincides with the real intent of the teaching,

it is obvious that all twelve steps are to be found acting in the present lives of beings. There is no need to construe Dependent Origination in a narrow and dogmatic way. It is, in every feature, a practical teaching and, as such, is never in any aspect far removed from the practicalities of our everyday life. For example, while the term "ignorance" occurs in the Past Existences division, clearly ignorance is present as an underlying condition and cause in all volitional activity in which craving is indulged and deepened into clinging. An intuitive and experiential understanding of the teaching yields a fluid, kaleidoscopic approach to all of the terms and steps.

The teaching is given in its traditional manner to emphasize certain points which are of great practical importance to all who would stop the rolling of the wheel of karma. Throughout this series of chapters, I have tried to emphasize these points. The understanding of this magnificent teaching can never be static: it is always developing, deepening, discovering new aspects related to immediate spiritual need. The teaching says as much by implication as by explicit explanation. The Mahayana teaching of shunyata, the Immaculacy of Nothingness, for example, is contained by implication in the teaching of Dependent Origination. And shunyata is the essence of wisdom. Chapter 11 will examine this relationship.

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1. These two ways of analyzing the Teaching of Dependent Origination are discussed in Ven. Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary* (Kandy. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), pp. 157–167, especially p. 159.



## **10. Dependent Origination, Renunciation of the World and Awakening to True Wisdom.**

Throughout this book, more emphasis has been placed upon the individual steps of Dependent Origination, and relations among small groups of steps, than upon the intuitive sense of the overall flow of action and consequence, birth and death, that is so often portrayed as a rolling wheel. Yet it is exactly this intuition of the weary round of ignorance, craving and sorrow that burgeons eventually into a dim awareness that there is a need to stop the rolling of the wheel.

Until the eye of wisdom begins to open, there is no basis for a genuine understanding of the Buddha's teaching. Beings may undergo great suffering and still remain in a profound state of spiritual slumber, clinging to transitory things and illusory refuges. Only when "all conditions ripen," that is, when the experience of suffering and impermanence coincides with an accumulation of spiritual merit sufficient to pierce for an instant the dark and turbid fog of ignorance, does the wisdom eye begin to open. This can manifest in simple, quiet ways. It can arise as "I could be wrong" or "There *must* be more to life than this" or "I don't want to continue this misery." This beginning of wisdom requires neither words nor any other obvious external signs of comprehension. Yet, once established, it disturbs the sleep of ignorance. It is as a tiny sliver in the palm of the hand: one cannot see it, but it causes irritation through even the slightest movement.

This intuitive sense of the rolling of the wheel of becoming is, whether one knows it or not, the beginning and foundation of understanding of Dependent Origination. It is also the basis of the monk's renunciation of the world. Yet neither Dependent Origination nor the renunciation of the world can truly be understood merely by reference to weariness with birth and death. There is, at the root of this intuition, the knowing, or sensing, deep within oneself that there is more to life than birth, death, pleasure, pain, health, disease, love, hate, knowledge and ignorance. It is this intuitive root—faith—that enables us to begin to turn from that which, at least in a deeply intuitive way, is at last being recognized as unreal. And this turning from illusion is a turning toward True Reality and True Life.

It is not surprising that some Western people encountering Buddhism in superficial ways have thought it to be life-denying and negative: if one views renunciation without faith, one is bound to have this attitude. When one is caught up in the rolling wheel of becoming, one is blind to Dharma. This is the sleep of ignorance. When the eye of wisdom begins to open and the sleeper begins to awaken, renunciation begins to have meaning. And in some intuitive way one begins to realize that, while there is no enduring refuge in the world of transitory, conditioned arising and passing, there *is* a True and Eternal Refuge which can be found.

In the last chapter, I discussed briefly the division of the steps in the teaching of Dependent Origination into those that emphasize cause and those that emphasize consequence. The consequences of willful actions are the monk's incentives toward renunciation. But it is important to understand that it is the *cause*, not the consequence, that must be renounced. There is no use in struggling against the present consequences of past actions. These must be accepted positively so that one can then do one's best *within the limits of these conditions* to cease from causing the wheel of suffering to continue to roll. For example, my body and mind are that of a human being. This is karmic consequence. Therefore, I experience life in the manner of a human being. And this body and mind are subject to disease, old age and death. I cannot just stop having human feelings (also karmic consequence) just because I want to; nor can I escape from illness, old age and death. If I accept these facts, I can still take reasonable care of body and mind so as to avoid making life more difficult than it already is. Indeed, I am more likely to take good care of body and mind if I accept that they are subject to illness and death than if I refuse to accept this fact. And I can learn to do my best in terms of *training* regardless of whether passing states of feeling are, at any one moment, pleasurable, painful or neutral in quality, and regardless of whether I am well or ill, young or old. There is, as renunciation deepens and matures, a gradual movement away from habitually and unreflectively clutching at transitory experiences as if they could offer any real satisfaction and security. And there is, simultaneously, the

natural movement of the Heart toward the Eternal, our True Refuge within which all the longing of the spirit finds its true Object.

The focus of renunciation is, then, the cessation of all willful perpetuation of suffering. Always within such renunciation, as its very living breath, is the purely compassionate motivation to cease from doing harm. The teaching of Dependent Origination shows that all aspects of worldly life arise in dependence upon conditions. Nowhere in transitory experience is there anything that can be taken to be a permanently enduring, separate form of existence. In other words, nowhere is there a *self*. In the beginning of renunciation, when the illusion of self is still very deeply rooted, people tend naturally enough to think of renunciation in a somewhat selfish way, as an escape from one's own suffering. With time, however, this shallow point of view dissolves until, one day, one looks with compassion upon this world of impermanence and knows that it is, in its True Nature, Immaculate, void of self, unreal and undefilable. Thus it is that *The Heart Sutra, The Scripture of Great Wisdom*, states that the Holy Lord, Great

Avalokiteshwara, the Bodhisattva who expresses the limitless Compassion of the Eternal, looks upon the world of body and mind and knows it to be "void, unstained and pure."<sup>1</sup> Where, within Great Compassion, is there any real distinction between self and other? Why would one who is training so as to be a vehicle of the Compassion and Wisdom of the Eternal deliberately do that which causes either self or others to continue mistaking dreams for Reality?

This relationship between Dependent Origination and the Bodhisattvic understanding of Compassion and Wisdom is a real and organic one and is experienced in the natural course of training. Different schools of Buddhism, and different teachers, emphasize different points. Regardless of such seeming differences, I encourage the reader to train in Buddhism so as to understand from his or her own experience the real basis of Buddhist teaching. Only through sincere practice can we realize for ourselves the way in which suffering is caused and the way in which suffering ceases. Only through a life of active faith can we come to know that this world of sorrow is the ever-changing face of the True World of Immaculacy.

Out of Great Compassion the Bodhisattvas dwell in this world, knowing its joys and pains, without mistaking it for the True Reality or causing its sorrows to multiply. They just do what needs to be done and thereby illumine the Way for those who, stirring in the midst of their slumber, begin to look within to find the Truth. While renouncing the world forever, the Bodhisattvas forever pour the Water of Compassion upon it.

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1. Rev. Master P. T. N. H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, 2nd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990), p. 73.

## 11. Dependent Origination and *Shunyata*.

In this chapter I would like to explore briefly the thesis that the essential concept of the Mahayana Wisdom Sutras, *shunyata*, is contained implicitly within the teaching of Dependent Origination.

The teaching of Dependent Origination is a practical exposition of the first two of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths: suffering is intrinsic to existence (the First Noble Truth); and the ultimate cause of all suffering is craving based in ignorance of True Reality (the Second Noble Truth). The teaching of Dependent Origination looks at the flow of our life in terms of its origins in confusion inherited from past existences, the perpetuation of that confusion in this present life, and the possible continuation of the confusion into future existences. Only when craving and ignorance cease will the rolling wheel of suffering stop.

This picture of worldly existence exemplifies the Buddha's teaching that all our experience is impermanent (*anicca*), that no transitory experience can satisfy the deepest longing of the Heart (the deeper meaning of *dukkha*), and that no matter how hard we try, we will never find an enduring refuge within transitory experience (*anatta*). These are three ways of looking at the one flow of life.

The full meaning of this view of existence is expressed in the teaching of Dependent Origination. This view of life is not a metaphysical doctrine. It is a practical expression of the way in which we come to perceive and understand the world as our greed, hate and delusion are converted through training into compassion, love and wisdom.

One way of characterizing ignorance is as a kind of misplaced faith. It is a conviction that some part of the world of impermanence can endure and that this enduring part can be a refuge which can provide true spiritual satisfaction. This conviction is so deeply rooted that it is unquestioned by most living beings. It provides the filter through which the world is perceived. It is not necessarily a consciously held belief, but provides presuppositions that underlie all worldly ideas of good and evil. It leads us to grasp after and cling to

transitory things; and this craving reinforces the ignorance *until*, one day, someone begins to think that he or she *might* be mistaken.

The misplaced faith described here is faith in the delusion of self. Over many lives it becomes a hardened, dense clot of delusion and longing. Buddhist training acts as a solvent to dissolve the clot.

The following are some ways in which penetration through training of the teaching of Dependent Origination works upon the clot of ignorance. The development of acceptance of the fact that attachment to transitory states of feeling always results in painful spiritual states (ranging from boredom to terror) undermines the strength of the conviction that worldly life can satisfy our real spiritual need. The development of acceptance of the fact that only volition is the doer of karma, there being no person in the past who is identical to the person of the present, helps greatly to dissolve the habitual tendencies of hatred directed toward both oneself (guilt) and others. The acceptance of our own mortality—that mind and body come into existence and must pass away—undermines the tendency to identify mind and body, or any aspect thereof, with an enduring, immutable refuge. The gradual, intuitive and experiential comprehension of the relations of dependency among all features of transitory experience works to weaken the belief that any aspect of the whole can exist in some protected, independent realm beyond the touch of impermanence and suffering.

This last feature is often emphasized by Buddhist teachers. If one looks at a house of cards sitting upon a table in a darkened room, one may easily mistake it for a much more solid object. But when, in the full light of day, one sees it as it is, recognizing that the whole construct exists because of many individually weak supporting relations among the cards, one perceives the whole as fragile and insubstantial. Through training, we develop insight into the relations of dependency among our desires and our states of feeling, our impulses to action and presuppositions darkened by ignorance, the present existence of body and mind and confusion inherited from past existences, the on-going process of birth and death and present deep-rooted habits of clinging, and so on. This insight, deeply nurtured

through the practice of all-acceptance, erodes away at many points the dark, compact obstacle of ignorance.

The real nature of our transitory existence is expressed in the Mahayana concept of *shunyata*. As Rev. Master Jiyu often pointed out, the way in which this term is commonly translated into English—as "voidness" or "emptiness"—is hopelessly lacking in depth and positivity of meaning. When training has worked sufficiently on the clot of ignorance to begin truly to break it up, the world is seen in a very different way. It is as if the solidity and opacity of body and mind—and of all aspects of impermanent existence upon which they depend and which depend upon them—drop away and all is known to be ephemeral and transparent. And through this transparent curtain of impermanence shines the immaculate light of the Eternal as sunlight breaking through separating clouds penetrates a veil of raindrops, revealing each to be a momentary, gleaming jewel. Then what had seemed so essential and real is revealed to be insignificant and ephemeral. And where there had been a seeming darkness, born of dividing the world into good (the object of desire) and evil (anything that might block the fulfillment of the desire), there is revealed to be a flow of all-embracing Immaculacy.

Rev. Master Jiyu's use of the phrase "Immaculacy of Nothingness" to translate *shunyata* is the best English rendering of which I am aware. The "nothingness" refers to the unreality of transitory existence relative to the True Reality of the Eternal. This is also the meaning of "voidness" and "emptiness," though I always feel that it would be more helpful to point out that what is referred to is voidness *of self*.

The sixth Chinese Ancestor's famous poem contains the lines "Since all is void where can the dust alight?"<sup>1</sup> expresses a profound understanding of both *shunyata* and Dependent Origination. Since there is nothing in the flow of transitory existence that is or can be an enduring self, there is and can be no accumulation of anything that can defile True Reality. All that beings think of as good and evil exists within the Flow of Immaculacy, dependently arising and passing. There is neither an enduring self that creates suffering nor one that

suffers: there is just the arising and passing of momentary states of volition and feeling. The cleansing and conversion of karma take place within this flow as an aspect of the Immaculacy of all things, not as a separating out of good from evil resulting in the preservation of good and the destruction of evil. (Attempts to do the latter lead in some cases to the unwholesome excesses of asceticism, in others to such tragedies as witch burnings and mass persecutions.)

As a result of Buddhist training, we come to perceive and understand our ordinary life in a very different way. When the influence of ignorance is great, there is felt to be a correspondingly great gap between ourselves—and our ordinary daily life—and the Eternal. As training erodes ignorance away over time, this seeming gap imperceptibly lessens. Great Master Tozan's profound expression of realization "I am not Him; He is *all* of me"<sup>2</sup> reveals an understanding in which there is both recognition of body and mind as existing within the realm of differences *and* awareness that the realm of differences is itself but the changing face of the One. In such an understanding, *shunyata* means "voidness of self" when applied to the aspect of existence as impermanent and conditioned; at the same time, it means "fullness of True Self" when applied to the aspect of the Oneness which pervades all differences. Similarly, *shunyata* means "unreality" and "True Reality," "transitory" and "Eternal," "created" and "Unborn" simultaneously. In this understanding, the changing reveals the Changeless and the Changeless embraces and illuminates the changing. And both are aspects of one Reality which we call "the Eternal," "Buddha Nature," "Unborn," "Dharmakaya," etc.

Words can do no more than point toward the experience of Truth. They neither express it clearly nor convey any adequate sense of the awesome immensity of our True Life. Nonetheless, they can sometimes help us in our work on the dissolving of the clot of ignorance. A verse from *The Diamond Sutra* eloquently expresses the point of view of *shunyata*:

*Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:  
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,*



*A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the *Sutra of Hui Neng* in *The Diamond Sutra and Sutra of Hui Neng*, A. F. Price and Wong Mau-Lam, trans., (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 1969), p. 18. Another way of translating the line “since all is void” is “since there is nothing from the first.”

<sup>2</sup> For another rendering of this line, as well as the entire poem and the context in which it was composed, please see *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd ed. rev, by Roshi P. T. N. H. Jiyu-Kennett (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Kenneth J. Saunders. See his *Epochs in Buddhist History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), p. 81.

### **Conclusion: An Infinite Love**

The ignorance from which all the sorrow and mayhem of life originate is, at its heart, a simple and innocent incomprehension. Rev. Master Jiyu often said, "By accident someone started the course of karma." There was an event in which one believed oneself to have lost that which one loved above all things. This sense of loss—or separation-tinged love (which was always there) with sadness. We are not speaking here of abstractions, but of actual events within a stream of karma: a baby is torn from its mother in wartime and cannot comprehend the separation; an animal loses its freedom and mourns the loss; a man despairs as he sees his people being destroyed by violence and disease. That which sets—and keeps—the wheel of birth and death rolling is the power of the conviction that one has indeed lost something—a conviction which began in a moment of anguish and confusion and which was deepened over lifetimes as beings tried a myriad ways of recovering their lost refuge.

And so, acting upon ignorance, beings deepened their despairing grief ("willful actions arise from ignorance") and died in the darkness of their pain and confusion. Our present life is the expression of the longing that was not fulfilled in those past existences ("relinking consciousness arises from willful actions; mind and body arise from relinking consciousness").

When we are still very young, we begin again the ancient, blind groping for our lost refuge. Once again, there is new life experience ("the senses depend upon mind and body; contact depends upon the senses"). And the meaning that this experience has for us will be influenced by the ancient karmic theme. This theme conditions the ways in which crucial events and relationships of ordinary life evoke states of feeling ("feeling arises from contact").

And so, once again, made hopeful by glimpses of happiness and retreating from the dark well of anguished grief, longing manifests ("craving arises out of feeling"). And, once again, the more we willfully give ourselves to confused longing, the more we become locked into the "I must have" of clinging ("clinging arises from craving"). And the desperation of this "I must have"—ancient, yet renewed by our

confused thrashings about in this lifetime—will, if unchecked, create the conditions for the continued rolling of the wheel of confusion and pain ("becoming arises from clinging; rebirth arises from becoming; old age, death and the continuation of suffering arise from rebirth").

The process described here is the "outflowing" of karma—longing and effort directed toward external objects and relationships in the vain attempt to find within them one's lost haven. But the outflowing is only part of the story. Eventually—and it may take a very long time—someone begins to question the externalized ways of searching for that which is lost. Even though one does not know this at the time, as soon as one begins to do this, one is beginning a deeper questioning—the questioning of the underlying premise upon which the whole process of outflowing is based: the premise that one has really lost one's refuge.

What is it that draws our attention to the fact that something is not working? Usually, it is a great dose of pure karmic consequence in the form of pain, bliss (the experience of unsaddened Love), or both. Pain—physical and spiritual—is a signal that something needs help. Deep pain signals a deep need. In order to be helped by pain, we need to practice accepting it within stillness. When we do this, pain teaches us. It teaches us many things, the single most important of which is that we are not the Eternal: we are finite, mortal beings who very much need the help of both That which is greater than ourselves and our fellow man.

Just as pain shows us that there is a need for help, bliss shows us that the needed help exists. If we refuse to accept pain, we blind ourselves to its teaching and our need becomes more desperate—and the pain more intense. If we grasp after bliss, we become side-tracked by the effort to re-create particular states of feeling, again neglecting the real need and so deepening suffering. The extent to which we seek to avoid the pain is directly proportional to the extent to which we cling to bliss. In the opening of the heart in meditation, all that arises and passes is welcomed, accepted and allowed to dissolve. This is true gratitude and, as everyone who has attempted to teach knows, the grateful student is the fast learner. We learn from pain that we are not

the Eternal; we learn from bliss that we are not separate from the Eternal.

Long ago love was saddened; over time, sadness deepened and darkened as craving and fear, frustration, anger and delusion developed. In the process of the deep cleansing of karma we are pulled back through the delusion, anger, frustration, fear and craving to the saddened love. The body is the custodian of the essential residues of our whole karmic history. When all conditions ripen—and timing is very important—these karmic residues, held in physical tension, are released into feeling and then into memory. As the sadness at last flows fully, the causes of suffering within our stream of karma are remembered and the incomprehension and sadness that have tinged love are gently washed by the Water of Compassion. Then it is that we recognize that the Love of the Eternal has been present through all the twistings and turnings of our karmic history. Confused and anguished at the time of death, beings believed themselves to be separate from this Love. They confused some passing reflection of Eternal Love for the whole of that Reality. And they despaired. In truth, there never was, nor can there ever be, a separation from our True Treasure. It was never lost, and that is why It cannot be found until we give up seeking, take refuge within our own Heart and sit still in childlike faith.

The teaching of Dependent Origination shows us how suffering is created and perpetuated. It can also show us how suffering comes to an end. Buddhist training makes positive use of the same truth of causality as is exemplified in the process of the outflowing of suffering. When we train in meditation and the Precepts, we allow the return-flowing to the Eternal to take place within our lives. Anger and cruelty cause outflowing; sympathy and kindness aid the return-flowing. Meanness causes outflowing; generosity aids the return-flowing. Greed causes outflowing; gratitude aids the return-flowing. Willful impulsiveness causes outflowing; willingness and patience aid the return-flowing. Pride causes outflowing; humility aids the return-flowing. Above all, the surrender to our Greater Self in pure meditation aids the return-flowing.

Thus it is that traditional descriptions of Dependent Origination show both that, say, "Becoming is dependent upon clinging; clinging is dependent upon craving" (and so on) and that "With the cessation of craving, clinging ceases; with the cessation of clinging, becoming ceases" (and so on). Where there is outflowing there is the potential for return-flowing. Where there is ignorance there is the potential for enlightenment. Where there is suffering there is the potential for suffering's cessation. In whatever circumstances we find ourselves, it is possible to turn toward the Eternal and ask for help.

Rev. Master Jiyu said many times that before we ever longed for the Eternal, the Eternal longed for us. There was never a time when we, or any beings within our stream of karma, were outside the Love of the Eternal. The very existence of the relationships of conditioned arising described in the teaching of Dependent Origination is a manifestation of this Love. All the seeming failures within this life and past lives have the merit of the pure longing that lies at their heart. Because these failures disappoint that longing, someone, someday, grows weary of looking for the answer in externals. The simple admission, "This is not working; please help me to find a better way" is the essence of true contrition—that "turning about in the seat of deepest consciousness" that is the beginning of the return-flowing. Thus, even the fact that, mistaking shadows for realities, our desperate searching leads again and again to failure is a manifestation of Compassion.

And so also is suffering. Without suffering, how would we know that "it is not working"? We may look with despair upon the world of suffering. When we do this it is because we do not recognize that, however great the rampage of greed, hate and delusion may become, in the course of time beings will learn from karmic consequence. It may take many lifetimes: the Eternal waits in perfect patience with an unconditional Love that sees neither good nor evil, success nor failure. It does not force Itself upon us. It waits and gently beckons. When at last, weary of the ancient round of external searching and sorrow, we turn toward It with childlike faith and true humility and cry for help, It enfolds us in tender Grace. While living an ordinary daily life, we

can offer all we have and are to, and know that we are never separate from, an infinite Love.

*"Joy and woe,  
Love and grief-  
Safe in His Hand,  
As on the wind  
Is carried the leaf."*

—Rev. Mokugen Kublicki