**Understanding and Practicing with Dependent Origination**

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**About the Study Session Materials**

Tipitaka – baskets, the earliest teachings (three baskets: sutta basket, poetry basket, basket of rules for monks/nuns). The sutta basket contains these groups of suttas, which number to nearly 2000):

* [Digha Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/index.html) (DN) — the "long collection"
* [Majjhima Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/index.html) (MN) — the "middle-length collection"
* [Samyutta Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/index.html) (SN) — the "grouped collection"
* [Anguttara Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/index.html) (AN)— the "further-factored collection" or the Numbered Collection (i.e. the Book of Ones, the Book of Twos, the Books of ….)
* [Khuddaka Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/index.html) — the "collection of little texts":

Books and websites referenced for Commentary and exegesis:

* *Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN),* *The Grouped Discourses of the Buddha*, translation is by Bhikkhu Bodhi
* *In the Buddha’s Words, An Anthology of the Buddha’s Teachings,* Bhikkhu Bodhi
* *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, Analayo.
* *Early Buddhism: A New Approach,* Sue Hamilton
* https://suttacentral.net/pitaka/sutta/linked/sn/sn-nidanavaggasamyutta/sn12
* www.leighb.com/essence.htm

# Introduction to the Teaching on Dependent Origination

A note on today’s topic: The idea with our Dharma Study Sessions is to give people a taste of the Buddha’s teachings in the suttas to encourage further investigation on your own. What I’m giving you today is my interpretation based on the study and practice on this topic I’ve done to date. With the sutta excerpts and teacher commentary I present, I encourage you to form your own understandings based on your own experience. A copy of this is study guide and the PowerPoint slides I created for it can now be found on the Dharma Study Session page on the Red Clay Sangha (RCS) website.

In an early and very clear sutta on dependent origination (SN 12:65), which we will shortly read together, the Buddha corrects the impression that his Enlightenment occurred suddenly or spontaneously, instead saying that it occurred after reflecting deeply (likely over a period of years) on the causes of suffering. Specifically, the Buddha, as Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it, “methodically traces this suffering back to its conditions by a process that involves, at each step, ‘careful attention,’ leading to ‘a breakdown by wisdom.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) Further, this particular sutta explains that the Buddha became enlightened only after he understood ***both*** how suffering arises through a linked series of conditions ***and*** how we can bring suffering to an end by following a particular path of practice, i.e., using the Noble Eightfold Path.

A few words about the nomenclature and translations:

The translation used for the Pali word, “*paṭiccasamuppāda,*” varies a little by translator. Most commonly it is translated as “Dependent Origination” or “Dependent Co-Arising.” The English word “dependent” in this Buddhist usage means “conditionally,” as in “Conditional” Origination or “Conditional” Co-arising. This will become clearer as we move through the morning. They are all apt.

The links in the “chain” of causation are factors I will most often call “conditions.”

## Revisiting *Dukkha* and the Four Noble Truths

As you all know, the Buddha’s signature teaching is called “The Four Noble Truths” and his primary concern as a teacher was for his listeners to understand what suffering is and how to end it. The teaching on dependent origination is a deeper explication of the second noble truth.

Preface to *The Shape of Suffering*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, p 2, on translating the word *Dukkha* from the Pali:

“’Suffering’ is a traditional equivalent [of the Pali word ‘*dukkha*’] but it has many weaknesses; ‘stress’ is an equivalent I tend to prefer – it can apply to many subtle levels of dukkha that ‘suffering’ misses, and it helps to de-romanticize the issue – but it has its weaknesses as well. In particular, it is too mild to convey the more blatant and overwhelming forms that dukkha can take.”

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Noble Truth** | **Our Task / Practice** |
| 1 *Dukkha* (suffering/stress) exists. | To be understood. |
| 2 Craving is the cause of suffering/stress. | To be abandoned. |
| 3 There is a way out of suffering. | To be realized. |
| 4 The way out is to practice the Noble Eight-fold path. | To be developed. |

Leigh Braselton, “The Essence of what the Buddha Discovered,” www.leighb.com/essence.htm

“Very importantly, the Buddha understood that *dukkha* isn't something "out there" - rather, it is an experience in the mind. He recognized that it was not possible to prevent the "out there" things like aging, sickness and death; that the only hope lay in controlling one’s reaction to these unpleasant events.”

Dukkha refers to the second arrow, not the first. Not death or aging, but our reactions to it.

## Sutta Excerpts on Conditioned Origination

From the *Saṁyutta Nikāya (SN) Connected Discourses on Causation*

**SN 12.1. Dependent Origination**

“Thus have I heard….

“And what, bhikkhus, is dependent origination? With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, [becoming]; with [becoming] as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, bhikkhus, is called dependent origination.

“But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, the cessation of consciousness; with the cessation of consciousness, cessation of name-and-form; with the cessation of name-and-form, cessation of the six sense bases; with the cessation of the six sense bases, cessation of contact; with the cessation of contact, cessation of feeling; with the cessation of feeling, cessation of craving; with the cessation of craving, cessation of clinging; with the cessation of clinging, cessation of existence; with the cessation of existence, cessation of birth; with the cessation of birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.”

This is what the Blessed One said. Elated, those bhikkhus delighted in the Blessed One’s statement.”

<https://suttacentral.net/sn12.1/en/bodhi>

### This/That Conditionality

"Dependent on *this*, *that* arises."

"If *this* doesn't occur, *that* doesn't arise."

And conversely:

When *this* ceases, *that* ceases.

If *this* ceases, that *also* ceases.

This following sutta adds depth to the previous one by explaining the Buddha’s thought process in understanding how each condition comes to be and how it ceases. I will read selected paragraphs from this sutta so we can get an idea of the Buddha’s practice.

SN 12:65. The City [first part]

“At Savatthī. Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: ‘Alas, this world has fallen into trouble, in that it is born, ages, and dies, it passes away and is reborn, yet it does not understand the escape from this suffering headed by aging-and-death. [How] will an escape be discerned from this suffering headed by aging-and-death?’

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me [to ask]: ***‘[How]*** does aging-and-death come to be? ***By what*** is aging-and-death conditioned? ’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is birth, aging-and-death comes to be; aging-and-death has birth as its condition.’

“***Then,*** bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ***‘[How]*** does ***birth*** come to be?… [**becoming**]?… **clinging**?… craving?… feeling?… contact?… the six sense bases?… name-and-form? …***By what*** is name-and-form conditioned?’ ***Then,*** bhikkhus, ***through careful attention***, there took place in me ***a breakthrough by wisdom*** [i.e., discernment]: ‘When there is name-and-form, consciousness comes to be; name-and-form has consciousness as its condition.’

“Then…. With name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact…. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.’

#### Introduce and Discuss Slides

Slide 1: Defining the Factors

Slide 2: Feedback loops

### Further Definitions

#### Ignorance

This factor is universally defined, in all Buddhist traditions, as ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. Because if we knew and practiced them, we would not be suffering or suffering so much, right? Ignorance then is a particular form of not-knowing – not knowing (understanding, practicing) – the causes of suffering and stress and the ways to cease or extinguish them. When we act in ignorance, our actions and thoughts are informed by delusion, one of the three poisons/fires/roots of suffering; deluded, we are not seeing things clearly, the way they are, but with a mind biased by fabrications and habitual patterns.

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu puts it, “Inappropriate attention is a synonym for ignorance; appropriate attention, a synonym for knowledge.” P. 33. Appropriate attention is also the key to cessation.

#### Sankaras/mental formations

In Buddhism, Sankaras are referred to as “volitional” or “intentional” mental formations because they can, and often do, generate the consequences – the karmic results – that produce suffering. What we refer to in contemporary culture as “reactivity” is the result of the mental formations we make in response to our impressions of something unpleasant or don’t like or don’t want.

"Volitional activity is conditioned by ignorance; because we don’t understand the truth, we are involved in all kinds of actions. … Because we do not perceive things clearly, because we do not perceive the fact of suffering and its cause and the way out, that force of ignorance conditions the next link in the chain: volitional actions of body, speech, and mind motivated by …. unwholesome mental factors."

*Dependent Origination: The Twelve Links Explained*

Joseph Goldstein, Tricycle article

#### Consciousness

In Buddhism, “consciousness” often means “awareness” and “attention.” Specifically, awareness of what is being experienced in any moment. In this teaching, “consciousness” also includes the basic climate of the mind at any particular moment (i.e., mood or mind state – aversive, say, covetous, confused – and the way it has been shaped by our habitual patterns and prior experiences.

Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism*, p. 74-75. “…what is meant by consciousness in early Buddhism is the *activity* of being conscious and not some kind of entity that one carries around … as a sort of mind-stuff.” I.e., as in some Western philosophy.

#### Craving, Clinging and Becoming

Clinging (*upadana*), from Wikipedia (I think this definition comes from the 1921 Pali-English dictionary created by early Pali-English scholar T.W. Rhys-Davies):

*“Upādāna* is a Vedic Sanskrit and Pali word that means "fuel, material cause… that is the source and means for keeping an active process energized". It is also an important Buddhist concept referring to "attachment, clinging, grasping". It is considered to be the result of *taṇhā* (*craving*), and is part of the *dukkha* (suffering, pain) doctrine in Buddhism.”

**Example from an online talk by Andrea Fella, IMC teacher**

**Craving** (*tanha*) arises when you really want something; you want to have it or push it away. Example: A person really wants the Rolex in a store window.

**Clinging** (*upadana*) The word means literally "taking up" (*upa* plus *adana*). Example: The person walks into the store and buys or steals it.

**Becoming:** The person assumes an identity based on the action that arises from clinging. I am so stylish, so obviously wealthy, of good taste, attractive, etc.

#### [Q&A before we take a 5 minute bio break before sitting practice]

# Practicing with the Conditions using the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Thanassaro Bhikkhu, p. 16:

“All the factors of dependent co-arising are processes and events that are immediately present in one’s awareness. There is no need to search outside of your immediate present awareness for any hidden causes underlying these factors. Every factor is right here to be observed.”

From *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Majima Nikaya MN 10)

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness:

1. Mindfulness of the body.
2. Mindfulness of feeling tone (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral).
3. Mindfulness of mind/consciousness (*citta*), of the mind-states such as greed, aversion, delusion or their opposites such as the Four Brahma Viharas
4. Mindfulness of mind objects / mental events such asFive hindrances or their opposites such as the Seven Factors of Enlightenment

How to practice, per MN:10:

“Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu with regard to the body dwells watching body; he is ardent, he comprehends clearly, is possessed of mindfulness and overcomes both desire for and discontent with the world. With regard to feelings, he dwells watching feeling [*vedana*] ... With regard to the mind he dwells watching mind [*citta*] ... With regard to mental events, he dwells watching mental events; he is ardent, he comprehends clearly, is possessed of mindfulness and overcomes both desire for and discontent with the world.”

### Discussion: What did you notice?

# The Path to Cessation

Here, the Buddha uses the same this/that framework to understand how to end suffering and stress. Thus, SN 12:65 continues:

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ***‘[How]*** *does aging-and-death* ***not*** *come to be?* ***With the cessation of******what*** *does the cessation of aging-and-death come about?’* Then, bhikkhus***, through careful attention***, there took place in me ***a breakthrough by wisdom***: ‘When there is no birth, aging-and-death does not come to be; ***with the cessation of birth comes cessation of aging-and-death***.’

“It occurred to me: ‘[How] does birth not come to be?… existence?… clinging?… craving?… feeling?… contact?… the six sense bases?… name-and-form? With the cessation of **what** does the cessation of name-and-form come about?’ Then, bhikkhus, through ***careful attention***, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom ***[discernment]***: ‘When there is no consciousness, name-and-form does not come to be; ***with the cessation of consciousness comes cessation of name-and-form***.’

…..“‘Cessation, cessation’—thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things [unknown] before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.”

<https://suttacentral.net/sn12.65/en/bodhi>

## Practices for the Cessation of Suffering

The following list identifies different ways we can practice observation, investigation and cessation of suffering:

* Using the Four Noble Truths as a frame to understanding the factors as they rise and fall
* The Eightfold Path (discussion on Jan 29th DSS)
* Applying the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, especially 3 and 4, to watching the conditioning factors rise and fall away.
* Applying the Four Right Efforts to the rising and falling away of the conditioning factors

### Applying the Four Noble Truths to Each Factor

As we can see in the sutta excerpts, the Buddha applies each of the Four Noble Truths to each factor as a way of understanding it on the path to cessation. By doing so, he is applying careful, appropriate attention as a means of training and inclining the mind.

**SN 12:33. Forty-four (44) Grounds for Knowledge**

**Note**: The “44” are 11 conditions multiplied by 4 Noble Truths; the application of each Noble Truth to each of the 11 conditions. This describes a process of investigation that leads to cessation. Ignorance is not included as a factor in this sutta though it is understood to be a critical link in the chain.

“At Sāvatthī.

“Mendicants, I will teach forty-four grounds for knowledge. Listen and pay close attention, I will speak.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied. The Buddha said this:

“And what are the forty-four grounds for knowledge? ***Knowledge of old age and death [1], knowledge of the origin of old age and death [2], knowledge of the cessation of old age and death [3], and knowledge of the practice that leads to the cessation of old age and death[4].*** Knowledge of [birth] … Knowledge of [becoming] … Knowledge of grasping … Knowledge of craving … Knowledge of feeling … Knowledge of contact … Knowledge of the six sense fields … Knowledge of name and form … Knowledge of consciousness … Knowledge of choices [fabrications], knowledge of the origin of choices [fabrications, knowledge of the cessation of choices, and knowledge of the practice that leads to the cessation of choices. These are called the forty-four grounds for knowledge…..[because each of the Four Noble Truths has been applied to 11 of the 12 links].”

Here is a similar example from sutta MN 9 On Right View, trans. by Bhikkhu Bodhi:

“When, friends, a noble disciple understands craving [1; craving exists], the origin of craving [2], the cessation of craving [3], and the way leading to the cessation of craving [4], in that way he is one of right view… and has arrived at this true Dhamma."”

And from SN 12:27 Conditions, Bhikkhu Bodhi

“When, bhikkhus, a noble disciple thus understands the condition [1; that it exists]; thus understands the origin of the condition [2]; thus understands the cessation of the condition [3]; thus understands the way leading to the cessation of the condition [4], he is then called a noble disciple who is accomplished in view, accomplished in vision, who has arrived at this true Dhamma, who sees this true Dhamma, who possesses a trainee’s knowledge, a trainee’s true knowledge, who has entered the stream of the Dhamma, a noble one with penetrative wisdom, one who stands squarely before the door to the Deathless.” Nibbana [Nirvana].

Here again are the Four Nobles:

1. *Dukkha* (suffering/stress) exists (to be understood)
2. Craving is the cause of suffering/stress (to be abandoned)
3. There is a way out of suffering (to be realized)
4. The way out is to practice the Noble Eight-fold path (to be developed)

Apply each noble truth to each condition while practicing:

1. The [condition] is to be understood [what they feel like physically and mentally].
2. This is the condition that gives rise to it; this is to be abandoned.
3. There is a way to cease the [condition] which is to be realized.
4. Apply steps of the Eightfold Path to cease suffering caused by the [condition].

In this way, we eventually, through investigation and practice, reach a place where:

1. Suffering is understood.
2. Craving and clinging have been abandoned.
3. Cessation has been realized.
4. We are liberated from suffering (perhaps just for a moment, or a few minutes, or in regard to a specific habitual pattern, a short time, a long time, or a lifetime).

#### The Four Right Efforts

The Four Right Efforts are applied and implied to the practice throughout the suttas and verses in the Pali Canon:

1. Not to let an unwholesome/unskillful thought arise **(Guard against)**
2. Not to let an unwholesome/unskillful thought continue **(Abandon)**
3. To make a wholesome/skillful thought arise **(Develop, cultivate)**
4. To make a wholesome/skillful thought **(Sustain).**

**Next session:** The Noble Eightfold Path

**In March:** Understanding the Deathless (Nibbana)

### Closing Circle/Discussion

1. Bodhi, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)