

PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA: SEEING THE DEPENDENT ORIGINATION OF SUFFERING AS THE KEY TO LIBERATION

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Buddhism and Western psychology share a common insight into suffering. In both traditions, suffering is seen as emotional confusion which limits the ability of human beings to function in an effective and satisfying way. The understanding of suffering and showing this understanding as the way to its decrease, indeed cessation, is central to both traditions as well. In this paper we will examine the method developed in traditional Buddhist psychology, called the *abhidharma*,¹ that leads to the cessation of suffering through accurately discerning its cause. Since the author is a Buddhist scholar, not a psychologist, further parallels with Western psychology must be drawn by others.

Buddhism holds as its basic premise that humans are fundamentally awake and intrinsically healthy. This wakefulness has no boundary or limit, and manifests as radiance and clarity intrinsic in our basic awareness. This wakefulness has been obscured by entrenched habitual patterns which manifest as suffering. We have become afraid of our basic health. The boundlessness of our minds gives us vertigo, and so we have manufactured psychological material to fill up the space.

This psychological material revolves around a belief in ego. The Buddha taught that attributing personal, independent existence to the stream of our experience is central to our addiction to pain. We attribute to the multiple experiences of thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and actions some agent who is experiencing and doing all of this, and we call this ourselves. But this agent is a creation of our own minds. Once created,



The Wheel of Life, or *bhavachakra*

we feel compelled to defend this self, and this creates a basic conflict in all of experience, for we are constantly confirming and defending this self. This dynamic is what perpetuates and solidifies our suffering.

Dismantling this ingrained belief in the fictitious self and returning to our basic wakefulness is what comprises the Buddhist soteriological path. Doing this is not a matter of just thinking it. Through the practice of meditation, we look for this self, and we cannot find it anywhere. At first, this is a frightening experience, but following the stages of the Buddhist path, we find that we really do not need a solid self. We come to understand that this “me” is merely a designation, an attribution which we use to refer to a continuum of experience which is our primary reference point.

How does a Buddhist understand suffering and its cause? The cue for this may be taken from the enlightenment of the Buddha himself. Tradition relates that the Buddha sat down under a tree, resolving not to arise until he fully and personally understood the nature of confusion. As he sat in meditation, he experienced the intensity of his own mind in the form of attacks by horrific demons. These attacks elicited powerful emotions in him, yet did not break his resolve. In the final night of his vigil, he focused upon the nature of cause and effect and discerned in detail the patterned arising of suffering. His realization came in three stages, experienced during three intervals or “watches” of the night.

In the first watch, after settling and clarifying his mind, the Buddha contemplated the pattern of the arising of suffering in his own life, and understood it completely. In the second watch of the night, the Buddha directed his mind to the pattern of the arising of suffering in all other beings, whether human, animal, bird, or insect, and he understood this as well. In the third watch of the night he penetrated the nature of the causal pattern of existence itself, calling it *pratītyasamutpāda*, or “dependent origination,” which expresses the complex web of

actions and results that constitute and perpetuate our involvement with suffering. Subsequently, the Buddha formulated the Four Noble Truths (*ārya-sattya*) as the means to realizing suffering, discovering its cause, and entering the path which leads to its cessation. This path, central to Buddhist practice, is not merely an analytical investigation, but, through the discipline of mindfulness-awareness meditation, the experiential truth of these fundamental Buddhist teachings dawns.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. *The truth of duḥkha, or suffering*

First, one acknowledges the presence of suffering in one's own experience, and admits the painful nature of suffering. Suffering here is understood as the general anxiety and insecurity which permeates our experience, as well as the more tangible forms found in specific situations of physical or psychological pain. This is not a theoretical process. The acknowledgement of suffering is often extremely difficult, because it demands a shift from our fantasies of how things could or should be and puts us in the more vulnerable situation of admitting how we actually feel. It is essential for spiritual development in Buddhism to begin with experiential realism as the foundation.

2. *The truth of the arising, or cause of suffering (samudāya)*

Further investigation reveals that suffering is not a random event. It arises from particular situations in our experience in a predictable, ineluctible pattern. The true causes of our suffering are not to be found in external events nor can they be

finally blamed on our parents, rivals, lovers, or children. The Buddhist contemplation of the process of cause and effect is a subtle one, and rests upon understanding the patterns of all phenomenal occurrences. Buddhist meditation leads the practitioner into a natural untangling of confusion concerning cause and effect, and has the power to activate a healing process far beyond a plateau of merely coping. Proper investigation of the cause of suffering spontaneously and naturally becomes a healing process; it is this investigation to which the remainder of this article is devoted.

3. *The truth of nirodha, or the cessation of suffering*

Profound penetration into the mystery of cause and effect can lead us to peace with ourselves and with others. This peace is not based upon blissful detachment or upon rejection of our pain. It is based upon penetrating insight, *prajñā*, which transforms our experience of suffering, taking away the panic, anguish, and fury we feel. Penetrating insight arises from our thorough examination of cause and effect so that we understand suffering not to be merely our private possession, but a common factor in the experience of all beings.

4. *The truth of the path, or mārga*

We must be willing to penetrate our own minds and experience in order to see who we are and how we operate without judgment or guilt. The heart of the Buddhist path is the practice of sitting meditation, which requires discipline (*śīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and penetrating insight (*prajñā*). Discipline means cutting our impulsiveness and habitual avoidance of the intensity of self-knowing. Meditation cultivates our ability to be with ourselves and our emotional states in all life situations,

and to discover the steadiness and intelligence of our minds in the midst of turmoil. Penetrating insight brings us to an understanding of who we really are, and enables us to empathize more profoundly with others.

PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA: UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSE OF SUFFERING

Pratītyasamutpāda serves as the slogan which expresses the Buddha's discovery of the pattern of cause and effect.² The word is divided into two parts. The first, *pratītya*, or "dependent," refers to the realization that everything which occurs arises from an intricate combination of causes and conditions, not one of which is primary. Our particular identity has been influenced by a combination of genetic inheritances, the variety of environments in which we were raised, the food we have eaten and the air we have breathed, the relationships we have developed, the larger culture in which we have lived, and so on. Each of these factors itself has been conditioned similarly. Recognition of the dependent nature of all phenomena suggests a vast context in which we live, in which all phenomena have been mutually conditioned.

Samutpāda, however, suggests that despite the infinite complexity of its causes, there is nonetheless a distinct quality to our experience. When we contemplate the dependent nature of our experience, we might be inclined to discount our suffering or confusions in the overwhelming vastness of the pattern of arising, or we may feel hopeless. *Samutpāda* means "arising," and suggests that there is a tangible quality to our experience which we must not lose sight of. Our suffering is tangibly present to us and we must relate directly with it in order for it to eventually cease.

In this way, *pratītyasamutpāda* expresses an understanding of experience in two dimensions: first, "up close," we see the

intensity of the present moment with all its texture and emotion (*samutpāda*); and simultaneously we see the vast context in which that experience is taking place, the complex of causes and conditions (*pratītya*) which contribute to the present moment. These two together bring tremendous clarity concerning the true nature of occurrences, free from hope and fear.

Such insight into the pattern of cause and effect has immediate practical application in our lives. When facing a personal crisis—for example when a loved one leaves us—we naturally look for the causes of our anguish. Conventionally, we think of only a few of the causes involved—our own acts which led to the separation, the motives of our loved one for leaving, and the actual circumstances of the alienation. When we are in pain, we wish to blame something or someone for our pain, and so we alternately blame ourselves, the loved one, or other persons or aspects of the circumstances. But, in reality, blame reifies our pain by bolstering it with justifications and reinforcing the alienation which has occurred. In prematurely seizing upon a cause of our suffering, we fixate on our pain and perpetuate it.

It is natural for us to search for the causes of our suffering. In the Buddhist analogy, if we find a baby lying in the road, it is natural for us to search for its parents. But our problem is that we are generally not far-reaching enough in our examination. The penetrating insight (*prajñā*) developed by the Buddha takes the natural inquisitiveness of our customary approach and expands it to encompass our entire range of experience. When we do so, we give up the convoluted tendency to assign blame, and so become more available to the original experience of our pain. This is to practice in the tradition of the Buddha's enlightenment experience described above.

From the Buddhist point of view, when our loved one leaves us, we could expand the basic investigation of our suffering and its origin. We of course look at our own actions, the

actions of the other person, and the circumstances of the separation. But, refraining from attaching blame, we more thoroughly investigate and examine our own actions in the context of the complex causes and conditions which have led us to who we currently are. These might include patterns in our family background, the cultural parameters and values in which we were raised, our age and general condition of health, and the other influences in our lives. In such an investigation we might consider astrology, national and international politics, our own biology and physical makeup, our spiritual aspirations, and so on. Extending this further, we understand each of these factors to have numerous ancestors as well: the multiple causes and conditions which led to their formation.

We discover that there is no one reason for the pain of our loss; our attachment to our loved one is deeply ingrained and supported by many factors in our environment. When we do not assign blame, the attachment itself takes on a composite quality which perfectly expresses the sense of *pratītya*, or dependent factors.

Now we return our attention to the experience of loss itself, the *samutpāda* aspect. Having understood the complexity of its context, we may now understand the agony of loss more directly. There is no longer a question of assigning blame to external situations or to specific individuals. Rather, we can see the pain as pain itself: “I hurt because I lost the one I love; in short, I just hurt.” We become sensitized to the loss inherent in every situation. We discover others who have suffered a similar loss, or for that matter we might see that everyone has lost something or someone, and that eventually everyone will lose themselves in death. This changes our experience. When we refrain from blaming, the intensity of loss may sweep over us, but we eventually come to accept loss as a natural, though painful, aspect of human experience. In so doing, two things happen: we mature in our ability to experience adversity without panicking, and we “soften up” and open to the suffer-

ing that we and others experience.

This investigation is not merely an intellectual one. It develops from the practice of sitting meditation as we touch our thoughts and emotions and let them go. The pain we have experienced turns our mind toward all possible reasons for that pain; we touch them and let them go. We dredge up our paranoia and fear, we range wildly across the entire spectrum of emotions; we touch all of these and let them go. We blame, see ourselves blaming, and let the blame go. We feel over and over again, in waves, the anger and hurt of our loss. That also we touch and let go. The energy of our minds covers all the possibilities and we touch them and let each of them go. With practice and patience, we come to glimpse *pratītyasamutpāda* naturally; an understanding of suffering which is beyond hope and fear.

With this we have begun to understand the Buddha's teachings on cause and effect. These teachings are profound, and cannot be completely comprehended immediately. When one of the Buddha's finest students claimed to understand *pratītyasamutpāda* clearly, the Buddha warned him that he had only begun to understand, and that he must fully penetrate it to truly extricate himself from the pattern of pain and suffering.³ He instructed this student to study the twelve *nidānas*, or links of the chain of causation.

THE WHEEL OF LIFE, AND THE TWELVE *NIDĀNAS*, OR LINKS

The twelve *nidānas*, or links, comprise a pedagogical device developed by the Buddha to aid his students in deepening their understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda*. According to the tradition, the Buddha developed the iconography depicting the twelve *nidānas* as the outer rim of a wheel made up of three concentric circles, each of which depicts a detailed dimension of the

Buddha's teachings on cause and effect. This wheel came to be known as the *bhavachakra*, or the Wheel of Life. Through contemplation of its symbolism, the practitioner might understand the causes and results of thoughts, motivations, and actions, renouncing those which lead to further suffering, and turning to those which lead to wakefulness.

In the center, the hub of the wheel contains three animals circling, each clutching the tail of the preceding one in its mouth. These represent the three primary poisonous emotions which are the essence of our suffering: the rooster represents passion; the snake, aggression; and the pig, delusion. The second circle is divided into six segments which display the mental states in which beings alternately dwell, called the six realms.⁴ These range from realms of blissful ignorance to realms of rage and warfare. Psychologically speaking, these realms are entrenched patterns of thought and emotion which we experience as totally filling our minds, and which perpetuate themselves. The final outer ring is the sequential depiction of the twelve *nidānas*, or twelve links of dependent origination, considered the key to understanding the patterned arising of cause and effect in the cycle of existence.

The central two circles of the wheel of existence provide vivid illustration of the varieties of suffering states. Their linkage into a circle suggests inevitability and changeability. But it is the outer rim which shows the pattern in which suffering arises continuously. When we examine the outer rim, we move from contemplating suffering to seeing the cause of suffering.

The Twelve Nidānas, or Links

The twelve links of the chain are said to be operant in every moment of experience in an interdependent manner, but it is through understanding their sequential aspect that the practi-

tioner might develop insight into the cyclic pattern of phenomenal “becoming” that they illustrate. We will now offer a description of the twelve links and then examine their interdependent nature.⁵

1. The first link is called *avidyā*, or ignorance, and refers to a deeply entrenched, primordial ignorance from which our confused perceptions of the world arise. It is depicted here as a blind grandmother hobbling with her cane down a rough mountain road. She is blind to her own habitual patterns, and to those of her children and grandchildren; nevertheless, she keeps hobbling forward. Her blindness is not passive particularly. It is a stubborn refusal to see her own struggle to maintain a fixed belief in a solid and continuous self and a continuous attachment to and belief in ego. This kind of ignorance is the opposite of wisdom in the Buddhist view.

2. The second link is called *saṃskāra*, or formations, the tendency for ignorance to form into activity and results. This is also deeply ingrained in us. We might understand it as the speed involved in habitual patterns. It is depicted by the potter at his wheel. What begins as a lump of clay (*avidyā*/ignorance) is constantly forming and reforming itself into a specific shape. The momentum of the potter’s wheel expresses itself in the transformation of clay into a pot, just as *saṃskāra* continually thrusts our ignorance into forms.

Links one and two are said to be phenomena of the past, which set the stage for the activity in the remainder of the *nidānas*. They are precursors to our current neurotic suffering and operate in a background environment beyond our immediate awareness. As we come to know our current patterns, we gradually begin to see the roles of these first two *nidānas*.

3. The third link begins to reveal the specific form that our accumulated ignorance and speed are creating. It is called

viññāna or consciousness, and is illustrated as a gymnastic monkey climbing a vine to pluck a luscious fruit. Consciousness is the reflective aspect of experience which knows and creates a sense of continuity. We experience it as our minds engaged in constant self-referential exploration, busily assembling the component parts of what we call ego or self.

4. The fourth link further confirms individual identity through the addition of name and form, *nāma-rūpa*. Iconographically expressed, a boat with a series of passengers is being ferried by a boatman. The passengers are the emotional, discursive, and perceptual aspects of human experience which are being ferried by consciousness. *Nāma* refers to the mental aspects of self-identity, *rūpa* to physical aspects. With consciousness, they make up the aggregation which we call the individual person.

5. The fifth link refers to the six senses, *ṣad-āyatana*. These are represented by a six-windowed house. Now that the rudiments of the individual identity have been developed, avenues to relationship with “other” are created in the form of the five senses plus the mental aspect. The ego reaches out to its world through perception in an attempt to confirm its own existence. At this point, perception is not yet taking place; feelers are being sent out to make a relationship. The next link confirms the completion of perception.

6. In the sixth, contact (*sparśa*) with other is made. “Other” can include any phenomenon of experience perceptually known. Contact is illustrated by a couple embracing. Here the sense faculties and mind make contact with their objects, and relationship is initiated.

7. The seventh link, *vedanā* or feeling, signals the response to the relationship which has been established. Here the experi-

ence of pleasure or pain arises as an initial flicker. Depicted as an arrow lodged in the eye, we see that the basic flavor of any feeling is intense. We feel so vividly all aspects of our relationship with the world, and we are affected by the confirmation or lack thereof that we encounter. This intensity makes us retreat to our instinctive habitual patterns, and is the occasion for the arising of painful situations.

According to the Buddha, links three through seven represent the solidification of ego and its attempts to create further territory. They happen so rapidly and so interdependently that it is difficult to see their separate functions. Taken together, they set the stage for the activities of the next three links.

8. In link eight, we experience the overt presence of painful habitual patterns in the form of *trṣṇa*, craving, expressed as a chubby man greedily slurping a sweet drink of milk and honey. This connotes self-indulgence, a tendency to react to the feelings exposed in the previous link, even if this reaction is ultimately destructive. From the Buddhist point of view, it is ultimately destructive to react impulsively to egocentered demands. Nevertheless, we gobble down the drink in a manner reminiscent of the habit-bound tendencies of the blind grandmother in the first link.

9. The ninth link extends the impulsiveness of number eight into full-blown emotionalism. It is called *upādāna* or grasping, which refers to intensified desire. Here a man climbs trees laden with fruit and eats voraciously, gathering additional fruits to carry with him. The sweet drink was merely an hors d'oeuvre. The emotion has reached its peak, and indulgence is fully exposed. The grasping is not merely sensual, it is also intellectual and aesthetic; it emanates from egocentrism.

10. The crescendo of impulsiveness pushes us into *nidāna*

number ten, *bhava* or existence. Here the emotionalism expresses itself in action, fulfilling the tendency for blindness to propel itself into form. It is depicted here as a pregnant woman, an expression of very ripe karma, about to give birth. This suggests a concrete, inevitable result of our craving and grasping which reinforces our past tendencies toward ego fixation and blind perpetuation of pain.

11 and 12. The last two *nidānas* summarize the whole of painful, self-centered existence. Eleven is *jāti* or birth, illustrated by a woman giving birth to a baby, and twelve is *jarā-marāṇa* or old age and death. Our emotions and activities in the present create new situations which mature, reproduce, and die. This death elicits overwhelming uncertainty and panic at the prospect of having lost a solid sense of existence. This process could refer to the culmination and death of a particular emotional state, such as lust, greed, or anger; a particular relationship or supportive living situation; the momentary death of a single thought process; and so on. Whatever the scale of experience being addressed, some level of panic and fear characterizes the habitual experience of death.

1 and 2. The horror of the death experience feeds into a further cycle of bewilderment and confusion, which leads us back to the first and second *nidānas*. The groping, blind grandmother, and the speed and intensity of the potter at his wheel, provide the continuing fuzzy background that proliferates the cycle of suffering. In this way, the momentum of blindness, self-indulgence, and habitual patterns has propelled us from beginningless time, continues to motivate our moment-to-moment activities, and is certain to manifest in the future unless we do something to curtail it. If we can see the truth of this cycle, we may begin to unravel our habitual patterns altogether.

IMPLICATIONS

How do we unravel habitual patterns using this model of the twelve links? We come to see that our neurotic suffering in the present, expressed through links eight, nine and ten, is not merely an isolated moment of pain which will go away by itself. We see that this moment occurs because of two factors: 1) We have developed the habit of creating pain for ourselves, and we have refused to acknowledge this habit, expressed through links one and two; and 2) because of this habit, we have developed a fixed notion of a personal self which we have set against an “outside” world, and our behavior continually works to reinforce and confirm this self, expressed in links three through seven. We also see that, unchecked, our neurotic suffering in the present (links eight through ten) will perpetuate this habit-pattern and egocentrism far into the future (links eleven and twelve).

At first, this insight might be felt to be very depressing. The Wheel of Life expresses the complete claustrophobia we discover when we understand our current situation in its larger context of entrenched patterns. But for the Buddhist practitioner, this claustrophobia has a powerful, healing effect. Knowing that the current situation is a potent microcosm of the entire pattern of suffering abruptly nails us to the spot, this present moment. There is no escape, no rationalization possible, no blame. We pause, we feel our suffering intensely, and we see the many causes and conditions which brought about the nightmare. This is the moment that we connect with *pratītyasamutpāda*, as discussed above. In the moment, we understand that we are tremendously free. All of our patterns have pivoted around the denial of this particular situation, and as we sit, acknowledging that which we have worked so hard to deny, a new understanding dawns.

This new understanding has several aspects. First, we realize that the self-identity we have so carefully built and

defended is unnecessary and extraneous. There is no reason to go on fortifying ego. There is merely the intensity of the present situation to work with, and it causes us to surrender our strategies and defenses. Having no ego to struggle with, we are merely here, experiencing events very directly. Pleasure is pleasure; pain is just pain; the threat and promise we feel is extra.

Secondly, this newfound clarity is very vivid and brilliant. The unavoidability of pain means that we are able to experience it with a non-theoretical directness and gusto. The past and the future have no reality for us; there is only the present moment. And in that moment, we can experience our minds resting; we can experience our basic wakefulness without the overlay of emotional confusion to which we have been addicted so long. This is a common experience for everyone, not just the Buddhist practitioner. At times of crisis, people regularly experience clarity and sanity. It is only before and after such moments that fear, confusion, and the struggle to re-establish oneself return. The Buddhist practitioner understands this basic experience to be an emergence of mind's true nature, and cultivates this state of mind through meditation. Because of this, crisis or obstacle is greeted by the Buddhist as a gift. It is not that such events are not painful; they are very painful, but that pain is a teacher, a reminder of our fundamental ability to take our experience undiluted. We need not defend ourselves against who we really are. This situation presents the opportunity for us to live with an appreciation of all experience. Then, ordinary living becomes an adventure.

As Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche (1978, p. 79) has said:

If a person is able to meet the present situation, *tendrel*,⁶ the present coincidence, as it is, a person can develop tremendous confidence. He begins to see that no one is organizing the situation for him but that he can work for himself. He develops a tremendous feeling of spaciousness because the future is a completely open one.

NOTES

1. *Abhidharma*, which literally means “higher, or superior truth,” refers to the material of the third “basket” or collection of the Buddhist canonical works of the *Tripitaka*. The many commentaries on this basket make up the backbone of traditional Buddhist psychology, which describes the nature of mind and emotions as well as the path to liberation.
2. In this commentary, I am indebted to Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhi-magga* XVII, 1-24, an important fifth century commentary on the *Abhidharma-piṭaka*. For a translation of this monumental work, see the translation by Ñyānamoli (Buddhaghosa, 1976).
3. This dialogue with Ananda is found in the *Maha-nidāna-sutta*, in the *Dīghanikāya*. This has been translated in part by Henry Clarke Warren (1896, pp. 202-208).
4. For an extensive treatment of the *bhavachakra*, which includes a commentary on these inner circles, see Ösel Tendzin’s (1981) article, “The Wheel of Life.”
5. There are many excellent sources on the meaning of the iconography of the twelve *nidānas*. The most helpful to the author have included commentaries by Chögyam Trungpa (1978), Sermey Geshe Lobsang Tharchin (1984), Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita (1977) and Stephen Goodman (1974).
6. *Tendrel* is the Tibetan term for *nidāna*, and is often used to refer to *pratīyasamutpāda* as well.

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