

Noble Path - From Not-knowing to Knowing¹

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(Translated and summarized by Radhika Abeysekera)

Part 1: Understanding Dependent Origination

Introduction

As with all my talks, I will begin by reminding you that you must listen attentively. If you do, then you will understand as to why you have traversed in this sorrowful *samsaric* journey for so long. You will also gain the knowledge as to the cessation of birth, decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. Also, I would like to remind you that in the past you have not always had the comforts and the faculties that you have now. We cannot see this endless *samsaric* journey of the past and the immense suffering we have undergone. We cannot see it because samsara is veiled from our view due to ignorance or not-knowing. This is why compassionate Buddhas are born to this world; to show us the path for the cessation of suffering because on our own we cannot see this.²

The Path for the cessation of suffering is only found in the Buddha's Teaching. However, even this path will not remain in its purest form for long. The Buddha said, "Monks, there was a time when there was only pure gold sold in the market. Then, when you were buying gold ornaments you were safe. You did not have to be afraid that you would be deceived. Later a time came when something like gold appeared in the world. It seems like gold, it looks like gold and feels like gold but it is an imitation. After that you have to be careful when you buy gold ornaments because you can be deceived".

"Monks, similarly a time comes when something like the Buddha Dhamma appears in the world. Then you have to be careful as you do not know if you are getting the real teachings of the Buddha. Now we have such a time with various teachings on how to eliminate suffering and various interpretations of the Buddha Dhamma. It is difficult, even for those who have come to the path to see what is truth. I am giving this Dhamma talk so that you can hear, understand and investigate for yourself through your own knowledge as to the appropriate manner of practicing the Dhamma. You should not believe me because I say so. Therefore, listen attentively with confidence (*sraddha*) so that you can make the decision for yourself".

¹ The terms *avijja* and *vijja* are usually translated as ignorance and wisdom. I have used the words not-knowing and knowing because these words arise from the word knowledge and because the word ignorance has a negative, judgmental association in the West often associated with stupidity or lack of intelligence. The not-knowing (*avijja*) in this context is common to all beings.

² For a comprehensive account on the "Importance of Listening to the Dhamma" read the third Dhamma talk of these series.

1. Understanding the Cause of Decay, Death, Sorrow and Lamentation

I will be talking today about the Four Noble Truths or the Dependent Origination. This teaching is also known as the Law of Cause and Effect which illustrates that, “When this arises that occurs and when this does not arise that does not occur”. It forms the core teachings of the Buddha.

How did the Buddha realize this Truth found in the Dependent Origination? Not only our Buddha, but all the Buddhas of the past and all the Buddhas of the future realize this Truth in this same manner. So listen carefully because this knowledge will lead you out of suffering.

Our Bodhisatta, when seated under the foot of the Bodhi tree, reflected and an investigative insight or wise consideration (*yoniso manasikara*) arose in his mind. All beings age, decay and die. They go through great sorrow and lamentation together with mental and physical suffering. There is no extinction to this suffering seen. When and how will this suffering cease?

Then a huge compassion arose in the Bodhisatta’s mind which gave rise to another wise consideration. He realized that the cause of this decay, death, sorrow and lamentation is birth. If there is birth then there is no getting away from decay and death. So long as there is birth there is decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, and physical and mental suffering. The Bodhisatta realized that:

1. The cause of decay, death, sorrow and lamentation is birth.

If birth arises, then decay and death together with sorrow, lamentation, and physical and mental suffering occurs.

What then is the cause of birth? He realized that the cause of birth is becoming. So long as there is becoming, birth in a realm with sense pleasures (*kama loka*), realm with form (*rupa loka*) or realm with no form (*arupa loka*) occurs

2. The cause of birth is becoming³.

If becoming arises, then birth in a realm of sense pleasures, form or no-form occurs.

What then is the cause of becoming? He realized that the cause of becoming is four types of grasping known as grasping to sense pleasures, views, self and rituals (*kama upadana, ditthi upadana, attavada upadana and silabbata upadana*). The Bodhisatta realized that as long as there is grasping, then becoming occurs.

3. The cause of becoming is grasping.

If Grasping arises, then becoming occurs.

³ Becoming is the feeling that one gets when thoughts, (mind objects) arise in the mind and are seen as real and outside (*bahira*) of the body and mind. At time of death, these mind objects such as one’s children, possessions and wealth (which arise from within the mind) seen with false view result in rebirth.

What then is the cause of grasping? Craving is the cause of grasping.

4. The cause of grasping is craving.

If craving arises grasping occurs.

What then is the cause of craving? Feeling is the cause of craving.

5. The cause of craving is feeling.

If feeling arises, then craving occurs.

What then is the cause of feeling? Contact is the cause of feeling.

6. The cause of feeling is contact.

If contact arises, feeling occurs.

What then is the cause of contact? The six senses is the cause of contact.

7. The cause of contact is the six senses.

If the six senses arise, then contact occurs.

What then is the cause of the six senses? Name and form is the cause of the six senses.

8. The cause of the six senses is name and form

If name and form arises, then the six senses follow.

What then is the cause of name & form? The consciousness is the cause of name & form.

9. The cause of name and form is consciousness.

If consciousness arises, then name & form occurs.

What then is the cause of consciousness? The volitional fabrications⁴ (*kamma*) are the cause of consciousness.

10. The cause of consciousness is volitional fabrications.

If volitional fabrications arise, then consciousness occurs.

What then is the cause of volitional fabrications? Not-knowing or ignorance is the cause of volitional fabrications.

11. The cause of volitional fabrications is not-knowing or ignorance.

If not-knowing arises then, volitional fabrications will occur.

This knowledge arose in the Bodhisatta and he realized that the root cause of birth, which resulted in the inevitable decay, death, sorrow and lamentation, is not-knowing or ignorance. The ultimate root cause of suffering (via the dependent origination) is

⁴ *Sankara* is also translated as conditioning activities as they are conditioned by perception.

ignorance. He then went through this Law of Cause and Effect in the reverse order starting with the root cause of ignorance.

1. If ignorance arises, then volitional fabrications occur.
2. If volitional fabrications arise, then consciousness occurs.
3. If consciousness arises, the name and form occurs.
4. If name and form arises, then the six senses occur.
5. If the six senses arise, then contact occurs.
6. If contact arises, then feeling occurs.
7. If feeling arises, then craving occurs.
8. If craving arises, then grasping occurs.
9. If grasping arises, then becoming occurs.
10. If becoming arises, then birth occurs.
11. If birth arises, then decay and death together with sorrow, lamentation and physical and mental suffering occurs.

The Bodhisatta saw that if for whatever reason there was a lot of water in the highest tier of a terraced paddy field on a mountain, then it would overflow into the next lower field. When the lower field is filled with water it overflows into the next and so on and so forth.

Similarly, if ignorance or not-knowing arises in the mind, volitional fabrications (*kamma*) occur. If volitional fabrications arise in the mind then consciousness occurs. If consciousness arises it drops into the mind, and name and form occurs. This law of cause and effect cannot be stopped once the cause arises. If ignorance arises, then volitional fabrications, consciousness, name and form, six senses, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming and birth will occur. If birth arises, then decay, death, sorrow and lamentations will occur. Like the overflowing water it happens naturally, no one can stop it once the cause or seeds are sewn. The effect or fruit will follow.

1a. The cause of decay, death, sorrow and lamentation (via the Dependent Origination) is not-knowing (*avijja*)

The Bodhisatta saw Suffering (*dukkha*) and the cause of suffering (*samudaya*). He realized that the root cause of suffering, via the dependent origination, was not-knowing or ignorance. As long as there is not-knowing or ignorance, then decay, death together with sorrow and lamentation would occur.

2. Understanding the Cessation of Decay, Death, Sorrow and Lamentation

The Bodhisatta then focused on the cessation of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering. The Bodhisatta realized that:

1. If there is no ignorance, then volitional fabrications will not occur.
2. If there were no volitional fabrications, then consciousness will not occur.
3. If there is no consciousness, then name and form will not occur.
4. If there is no name and form, then the six senses will not occur.
5. If there are no six senses, then contact will not occur.
6. If there is no contact, then feeling will not occur.
7. If there is no feeling, then craving will not occur.
8. If there is no craving, then grasping will not occur.
9. If there is no grasping, then becoming will not occur.
10. If there is no becoming, then birth will not occur.
11. If there is no birth, then decay and death together with sorrow, lamentation and physical and mental suffering will not occur.

The Bodhisatta then examined the cessation of cause and effect back and forth as follows:

1. If there is no birth, then there is no decay, death, sorrow and lamentation.

None of us want suffering. So we must work at preventing birth because if we have no birth, then we have no suffering. However, the Bodhisatta realized that:

2. If there is no becoming, then there is no birth.

Let us focus then on becoming, because if there is no becoming, there is no birth and no decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. Now we can let go of working towards ending birth and ending decay and death and just focus on ending becoming. However, the Bodhisatta realized that:

3. If there is no grasping, then there is no becoming.

Let us focus then on grasping. We can then stop working on the other three. If we are hungry because we have no food, will hunger cease by watching a beautiful movie? No, we have to eat food to end our hunger. Similarly we have to work at eliminating grasping. We can break this chain by working at eliminating grasping. Now we are free from working towards eliminating becoming, birth, and decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. However, the Buddha realized that:

4. If there is no craving, then there is no grasping.

Let us then focus on craving. If we can break the chain at this point and eliminate craving we can be free from working on four steps of the dependent originations. And this is true. If you can break the chain at the point of craving you can be free from birth and the resulting decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. Many teachers concentrate on breaking the link at craving. However, it is not enough. The dependent origination goes further. The Bodhisatta realized that:

5. If there is no feeling, then there is no craving.

Now we can be free of the five steps below and start working on eliminating feeling. However, the Bodhisatta realized that:

6. If there is no contact, there is no feeling.

7. If there are no six senses, then there is no contact.

8. If there is no name and form, then there are no six senses.

9. If there is no consciousness then there is no name and form.

10. If there are no volitional fabrications, then there is no consciousness.

11. If there is no ignorance or not-knowing, then there are no volitional fabrications.

We can skip all nine of the lower steps and start working on the tenth step, volitional fabrications, (*sankara* or *kamma*). If we start working at eliminating volitional fabrications we can be free of consciousness. However, the Buddha realized that the cause of volitional fabrications is not-knowing or ignorance. As such, this is where we have to focus to eliminate suffering.

We do not have to work on each and every one of the steps and break the chain of dependent origination on every link of the chain. Instead, we could go all the way to the beginning, the root cause, and eliminate ignorance or not-knowing. If there is no ignorance then (via the dependent origination) there is no birth. And if there is no birth, then there is no decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. Therefore, we can concentrate on eliminating ignorance or not-knowing and achieve freedom from decay, death, sorrow and lamentation.

2a. The cessation of decay, death, sorrow and lamentation (via the Dependent Origination) is knowing (*vijja*)

The Buddha realized that the only way to stall this cycle of decay, death, sorrow and lamentation was to prevent birth and the only way to prevent birth was to prevent ignorance from arising in the mind. He realized the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the path to the cessation of suffering (*magga*) via the dependent origination.

The Buddha realized that the root cause for decay, death, sorrow and lamentation (*dukkha*), was ignorance or not-knowing. If not-knowing (*avijja*) was in the mind, then one could not escape from decay and death. If there was decay and death anywhere, then for sure, ignorance was still there.

Cause and effect operates systematically as per the Dependent Origination. However, it is the understanding of not-knowing (*avijja*) and changing it to knowing (*vijja*) that we have to focus on. We have to ferret out this not-knowing that is veiled from our view, and work at eliminating it so that knowing would arise in our minds. This is where we need to focus our efforts.

Linking Dependent Origination to the Four Noble Truths

The dependent origination can ultimately be summarized by two causes and their resulting effects (*Hethu Pala Dhamma*)

1. Suffering (*dukkha*) and the cause of suffering (*samudaya*)
2. Cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the Path to Cessation (*magga*)

The first cause and effect is worldly. It can be experienced by ordinary persons (*putajana*). The second cause and effect is supra mundane. One who has realized it is said to be an Awakened Being (*Arahanth*).

All devotees want to take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and all want to work towards cessation of suffering. But they are not sure where to start. By summarizing the Dependent Origination we can focus on eliminating the root cause, not-knowing. Many focus on eliminating craving for the cessation of suffering. It is true that if you have no craving, then you can eliminate suffering. However, the Dependent Origination takes you to the root cause and that is where you need to focus to eliminate suffering completely.

1. If not-knowing arises in our minds (cause), then we will have birth, and decay, death, sorrow and lamentation (effect). If decay, death are in our lives then you can be sure that not-knowing is present in your mind. This results in samsara.
2. If knowing arises in our minds (cause) we will have no birth, no decay, death, sorrow and lamentation (effect). If these are not in our lives then you can be sure that knowing is present in your mind. This is Nibbana.

Sadu, sadu sadu

My all beings be well and happy

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