

I'm not robot!

Central to Buddhist philosophy and practice is the principle of dependent origination, sometimes called dependent arising. In essence, this principle says that all things happen through cause and effect and that they are interdependent. No phenomenon, whether outer or inner, occurs except as a reaction to a previous cause, and all phenomenon will, in turn, condition the following results. Classic Buddhist doctrine carefully enumerated categories, or links, of phenomena that constitute the cycle of existence that makes up samsara--the endless circle of dissatisfaction that constitutes the unenlightened life. Escaping samsara and achieving enlightenment is the result of breaking these links. The Twelve Links is an explanation of how Dependent Origination works according to classical Buddhist doctrine. This is not regarded as a linear path, but a cyclical one in which all links are connected to all other links. Escape from samsara can be initiated at any link in the chain, as once any link is broken, a chain is useless. Different schools of Buddhism interpret the links of dependent origination differently--sometimes quite literally and sometimes metaphorically--and even without the same school, different teachers will have different methods of teaching the principle. These are difficult concepts to grasp since we are attempting to understand them from a linear perspective of our samsaric existence. Nicky Almasy / Getty Images Ignorance is this context means not understanding the basic truths. In Buddhism, "ignorance" usually refers to ignorance of the Four Noble Truths--in particular that life is dukkha which means unsatisfactory or stressful. Ignorance also refers to ignorance of anatman--the teaching that there is no "self" in the sense of a permanent, integral, autonomous being within an individual existence. What we think of as our self, our personality and ego, are for Buddhists regarded as temporary assemblies of the skandhas. Failure to understand this is a major form of ignorance. The twelve links are illustrated in the outer ring of the Bhavachakra, also known as the Wheel of Life. In this iconic representation, Ignorance is depicted as a blind man or woman. Ignorance produces samsara, which can be translated as volitional action, formation, impulse or motivation. Because we don't understand the truth, we have impulses that lead to actions that continue us along a path of samsaric existence, which sew the seeds of karma. In the outer ring of the Bhavachakra (Wheel of Life), samskara usually is illustrated as potters making pots. Vijnana usually is translated to mean "consciousness," defined here not as "thinking," but rather as the basic awareness faculties of the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind). There are therefore six different types of consciousness in the Buddhist system: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, smell-consciousness, taste-consciousness, touch-consciousness, and thought-consciousness. In the outer ring of the Bhavachakra (Wheel of Life), vijnana is represented by a monkey. A monkey leaps thoughtlessly from one thing to another, easily tempted and distracted by sensations. Monkey energy pulls us away from ourselves and away from the dharma. Nama-rupa is the moment when matter (rupa) joins mind (nama). It represents the artificial assembly of the five skandhas to form the illusion of an individual, independent existence. In the outer ring of the Bhavachakra, nama-rupa is represented by people in a boat, traveling through samsara. Nama-rupa works together with the next link, the six bases, to condition other links. Upon the assembly of the skandhas into the illusion of an independent individual, the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) arise, which will lead onward to the next links. The Bhavachakra (Wheel of Life) illustrates shadayatana as a house with six windows. Shadayatana relates directly to the next link,-- contact between faculties and objects to form sense impressions. Sparsha is contact between the individual sense faculties and the outer environment. The Wheel of Life illustrates sparsha as an embracing couple. The contact between faculties and objects leads to the experience of feeling, which is the next link. Vedana is the recognition and experience of the preceding sense impressions as subjective feelings. For Buddhists, there are only three possible feelings: pleasantness, unpleasantness or neutral feelings, all of which can be experienced in various degrees, from mild to intense. The feelings are the precursor to desire and aversion--the clinging to pleasant feeling or the rejection of unpleasant feelings The Wheel of Life illustrates vedana as an arrow piercing an eye to represent sense data piercing the senses. The Second Noble Truth teaches that Trishna--thirst, desire or craving--is the cause of stress or suffering (dukkha). If we are not mindful, we are perpetually being pulled around by desire for what we want and pushed by an aversion to what we don't want. In this state, we heedlessly stay entangled in the cycle of rebirth. The Wheel of Life illustrates Trishna as a man drinking beer, usually surrounded by empty bottles. Upadana is the attached and clinging mind. We are attached to sensual pleasures, mistaken views, external forms, and appearances. Most of all, we cling to the illusion of ego and a sense of an individual self--a sense reinforced moment-to-moment by our cravings and aversions. Upadana also represents clinging to a womb and thus represents the beginning of rebirth. The Wheel of Life illustrates Upadana as a monkey, or sometimes a person, reaching for a fruit. Bhava is new becoming, set in motion by the other links. In the Buddhist system, the force of attachment keeps us bonded to the life of samsara to which we are familiar, so long as we are unable and unwilling to surrender our chains. The force of bhava is what continues to propel us along the cycle of endless rebirth. The Wheel of Life illustrates bhava by picturing a couple making love or a woman in an advanced state of pregnancy. The cycle of rebirth naturally includes birth into a samsaric life or jati. It is an inevitable stage of the Wheel of Life, and Buddhists believe that unless the chain of dependent origination is broken, we will continue to experience birth into the same cycle. In the Wheel of Life, a woman in childbirth illustrates jati. Birth inevitably leads to old age and death. The chain inevitably leads to old age and death--the dissolution of what came to be. The karma of one life sets in motion another life, rooted in ignorance (avidya). A circle that closes is one that also continues. In the Wheel of Life, Jara-maranam is illustrated with a corpse. The Four Noble Truths teach us that release from the cycle of samsara is possible. Through the resolution of ignorance, volitional formations, craving and grasping there is liberation from birth and death and the peace of nirvana. It is because of the mystery of birth, old age and death that Buddhas arise in the world. There is no realm of existence in which these realities do not exist, and it is the sole purpose of the Buddha's enlightenment to penetrate into their root causes. Perhaps the most profound part of the Buddha's teaching is the description of how this wheel of life, death and rebirth continues rolling on. The insight into all the links of the chain of existence is expressed in what is called the Law of Dependent Origination. There are twelve links in this Law of Dependent Origination. The first two have to do with causes in the last life which condition birth in this one. The first of these links is ignorance. Ignorance means not knowing the truth, not understanding the Dharma, ignorance of the four noble truths. Volitional activity is conditioned by ignorance; because we don't understand the truth, we are involved in all kinds of actions. And the karmic force of these actions conditions the third link in the chain. 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 wholesome or unwholesome mental factors. The third link is rebirth consciousness; that is, the first moment of consciousness in this life. Because ignorance conditioned the energy of karmic activity in our last life, rebirth consciousness arises at the moment of conception. Volition or intention is like the seed; rebirth consciousness, like the sprouting of that seed -- a cause and -- effect conditioned relationship. Because of ignorance there were all kinds of actions, all kinds of karmic formations. And because of karmic formations arises rebirth consciousness, the beginning of this life. Because of the first moment of consciousness in this life arise the whole mind-body phenomena, all the elements of matter, all the factors of mind. Finally, because of the mind-body phenomena arising, the sense spheres develop. This is during development of the embryo, before birth. Rebirth consciousness at the moment of conception conditions the arising of mind-body phenomena. Because of that arise all the six spheres of the senses, the five physical senses and the mind, which in turn conditions the arising of contact, contact between the sense organ and its appropriate object: the eye and color, the ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and sensation, mind and thoughts or ideas. Contact involves the coming together of an object through its appropriate sense door and the consciousness of either seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking. Conditioned by the senses, contact comes into being. Because of the contact between the eye and color, the ear and sound, and the other senses and their objects, there arises feeling. Feeling means the quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neither pleasantness nor unpleasantness involved in every mind moment, in every moment of contact. Whether it is contact through the five physical sense doors or through the mind, feeling is always present, and is called, therefore, a common mental factor. Conditioned by contact, there arises feeling; that is, the quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness or neutrality. Because of feeling arises craving. Craving means desiring, hankering after objects. What is it that we desire? We desire pleasant sights and sounds, pleasant tastes and smells, pleasant touch sensations and thoughts, or we desire to get rid of unpleasant objects. Desire arises because of feelings. We start hankering after, or wishing to avoid, these six different objects in the world. Feeling conditions desire. Desire conditions grasping. Because we have a desire for the objects of the six senses, mind included, we grasp, we latch on to, we become attached. Grasping is conditioned by desire. Because of grasping, again we get involved in karmic formations, repeating the kinds of volitions which, in our past life, produced the rebirth consciousness of this life. Feeling conditions desire, desire conditions grasping, and grasping conditions the continual actions of becoming, creating the energy which is the seed for rebirth consciousness in the next life. Because of these karmic actions resulting from grasping, again there is birth. Because there is birth, there is disease, there is sorrow. There is decay, pain, suffering, and death. And so the wheel goes on and on, an impersonal chain of causality. The Buddha's problem, and the problem of us all, is to discover the way out of this cycle of conditioning. It is said that, on the night of his enlightenment he worked backward through the Law of Dependent Origination, seeking the place of release. Why is there old age, disease and death? Because of birth. Why is there birth? Because of all the actions of becoming, all the volitional activities motivated by greed, hatred and delusion. Why are we involved in these kinds of activities? Because of grasping. Why is there grasping? Because of desire in the mind. Why is there desire? Because of feeling, because the quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness arises. Why is there feeling? Because of contact. Why is there contact? Because of the sense-spheres and the whole mind-body phenomena. But there's nothing we can do now about being a mind-body process. That is conditioned by past ignorance and having taken birth. So there is no way to avoid contact. There's no possible way of closing off all the sense organs even if that were desirable. If there's contact, there's no way of preventing feeling from arising. Because of contact, feeling will be there. It's a common factor of mind. But, it is right at this point that the chain can be broken. Understanding the Law of Dependent Origination, how because of one thing something else arises, we can begin to break the chain of conditioning. When pleasant things arise, we don't cling. When unpleasant things arise, we don't condemn. And when neutral things arise, we're not forgetful. The Buddha said that the way of forgetfulness is the way of death. And that the way of wisdom and awareness is the path to the deathless. We are free to break this chain, to free ourselves from conditioned reactions. It takes a powerful mindfulness in every moment not to allow feelings to generate desire. Finding The Real End When there's ignorance in the mind, feeling conditions desire. If there's something pleasant, we want it; something unpleasant, we desire to get rid of it. But if instead of ignorance in the mind there is wisdom and awareness, then we experience feeling but don't compulsively or habitually grasp or push away. If the feelings are pleasant, we experience them mindfully without clinging. If unpleasant, we experience them mindfully without condemning. No longer do feelings condition desire; instead, there is mindfulness, detachment, letting go. When there is no desire, there's no grasping; without grasping, there's no volitional activity of becoming. If we are not generating that energy, there's no rebirth, no disease, no old age, no death. We become free. No longer driven on by ignorance and desire, the whole mass of suffering is brought to an end. Every moment of awareness is a hammer stroke on this chain of conditioning. Striking it with the force of wisdom and awareness, the chain gets weaker and weaker until it breaks. What we are doing here is penetrating into the truth of the Law of Dependent Origination, and freeing our minds from it. This article is only for Subscribers! Subscribe now to read this article and get immediate access to everything else. Subscribe Now Already a subscriber? 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