

As to the question “Why are you here?” there are many great answers. But, for today, you are here as an expression of dependent origination. Dependent origination has been the wheel that’s been rolling and we can look at it in this one life. It’s the wheel that’s been rolling since your conception, and the wheel that will roll until your final, last breath. Or, if you’re open to it, this is the wheel that’s been rolling since endless time and will keep rolling if not interfered with. Rolling and rolling and rolling. Just as a curiosity, how many of you are open to the idea of multiple lives?

Wow. Usually I figure Burma for that much hand response. Because one reason that this teaching is not given often is, one, it can get complicated. And, two, it runs into our cultural resistance and somewhat obtuseness to this idea, and discomfort with this idea that there are multiple lives. So it’s not something you have to believe in some sort of hardened way, but to be at least open to that possibility. That’s the classical holding of this teaching. That it really is—this is the one great engine that’s been behind our multiple lives. Even classically, in Asian countries, this teaching is seen as how we go through multiple lives; but also the forces that are operating in us day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment over the span of years. So there’s another way of holding this that’s just as accurate and that’s seeing it as how we’re going about our day with clarity or confusion. So that’s not just a Western adaptation. Even in the—very near to the time of Buddha’s passing there were several ways to hold dependent origination.

With this teaching of dependent origination—the wheel that often is the symbol for it—we get much more clarity on what our ignorance is, what our misunderstanding is, and what our confusion is. So that’s articulated in this teaching of dependent origination. We get the clear linking of how misunderstanding—not seeing things clearly—cascades forward as really the support of our craving and our thirst and our hunger for the things we don’t have. And how that ripples forward into our suffering. Craving, itself, can be seen as the cause of suffering. But really the deep agitation and loss that we feel, that we experience, dependent origination shows this link; it shows this step-by-step path of how our misunderstanding leads to craving and our craving leads to suffering.

This teaching also clarifies the teaching of karma. Conditionality—how each moment is arising out of conditions and everything we experience is affected by the conditions supporting it; everything except for nibbana, which is not on

this chart. It's what we experience when we finally break off this chart. But everything else we experience is conditional. We get the teachings of emptiness through dependent origination: more clarity, again, on non-self. We get to see the one great engine that's been driving samsara and rebirth and luckily there aren't two. Defeating this one understanding, this one, it's already powerful enough to have been generating us, but luckily it's not a two-engine conundrum, because this one is already tough enough.

And this is the one great engine of our suffering. Understanding dependent origination, we understand the forces that drive us into our most horrendous experiences, our greatest losses, our greatest mental agitation, fear, anger. So when we want to understand our suffering and where it comes from, this teaching of dependent origination is—if you pop the hood on your psyche and looked in, you would see—one engine and this is the engine you would see: dependent origination.

And, lastly, this teaching helps clarify the role of the eightfold path. So the elements of the eightfold path—and how to apply them and what we're applying them to—make sense. There are many great qualities of following the eightfold path as far as the mindfulness and developing calm. It's a beautiful thing to do, if you're agitated have a—develop calm. But calm in itself is a temporary relief. So it's great to do, but it's a temporary relief. But calm in the pursuit of untangling dependent origination shows you the true benefit of developing calm. So, again, dependent origination clarifies what we're doing on the eightfold path.

How're we doing so far? Thumbs up?

Okay, so we can get into it a little. Dependent origination, when it's given in the Pali canon, is given as a list; and it's a list that you read from top to bottom or from bottom to top. It's twelve links and the sense of the linking process is by the forces of conditionality. Over time, the way our minds work, it's been helpful to put it in a circle. It's been helpful to put it in a wheel. And the Buddha had talked about the wheel of samsara. So it's—that imagery is helpful if you actually start looking at dependent origination as a wheel. And yet originally it was just a list of twelve things. Then you read them up and down and memorized that list. So the wheel comes a little—the actual bending it into a wheel—is a later development in how to hold these teachings. But it gives an individual presentation of how this all happens.

The two key features of dependent origination that come together: the first is conditionality and we'll get into that in just a second, and the second is the actual twelve links that go from ignorance and suffering. So there are these two key features in dependent origination: conditionality and then understanding what these twelve links are.

Conditionality is the best English word. Over time it was actually helpful to learn a little bit of Pali because the Pali holds some concepts better than our English translations; but to keep it simple—conditionality. And this is the core of conditionality. The first one relates to this Pali word, *paccaya*: “When this is, that is. From the arising of this, the arising of that.” And then *nirodha*: “When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that.”

So this is a law. It's a law like gravity. It's a law like electro-magnetism. It's part of how things have been arising and passing away. Nothing arises and passes away on its own. In physics, in quantum theory, that can happen. Something can burst into existence and pop out of existence all on its own. In terms of—that's the quantum theory—and in terms of this teaching, for something to arise, it arises because of supporting conditions. So you would never get an oak tree if you hadn't originally had an acorn. There's not an oak tree on the planet that didn't start from an acorn. This building did not pop into existence. It was built. It was constructed. This body we have did not pop into existence; it came out of conditions, conception, being carried in your mother's womb. There were many supportive conditions that allowed us to be here; that allowed this experience to happen. It all arises out of supportive conditions. And if you remove those supportive conditions, then you remove the capacity of what would have arisen. So if you remove the acorn, you remove the oak tree. No acorn, no oak tree.

So this is part of the force within dependent origination. And what keeps the wheel rolling in the forward direction is that: when one thing arises, that sets the conditions for the next thing to arise. If you can stop that initial thing from arising, you stop what would have arisen out of it as a supporting condition.

An example of that: I was thinking about it and it used to be that the settlers that came to North America, the Europeans that came over, they got a lot of malaria in the southern states, in Virginia. And it was mostly noticed in the first colonies in Virginia, but then all through the South. Wherever there's sort of a hot, wet area, there were mosquitos. And the mosquitos, back then, actually carried malaria.

And yet very few of us worry about malaria now in any of the southern states, because it has been eradicated. So the process of that eradication is malaria—the word means “bad air.” So people were get—people were feeling very ill. It’s a very deep illness that has a lot of muscle aches, and tensions, and sweating, and chills. The first clue they had is that it happened where there was bad air and the bad air is what you might think about in a swampy area. It’s kind of stagnant and hot. But then they found the true cause of malaria, which is being bitten by a mosquito carrying the malaria bacteria—or, I guess, whatever entity.

So they identified the actual cause. If you had mosquitos carrying malaria, they give rise to people getting malaria. And that’s a causal link. If you don’t know that causal link, you actually—it’s very hard to prevent malaria if you don’t know the crucial, causing link preceding it. So they did. They found that mosquitos were that cause. And then in reducing the mosquito populations, they drained the swamps; they dug irrigation ditches, drainage ditches. That took away the supportive cause for why there were so many mosquitos. And so you have people feeling ill; look back a link, you find mosquitos; look back a link and you find their breeding grounds. If you can change the breeding grounds, not so many mosquitos. Not so many mosquitos, not so much malaria.

This is the *paccaya* and *nirodha*. *Paccaya* is the forward: because of the conditions of the swamp, lots of mosquitos. Lots of mosquitos, lots of malaria. The *nirodha* is if you can interrupt the preceding cause, you don’t have to work so much with what came out of it.

This is the law of conditionality. Many, many, many conditions come together to create a moment. In dependent origination we’re looking at what is the—what’s the crucial preceding link that if you were to stop that, you wouldn’t have to deal with the next ones. You wouldn’t have to—the wheel wouldn’t have to keep rolling. So that’s the investigation.

This word *paccaya*—in Burmese they pronounce it *pes-ay-oh*. It’s—their *c*’s are a little softer. And so you can hear them chanting. They go to the monasteries, they go to the pagodas, and they’ll be chanting the *pes-ay-oh*. And they can go on for an hour chanting all the various conditions that come together to create a moment of experience, and then orienting themselves towards this conditionality; this conditional nature of experience.

The *paccaya* also is the root base of *paticca samuppāda*. If you look at it, it's not exactly the same word, but it's that same sense of conditionality.

Audience member: Good morning.

Tempel Smith: Good morning.

Audience Member: From the way I understand it—I'm sure you're gonna get into this—is that when you were relaying your example of the malaria and the mosquito to the water, and then you can go back to water to “Where did that come from?” and you keep going back and back and back and that's where the circle comes around. There's really no beginning. You can't trace the beginning. You can't really trace the end. So at some point I get the impression that just what much of our meditation involves, just being present, is a moment of stepping off of that wheel because you can't really trace it back to an ultimate beginning and an ultimate end. So I just was kind of questioning that with the example of the malaria, where there's a—you can keep going back until emptiness, until “Where does it really begin?”

Tempel Smith: Right. A good question. And so if it doesn't have a beginning, if it's gone back in time, how can you interrupt the process? Does it keep going backwards in time? The twelve links show how every time that there's a cycle, there's a starting place and the starting place is misunderstanding. And that rolls the wheel one wheel forward. And then because of misunderstanding, it rolls again and it rolls again and it rolls again. So, you know, the wheel has been going for many times.

As we'll learn today, when we look at it, the—you keep going back from malaria to mosquitos to swamp. The swamp in this equation is misunderstanding. That is the fundamental place if you can remove the swamp, if you can remove not seeing, then you've disrupted the entire wheel. But if you haven't affected the swamp, if you haven't affected ignorance, they will come back. So you can try to kill every mosquito—as long as there are two and a great swamp, they'll come back again. And so we have to get to the original cause. And in these teachings the original cause is misunderstanding. And that misunderstanding is what feeds the whole process. So until we get to misunderstanding—until that is weakened, dismantled, destroyed—we haven't completely gotten off the wheel.

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“Conditionality”

And there are moments to suspend the agitation of the wheel. So, again, points of calm, being present—the wheel becomes light at that point. But we’ve only found a resting place. And as soon as we’re distracted because we have an underlying misunderstanding, we’ll get swept up again. So that comes later, getting to that original cause. This teaching of dependent origination is fascinating because it holds up in terms of this very large view of multiple lives. But when you become intimate with it, it actually does come down and it is exactly how I’m talking to my mother and if I get caught up in an old argument or she pushes a button or I push a button in her. The very same forces that cause the large-scale life after life are also causing how we navigate our moment-by-moment experience.

So it’s in a profound teaching that it can go to both levels. That you can see dependent origination as sometimes right in the choice of words you make and you can feel all these links buzzing. And you have an option of getting caught or using wisdom to pop that bubble. And it’s the same factors that cause you to go life to life. I used to teach wilderness canoeing, and you would never take young kids and put them on the most powerful river and try to teach them those currents. So we’d always find a small river, a small stream, but small streams and large rivers have the same forces in them; it’s just they are on a more powerful scale.

And so dependent origination, as it’s playing out intimately here and now, is the exact same force that drives the larger process. And, actually, you don’t have to come up with a completely different theory on why the large scale and the small scale are working. It sort of goes to the same level. I used to be a physicist, so you’ll hear these comments. But the sun, a massive thing, is made up of atoms. It’s made up of little particles, but so many of them, the forces that fuse two protons together release so much energy that we get the heat back here. So the “couldn’t get smaller” and the “hard to find larger” are—they work on the same forces and the same is true for dependent origination when we really get to see it. It’s both very intimate and immediate, and it’s the large-scale patterns as well.