

Notes and Quotes for July 17, 2022 *Dharma Reflections*:

Dependent Origination (*pratityasamutpada*)

[Introduction, and The First Link: Ignorance (*avidya*)]

“Dependent arising is one of the most essential teachings of the Buddha. He expressed its over-riding principle...:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.” (p. 156)

[Endnote 48. on p. 347: “*Pratityasamudpada* is translated as ‘dependent origination’ when speaking about the twelve links and as ‘dependent arising’ when speaking of the broader sense in which all phenomena are dependent and therefore empty of true existence.]

“‘*Because of this, that exists*’ points out that things come into existence due to causes and conditions; they do not appear without a cause.... Therefore everything—the body, the mind, and the external universe—depends on causes and conditions.

“‘*Because this has arisen, that arises*’ illustrates that causes, like their results, are impermanent.... Each person, thing, and event arises due to its own causes. There is no discernable beginning....

“The only thing we can point to as the cause of the first moment of mind in this life is the previous moment of that mind in the previous life.” (pp. 7-8)

“One of (the Buddha’s) main teachings on conditionality is the twelve links of dependent origination.... These twelve describe the causal process for rebirth in samsara and the unsatisfactory experiences that ensue. They also show the way to attain liberation....

“Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Middle Way*... establish(es) the conventional existence of the twelve links while refuting their inherent existence....

“Although the Buddha did not explicitly teach emptiness when he taught the twelve links, he set out the basis on which we can understand it: everything that exists dependent on other factors is empty of having its own inherent nature, and everything that is empty exists dependent on other factors....

“Although the realization of the emptiness of inherent existence will free us from samsara, we cannot dive into meditation on emptiness immediately. We must first eliminate coarse wrong

conceptions, such as believing that our lives and dukkha are just random occurrences or that they arise from an external creator or from another incompatible cause.... In the *Rice Seedling Sutra*, the Buddha said:

Monastics, he who understands this rice stalk can understand the meaning of dependent arising. Those who know dependent arising know the Buddha.

“*Dependent arising* is an abbreviation for ‘dependent and related arising.’ In the context of the twelve links, *dependent* means that the arising of each link depends on the previous one. *Related* indicates that if one link does not exist, the next cannot arise; there is a relationship between the two links.... To fully understand each link, we need to understand its relation to both the link that precedes it and the link that follows it. The Buddha calls on us to contemplate: What is the origin of each link? What is its cessation? What is the path leading to that cessation?...

“The Buddha does not imply that any one link arises as a result of only the preceding link. Rather, a momentum builds up as the various factors augment and reinforce one another. In short, both samsara and liberation depend on many interconnected causes and conditions.

“How Cyclic Existence Occurs

“When speaking of the twelve links, terminology is used in a specific way. For example, the link of ignorance refers to a specific instance of ignorance, not to all ignorance. The links of formative karma and consciousness refer to specific instances of these, not to all karma or consciousnesses. Not all types of craving and clinging described under the links of craving and clinging are instances of those two links.” (pp. 156-159)

- *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature* (Vol. 3 of *The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*), The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2018.

[From the same volume, the **twelve links** are enumerated as:]

1. *Ignorance (avidya)*
2. *Formative Action (samskara karman)*
3. *Consciousness (vijnana)*
4. *Name and Form (nama-rupa)*
5. *Six Sources (sadayatana)*
6. *Contact (sparsa)*
7. *Feeling (vedana)*
8. *Craving (trsna)*

9. *Clinging (upadana)*
10. *Renewed Existence (bhava)*
11. *Birth (jati)*
12. *Aging or Death (jaramarana)* (pp. 159-191)

“The reality and existence of things is understood (by Madhyamikas) only within the framework of day-to-day experience. From that perspective, both the mental world of experience and the external world of material phenomena exist. Madhyamikas do not make one more or less real than the other.

“The essentialists—those who assert true existence—use the principle of dependent arising as the premise to argue that phenomena possess a real, specific, true nature. For them, dependent arising is proof of true existence. Nagarjuna responds by saying that the reason they use to prove true existence—dependent arising—actually proves the exact opposite—emptiness. The fact that things arise from causes and conditions and depend on other factors shows that they do not possess any truly existent nature of their own.

“According to the essentialists, if things didn’t truly exist, they wouldn’t exist at all. Nagarjuna retorts that in a system that does not accept emptiness, there is no way to establish the existence of karma and its effect, the four truths, dependent arising, and so on. If all phenomena were not empty of true existence, none of these things would be tenable; they could neither arise nor cease.... In fact, emptiness and dependent arising come to the same point. In this way, Nagarjuna demonstrates through reasoning that the meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras cannot be interpreted otherwise but is definitive. He also shows that the sutras that disagree with this require interpretation and cannot be understood literally.” (pp. 100-101)

Here is a clue as to why the Buddha taught differently at different times, from Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland*:

“Just as a language teacher makes [some students] read from a diagram of the alphabet, likewise, the Buddha taught the Dharma in accord with his disciple’s abilities.

To some, the Dharma he taught is for the purpose of stopping negativity.
To some, it is aimed at the practice of virtue.
And to some, he taught one that is based on duality.

To some, the Dharma he taught is not based on duality,
and to some, he taught a profound Dharma that terrifies the timid.
Its essence is wisdom and compassion,
and it is the means to attain full awakening.” (pp. 101-102)

From the Rochester Zen Center’s *Chants & Recitations*:

“And when we turn inward and prove our True-nature—
that True-self is no-self,
our own Self is no-self,
we go beyond ego and past clever words.

“Then the gate to the oneness of cause and effect is thrown open.”

(p. 35, Master Hakuin’s *Chant in Praise of Zazen*)

“Nagarjuna’s homage to the Buddha in *Treatise on the Middle Way* explores the emptiness of causes and their effects:

I prostrate to the perfect Buddha,
the best of all teachers,
who taught that that which is dependent arising
is without ceasing, without arising,
without discontinuation, without permanence,
without coming, without going,
without difference, without identity,
and peaceful—free from [conceptual] fabrication.

“Here Nagarjuna identifies emptiness as the absence of eight characteristics of conditioned things: ceasing, arising, discontinuation, permanence, coming, going, difference, and identity. These eight absences are not qualities of an absolute or permanent entity that neither arises from causes nor produces effects. Rather, they pertain to the very things that conventionally have causes and effects, that come and go, that are the same (identical) or different, and so on. Conditioned phenomena and their eight characteristics all exist conventionally, but ultimately cannot be found by analytical wisdom.

“In what sense do things arise? How can we understand causation?... On the conventional level, when we say something arises from something else... we do so in the context of everyday

convention.... We simply observe a peach tree growing from a peach seed and say, 'This thing arises from that thing....'

"On the conventional everyday level, there is no problem with talking about causes and effects being different. We know the elephant embryo and the adult elephant are not the same thing but are causally related to each other. But when we search with ultimate analysis, asking 'How exactly does an effect arise from a cause? At what specific moment does the cause become the effect?' the process of production becomes amorphous....

"A cause precedes its effect, and the effect follows its cause. But when we look at the activity of something arising, we see that two processes are occurring simultaneously: the ceasing of the cause and the arising of the effect. When the effect is arising the cause is ceasing; when the cause is ceasing the effect is arising.

"The cessation of the cause is an activity of the cause, and the arising of the effect is an activity of the effect. While the seed is ceasing, the sprout is arising. If these two simultaneous activities existed inherently, the two agents that are doing these two activities—the seed and the sprout—should also exist at the same time. But this is impossible because the seed must cease for the sprout to arise. Such faults appear if we assert inherently existent causes and effects.... (This) undermines any notion of something arising from another thing that is a totally unrelated other....

"While conventionally things arise and cease, are identical and different, come and go, these activities do not exist on the ultimate level, nor do the agents of these activities exist in the perspective of the wisdom realizing the ultimate nature.

"Understanding this is important. Dzogchen (a suite of meditation practices in the Vajrayana Nyingma school that is congruent with several Zen school practices—[Larry]) contains the practice of searching for the nature of mind—what the mind is, where it comes from, what its shape and color are, and so on. This is a skillful way to lead beginning meditators to approach understanding the nature of mind, for they come to understand that the mind has no form, no shape, no color; it cannot be touched or smelled or tasted. These meditators have not realized the ultimate nature of the mind, which is the absence of inherent existence; they have only realized the mind's lack of conventional qualities such as color and shape. We have to clearly distinguish the conventional and ultimate natures of the mind and understand that realizing the ultimate nature of the mind involves negating its (fabricated) inherent existence, not its form or location." (pp. 107-110)

- *Searching for the Self* (Vol. 7 of *The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*), The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2022.

“1. Ignorance (*avidya*)

“The ignorance that is the root of samsara is beginningless. The Buddha said (Anguttara Nikaya, trans. Bhikku Bodhi in *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* [Wisdom 2012], 10.61-2):

A first beginning of ignorance, monastics, cannot be discerned, of which it can be said, ‘Before that, there was no ignorance and it came to be after that.’ Though this is so, monastics, yet a specific condition of ignorance is discerned.

“Although ignorance and cyclic existence are beginningless, in the evolution of a particular lifetime, ignorance is its initial cause....

“According to the Prasangikas, it is a moment of the innate ignorance grasping the person as inherently existent that leads to rebirth in samsara....

“The view of a personal identity and ignorance both grasp their object as existing inherently, and for that reason the view of a personal identity is a form of ignorance. First-link ignorance is the view of a personal identity; it is an innate self-grasping that has been present since beginningless time and gives rise to formative karma that projects a rebirth in cyclic existence.... All beings except arhats, bodhisattvas of the eighth ground or higher, and buddhas have ignorance, but only ordinary beings—those below the path of seeing—have first-link ignorance....

“First-link ignorance is the specific moments of ignorance grasping inherent existence and the view of a personal identity that lie behind the motivation, performance, and completion of a virtuous or nonvirtuous karma powerful enough to project a rebirth in samsara.... In short, first-link ignorance is the view of a personal identity that newly motivates its (that set of twelve links’) second branch, formative action. This ignorance actively grasps the self as existing in a certain way it does not. It is the root of samsara, the principal cause of rebirth in cyclic existence....

“Nagarguna says...:

As long as the aggregates are grasped [as inherently existent],
so long thereby does the grasping of I exist.

Further, when the grasping of an [inherently existent] I exists,
there is [formative] action, and from it there is also birth.

“Grasping the aggregates as inherently existent gives rise to grasping the I that is merely designated in dependence on them to exist inherently. Based on the view of a personal identity that grasps our I as inherently existent, we create karma that projects rebirth in samsara. Ignorance afflicts transmigrating beings because it obscures seeing the right view that directly perceives the emptiness of inherent existence.

- *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature*, pp. 159-162

Possible Discussion Starting Points

1. In discussing the twelve links, H.H. The Dalai Lama asserts, “Although the realization of the emptiness of inherent existence will free us from samsara, we cannot dive into meditation on emptiness immediately...” (see page 1). Isn’t it such “diving immediately” available to those who want it, though, when working in Zen with a teacher?
2. On p. 3: “According to the essentialists, if things didn’t truly exist, they wouldn’t exist at all. Nagarjuna retorts that in a system that does not accept emptiness, there is no way to establish the existence of karma and its effect, the four truths, dependent arising, and so on.” This is a subtle but important point—what are some of the inconsistencies that are avoided when we accept the (essential) emptiness of all phenomena?
3. In the same section referenced in 2. above, the idea of two classes of sutras (teachings of the Buddha) is introduced: those that are *definitive*, and those *requiring interpretation*. The Buddha taught for fifty years, addressing many individuals and audiences under different circumstances, and taught in a manner suitable for the listeners at that time. Depending upon the tenet system held, different sutras can be deemed definitive, with others requiring interpretation. Why might the *Prajna Paramita* teachings be thought of as definitive? [Hint: *gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, svaha!*]
4. From page 4, “Conditioned phenomena and their eight characteristics all exist conventionally, but ultimately cannot be found by analytical wisdom.” In what way can we see this as a restatement of “The Two Truths”?
5. From page 5, “Dzogchen contains the practice of searching for the nature of mind.” Is this in any way different from what you understand to be the practice of Zen?
6. On page 1, we hear that the Buddha’s teachings on the twelve links “show the way to attain liberation.” While we haven’t discussed all twelve links yet, do you get a sense of why this might be true?
7. On page 6, “It is a moment of the innate ignorance grasping the person as inherently existent that leads to rebirth in samsara.” Also, “Based on the view of a personal identity... we create karma that projects rebirth in samsara.” How can we avoid, moment by moment, creating the conditions for the constant renewal of our own personal, constantly-changing, samsara? Looking at life this way, doesn’t it make sense to locate and learn how to operate to the “controls” of this process, so as to intentionally *guide* the course of our karmic formations?