

## **Notes and Quotes for August 21, 2022 Dharma Reflections**

### **Dependent Origination (*pratityasamutpada*), Links 2 and 3:**

#### ***Formative Action (samskara karman) and Consciousness (vijnana)***

“**samskara**... In Sanskrit, a polysemous term that is variously translated as ‘formation,’ ‘volition,’ ‘volitional action,’ ‘conditioned,’ ‘conditioning factors.’ In its more passive usage,... samskara refers to anything that has been formed, conditioned, or brought into being... dependent on causes and conditions. It is in this sense that the Buddha famously remarked that ‘all conditioned things (samskara) are impermanent’ (anityah sarvasamskarah), the first of the four criteria that ‘seal’ a view as being authentically Buddhist.... In its more active sense, samskara as latent ‘formations’ left in the mind by actions (KARMAN) refers to that which forms or conditions other things. In this usage, the term is equivalent in meaning to action. It is in this sense that samskara serves as the second link in the twelvefold chain of dependent origination,... (where) samskara refers specifically to volition (CETANA) and as such assumes the karmically active role of perpetuating the rebirth process.... Samskara is also the name for the fourth of the five aggregates (SKANDHA), where it includes a miscellany of phenomena that are both formed and in the process of formation, i.e., the large collection of factors that cannot be conveniently classified with the other four aggregates of materiality (RUPA), sensation (VEDANA), perception (SAMJNA), and consciousness (VIJNANA).”

- *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Robert E. Buswel Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 758.

#### **“2. *Formative Action (samskara karman)***

“Formative actions afflict migrating beings because they plant polluted karmic seeds on the consciousness. Formative action is the intention (mental karma) or the physical or verbal action that is newly formed by first-link ignorance. It produces the mental and physical aggregates of a future birth in cyclic existence....

“Formative actions are either virtuous or non-virtuous.... The completion of the action produces a karmic seed that has the potency to bring a rebirth. This karmic seed is placed on the third link, causal consciousness (vijnana). When nurtured by the eighth and ninth links—craving and clinging—the karmic seed will blossom into the tenth link, renewed existence, which in turn gives rise to the next birth. Both the seed and the resultant aggregates are ethically neutral....

“A new rebirth is not the sum total of all the karma we have ever created. Only one karma—or in some instances a few karmas—determine the realm of our next rebirth.

“How karma created to be reborn in the desire realm ripens may vary. The ripening of karma in the desire realm can be affected by the person’s thoughts just before death, prayers of spiritual mentors, the circumstances of prospective parents, and occurrences in the *bardo* (intermediate stage between death and the next life)....

“Contemplating the first two links increases our renunciation of samsara and motivates us to live ethically. We become more interested in learning about emptiness because the wisdom realizing the ultimate truth can eliminate the ignorance that is the root of samsara and bring liberation.” Pp. 165-168

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

“Here it becomes evident that attaining liberation or awakening doesn’t involve going somewhere else; it is a matter of changing our mind.” P. 163

“The fact that things are empty of inherent existence allows for them to arise dependent on causes and conditions. Emptiness and dependent arising are compatible.” P. 191

“People veering toward nihilism will benefit from studying dependent arising, which reaffirms the conventional existence of phenomena. In addition, they should understand that emptiness is a phenomenon—it is an existent; it is not nothingness. Emptiness is a property of conventionally existent phenomena.... When meditators realize emptiness directly, they do not fall to nihilism because they know that emptiness is a property of all phenomena.” Pp. 219-220

“Just the words ‘dependent arising’ refute the two extremes. ‘Dependent’ refutes inherent or independent existence, the extreme of absolutism, and ‘arising’ refutes total nonexistence and the extreme of nihilism. ‘Dependent’ indicates phenomena are empty, ‘arising’ indicates that they exist. Dependent arising means no inherent existence because phenomena arise dependent on many factors that are not them....

“Dependent arising means to exist falsely. Existing falsely isn’t nonexistence; it means that like illusions, dreams, and holograms, things appear one way but exist in another. They exist nominally, only at the level of appearances, because like clouds in the breeze, they lack any essence....

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

“For an ordinary person, death is followed by a period of unconsciousness or ignorance in the bardo of emptiness. This ignorance is the point of departure in the cycle of illusion, the first mental obscuration that gives rise to all the others.

“In the outer links of the (graphic depiction of) Wheel of Life, the first link, *ignorance*, is symbolized by a blind person groping for the way with a cane. That ignorance also appears in symbolic form at the center of the hub around which the wheel of samsara constantly turns.

“On the basis of ignorance, under the influence of latent formative elements (*samskara karmān*) in the fundamental consciousness, the experience of individual consciousness (*vijñāna*) is reactivated. These elements are karmic imprints remaining in the fundamental consciousness after death and the disappearance of individual consciousness.

“At the moment of death, the action of karma temporarily disappears. Then it returns as *formative factors*, the second link, reconditioning the mind in the individual consciousness along with mind’s productions. These factors exist in the form of propensities and habits. The karma, or formative factors that cause the reappearance of the ‘I am’ delusion, or sense of individual consciousness, are the point of departure here, but they continue their activity throughout the cycle. The rebirth of the individual consciousness is symbolized by a potter molding clay and corresponds to the end of the bardo of emptiness, the moment at which the consciousness reestablishes itself before beginning its migration into the bardo of becoming.

“The ‘individual’ *consciousness* is the third link, symbolized by the agitated monkey which is the cognitive mode that experiences everything in terms of subject and object, which in turn gives rise to all dualistic activity.”

*Luminous Mind—The Way of the Buddha*, Kalu Rinpoche, Wisdom, 1997. Pp. 71-72

### **“3. Consciousness (*vijñāna*)**

“Third-link consciousness is primarily the polluted mental consciousness that has just joined to the next birth under the control of the afflictions and karma. Third-link consciousness does not refer to all consciousnesses.... (it) refers only to the mental consciousness of two specific moments:

- 1) The *causal consciousness* is the moment of consciousness on which the karmic seed created by a formative action is placed. This consciousness is neutral and the seed of a virtuous or nonvirtuous karma infuses or ‘perfumes’ it. The continuum of the causal consciousness carries the seed until the time it ripens as the new rebirth, it becomes the resultant consciousness.

- 2) The *resultant consciousness* is the first, brief moment of mental consciousness at the beginning of a new life. In the next moment the fourth link, name and form, arises. In terms of most human lives, the resultant consciousness occurs at the moment of conception. We don't know if conception occurs before the fertilized ovum implants in the uterus or at the time it does. It is also hard to say when the resultant consciousness occurs in cases of in vitro fertilization. However, it is clear that without the presence of a mental consciousness, the mere physical joining of a sperm and ovum will not become a human being....

“What carries the karmic seeds until they bring their results is a widely discussed topic among Buddhist schools....

“Prasangikas... (say) that in the long term the mere I carries the karmic seeds. They assert this because a nominally existent person exists when the action is created and when the action bears its result, so this mere I must be the basis for infusion of the karmic seed. The mere I is impermanent and cannot be found under ultimate analysis; there is nothing to point to and say, ‘this is the person’ other than the person that exists by mere imputation. Although the mere I carries the karmic seeds over a long period of time, the mental consciousness carries them temporarily.”

- *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature* (Vol.3 of *The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*), The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2018. Pp. 168-169.

[Contrast the Prasangika's view, above, with that of the Yogacara school (Asanga, Vasubandhu, etc.), which posits that the karmic seeds are carried in the *alaya-vijnana*, or the “eighth consciousness.” See the glossary entry on “Consciousness” in *The Three Pillars of Zen*.] On the subject of this *alaya-vijnana*, in the *Samdhinirmocanasutra*, the Buddha said,

The profound and subtle appropriating consciousness  
With all (its) seeds flows like the stream of a river.  
I did not reveal it to childish beings  
So that they many not imagine it as being like a self.

- *A Compendium of the Mahayana—Asanga's Mahayanasamgraha and Its Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, trans. by Karl Brunnholzl, Snow Lion, 2018, p. 104.

## Possible Discussion Starting Points

1. In the RZC's chanted version of the *Prajna Paramita Hridaya (Heart of Perfect Wisdom)*, the fourth aggregate **samskara** is translated as "choice." Why do you imagine Roshi Kapleau and his team chose this particular nuance, or emphasis, from among the variety of meanings in English for the Sanskrit "samskara?"
2. Have you ever closely studied the graphical teaching (usually in the form of a thangka) called "The Wheel of Life?" It is a big circle, with twelve segments forming the outside edge, that has the different realms of existence shown in the main body of the circle. The whole thing is being devoured by a demon from the outside and has a pig (ignorance), snake (aversion), and cock (desire) in the very center, biting one another's tails. Floating in the space outside that whole mess is a Buddha. Had you known that each of the twelve perimeter segments correspond to one of the twelve "links" in dependent origination?
3. (from the bottom of p.1) "A new rebirth is not the sum total of all the karma we have ever created. Only one karma—or in some instances a few karmas—determine the realm of our next rebirth." Since, as we heard last month, there is no beginning to ignorance, we have been cycling in samsara for a long, long, long, long time. And since that beginningless beginning, we've had every opportunity to have thought about, talked about, and to have done every non-virtuous type of action imaginable. It is highly likely that the seeds of many of these non-virtuous volitional actions have not yet ripened. We don't know what's coming next, nor (given our current level of understanding) can we control all of the circumstances of our dying or rebirth. Hence (at the top of p. 2), "Contemplating the first two links increases our renunciation of samsara and motivates us to live ethically." At a certain point, Dharma practice becomes much more than a hobby or an intellectual study—it deals with deadly serious matters.
4. "Emptiness is a phenomenon—it is an existent; it is not nothingness. Emptiness is a property of conventionally existent phenomena.... When meditators realize emptiness directly, they do not fall to nihilism because they know that emptiness is a property of all phenomena" (from p. 2). Does this help clear things up a bit for you? Would it help if we chanted "Form is empty" instead of "Form is emptiness?"
5. On p. 3, the "bardo of becoming" is mentioned. Technically, what we usually think of as "the bardo," the series of experiences just before conception (that is, just before entering a new existence in the desire realm) is just one of six bardos (intermediate states, or times "between two") identified by some great Tibetan sages—this human existence, for example, is a bardo, between conception and dying, and this "between life" itself also contains the dream bardo and the meditation bardo. There are additionally two bardos associated

with the period immediately after dying, that precede the “bardo of becoming.” We’re always “in between” one state and another.

6. (from p. 2) “Dependent arising means to exist falsely. Existing falsely isn’t nonexistence; it means that like illusions, dreams, and holograms, things appear one way but exist in another. They exist nominally, only at the level of appearances, because like clouds in the breeze, they lack any essence.” So, what we normally think of as our “self,” and what we think of as “the world and the things in the world” (all together, known as “samsara”), is specious. Does this set you back and make you think? Another way to reflect on this is through the term mentioned on p. 4—the “mere I,” which exists only through designation, that exists only nominally, that exists merely by attribution. Does your “self” tend to have a strong reaction when you consider such matters?