

Dependent Arising

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on xx August 1989

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from www.suanmokkh.org and www.bia.or.th. The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

Before everything else, please allow me express my gladness that all of you have come here to this place in this way, namely in order to search for Dhamma.

If we examine things in a broad way, we can see that those who travel great distances can be seen in two ways. There are those travelers who come as tourists and then there are those who come as pilgrims. And between the two there is a very clear and important difference, and the results or the benefits that each receives are also quite different.

To put it in very simple and blunt terms, if one comes like a tourist then one gets Satan to take home, and if one comes like a pilgrim then one gets God to take home.

You all have probably seen that the majority of tourists are seeking their own pleasure, their own fun and for the most part this is just pleasures of the flesh. There for the most part if not exclusively sensual pleasures. So when they return home they just take all this sensuality back with them in order to maintain and even strengthen their human defilements. But for the pilgrim... the pilgrim comes in order to study Dhamma, in order to know the Dhamma, to have Dhamma, to practice the Dhamma, and to use the Dhamma. And so when the pilgrim goes back home they have the Dhamma that will help them to survive, the Dhamma that will save them; so this is what is called ‘taking God home with us.’

So when you come here in order to study Dhamma and practice meditation, you are doing so in order to discover the things that will help save you. And so this is exactly the purpose or the ideal of the pilgrim, to find the things that will help save us just in the way in which God can help save us. So we'd like you to consider this matter and see if this is what is occurring, that one has come as a pilgrim, or to put it in even higher terms to come as a 'spiritual' pilgrim.

And we're also going to take the opportunity to know the Buddha. To know the one who is considered to have given birth to Buddhism, and so we'll use this opportunity to know the genuine Buddha also.

Most of you when you hear about the Buddha, all you know about is what is written in the history books about some historical personage who lived a long time ago. This is just the personal Buddha but that's not the real Buddha. The Buddha himself said that, "Even those who see me in the flesh, who see my skin and my robes, they haven't really seen the Buddha." He said, "To see the Buddha one has to see the Dhamma; those who see the Dhamma see the Buddha." This is how to see the real Buddha.

Back in India when the Buddha was alive there were loads of people who saw the Buddha but never knew him. There were people who just didn't get any advantages from him, so they weren't at all interested. And there were even some people who made themselves enemies of the Buddha. For example there were certain women who were very angry at the Buddha because their husbands went off and became monks and then they became like widows, and this made them very angry at the Buddha. And so there are many examples like this of people who saw the physical Buddha but never really knew the real Buddha.

There were even cases where people tried to hire assassins to kill the Buddha.

And so now we need to understand the Dhamma which is the genuine Buddha. The real Buddha is the Dhamma, so it's important that we understand what the Dhamma is.

The personal Buddha that most people think about, that certain person, that historical individual, that's not the real Buddha. Most people see a human form, a physical body and think that that's the real Buddha. When we talk about this personal Buddha, there are the stories of how he was born, how he was enlightened under the Bodhi tree, and how eventually he died. But that is not the real Buddha. The real Buddha is the Dhamma which is eternal. The real Buddha

was never born, the real Buddha was never enlightened, and the real Buddha didn't die. Please try and get to know this real Buddha.

We should understand that it's the real Buddha that makes this ordinary common individual become a Buddha. In Mahāyāna they talk about all the hundreds or thousands or millions of Buddhas, of the Awakened Ones. And all of these Buddhas, these personal individual Buddhas became Buddhas because of the real Buddha, because of the Dhamma. So we should see that it's the real Dhamma that makes all these individual Buddhas.

So please understand the Buddha in these two meanings. The first meaning is in the terms of people language, whereas the second 'Buddha' is the Buddha of Dhamma language. People language is the ordinary materialistic way of speaking that is used in the world. Most people talk about individual people, separate people, and material things; this is what most people spend their time talking about, we call this 'people language.' So there is the Buddha of people language. But there is also a way speaking that goes beyond the superficial materialistic understanding of the common person to a deeper understanding of Dhamma, we call this way of speaking 'Dhamma language.' So there is also the Buddha of Dhamma language. That individual personal Buddha we can call just 'the external Buddha' or 'the superficial Buddha.' But the Buddha we talk about in Dhamma language, the genuine Buddha that is the Dhamma, we can talk of as being 'the inner Buddha' or 'the essential Buddha.' We should understand how the Buddha is talked about in both kinds of language; both people language and Dhamma language.

So please think which of these Buddhas can help you? Which of these Buddhas can you have with you so that this Buddha can help you in your living of life? That personal Buddha died a long time ago, and there is just no way that this Buddha can be with you – if we talk about the superficial Buddha – and that Buddha can't help you. So it is important to understand which Buddha can really help us. And then to come here as a spiritual pilgrim is to come here and to seek the real Buddha, the Buddha that can actually help us so that we can benefit from this true Buddha.

And we ought to know that even though that superficial Buddha, the historical Buddha passed away, in passing away he left behind the Dhamma, or the Dhamma remained. The real Buddha remained. So no matter how many individual Buddhas have passed away, have passed on to wherever they go, the real Buddha always remains, always there available to help us, to help save us.

This is something the spiritual pilgrim should be very clear about.

So now let's talk in some detail about the Dhamma which is the real Buddha. The Buddha once said that, "The one who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha, the one who sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma." And then in another place said that, "The one who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma, the one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination." And so this means that to see, to understand dependent origination is to see the Dhamma, is to see the real Buddha.

So the Buddha said that, in short, "The one who sees *paṭiccasamuppāda* [dependent origination] sees the Dhamma; and the one who sees the Dhamma sees me." Not 'me' the personal Buddha, but 'me' the real Buddha. This is something to reflect upon carefully.

In our retreats we've heard that there are certain people who get bored hearing about dependent origination. And they complain that all they want to do is to practice meditation and hear about meditation and don't bother us with all this dependent origination stuff. This attitude is very incorrect. It is necessary to understand *paṭiccasamuppāda*, dependent origination, first. It is necessary to understand this in order to practice meditation correctly. So we have to learn about dependent origination so that one begins to see the real Buddha, and only then can one truly practice meditation in order to have the true Buddha. Please keep this in mind.

As for the meaning of 'dependent origination' it is very simple. It basically means that depending upon certain things, dependent upon certain conditions *dukkha* (suffering, pain) arises, happens. This is called 'dependent arising,' 'dependent origination.' And then dependent on certain things *dukkha* quenches, suffering ceases. This is what dependent origination is all about. The origination and the quenching of *dukkha*, of suffering, happens depending upon various causes and conditions. So this is what dependent origination is all about. In what way does *dukkha* dependently arise? And in what way does *dukkha* dependently quench? That's what dependent origination is about. If we don't understand this, how in the world can we practice meditation in order to end suffering; it is silly if we don't even know this basic point.

Although dependent origination, *paṭiccasamuppāda*, is an internal thing and something each of us must see by ourselves, within ourselves, although this is true we still need to hear about it from someone else in order to know where to

look and how to look in order to see the dependent origination. So we begin by studying or listening about dependent origination so that we know what we must do in order to see it for ourselves. So we understand how to practice correctly in order to see the dependent origination as it's arising/quenching, arising/quenching, arising/ceasing, over and over again within us. It is going on all the time, but we don't yet know how to see it. So this is the importance of hearing about it, studying about it in this way, so that we can use this knowledge then to look inside and see this constant arising and ceasing, arising and quenching of dependent origination and then we can see it directly within ourselves.

So now we'll get ourselves ready to study dependent origination.

Because there are sense organs which we call the *āyatanas*, that which can be experienced, the experienceables... because we have these six sense organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind – to receive sensual objects, experience objects and because there are these sense objects – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mental objects... Because these exist – and they exist naturally, all of these are certainly there, they exist naturally, there is no question about this... Now because they exist, they can interact, and when these two interact, when they come together, for example when an eye and a sight come together, then there arises consciousness, sense consciousness. There are six kinds of consciousness: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind consciousness. This is very natural. Because there are the inner sense organs and the outer sense objects they can interact; when they do interact then there arises consciousness.

So that's the starting point of dependent origination. Because there is the inner sense organ, the outer sense object, when the two come together, when the two interact, consciousness naturally arises. This is a perfectly natural thing there is nothing magical or special or anything about it. It's just the law of nature that when sense organ and sense object interact then one of the six kinds of consciousness will arise. This is perfectly natural, it doesn't depend on some God that makes it happen, or on *devas*, or angels or spirits that help. It's just a purely natural phenomenon that happens in a natural way. That happens according to the natural law, or the absolute truth of nature, of the universe. This is perfectly natural that things would happen this way. And you can see this right here and now for yourself because it's happening at this very moment. The Buddha talked about this so that we would look and see it for ourselves. And that's what we must do, must look and see this right now as it happens and then

we can see the starting point of dependent origination.

When you see this then it is perfectly obvious that consciousness has just arisen, when the sense object and sense organ come into contact, when they interact, before there is this interaction of sense organ and sense object there wasn't consciousness; but then because the two interact consciousness arises, right then and there. So this shows very clearly that consciousness is not any 'self,' or some eternal 'soul,' some perpetual 'self,' an *ātman* or an *attā*, or anything like this. Most human beings confuse this consciousness with some eternal spirit or soul that lasts and goes on forever and ever. But if we study just this very beginning of dependent origination we'll see that this consciousness just arises momentarily when the sense organ and sense object come together. And so this shows us very clearly that the truth of not-self, the truth that you can't find an eternal soul anywhere. We see this as we study dependent origination just at the very beginning.

Then as for the sense organs – the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind – these can exist, they function because there is a nervous system, that's all. Because there is a nervous system there are eyes that can see, ears that can hear and so on. This doesn't depend on having a self or a 'soul. And then as for the objects in the universe around us the sights, sounds, smells and so on, these are even more clearly not-self, they just exist naturally, none of them are 'I' or 'mine' in any way. And so from beginning our study of dependent origination it becomes very clear, this fundamental law, this natural law, of what is really happening in life and we can see that whatever is happening it's not-self.

And so at this point we can see that consciousness arises dependent on certain things; there are certain conditions necessary for the arising of consciousness. And so then we are seeing the law of dependent origination.

And then next we see clearly that when these three things come together, when they meet and function together, when the sense organs, sense objects, and sense consciousness function together we see that this is contact, where these make contact. And how these come together and function together as contact can be seen clearly by practicing correctly.

Then the next stage of dependent origination is that if there is this contact, when these three come together and there's contact, then there naturally arises what we call *vedanā* (feeling). *Vedanā* means to feel pleased, a pleasant feeling, pleasantness, or an unpleasantness. To be pleased by an experience or to be

displeased by it, this is the meaning of *vedanā*. Once there is contact there will naturally be *vedanā*, this feeling. And there is just absolutely no need to go and talk about some God or divine power having anything to do with this. For living beings, when there is contact there is automatically, naturally feeling.

Then the next step is that when there is *vedanā*, feeling, there arises *taṇhā* (craving). *Taṇhā* is a kind of hunger or want. When there is feeling there naturally arises want or desire based on that feeling. If it is an agreeable pleasant feeling, if there is a lovely attractive feeling then there arises ‘wanting to get it, wanting to have it.’ But if the feeling is unlovely, unattractive then there arises ‘wanting to get rid of it, wanting to destroy’ whatever it is. So when there is feeling there naturally will arise craving or this kind of blind desire. This happens naturally, this is just how things happen according to natural law; there is no need to talk of anyone coming into help this happen.

Now here we lack correct understanding, we don’t understand things as they actually are. Instead we have a lot of incorrect knowledge. We see things and understand things incorrectly. We lack what is called *vijjā* (correct understanding) and we have *avijjā* which means ignorance, lack of understanding, lack of knowledge, or even to know things in the wrong way. So when we naturally have this ignorance when there is feeling, the kind of wanting or desire that arises is called *taṇhā*. *Taṇhā* is a specific term. (I translate it as ‘craving’). It is to want, to desire in an ignorant way. It is the want and desiring through the power of ignorance, through knowing things incorrectly; we call this *taṇhā*, which is very different than when there is wisdom. When there is wisdom then things are understood correctly and there’s no ignorance. And so the want or desire that may arise is given a different name, we call it *saṅkappa*. *Saṅkappa* we translate it as ‘aspiration’ or ‘aim.’ It is a whole different thing than this ignorant wanting or craving which we call *taṇhā*, which is totally under the power of ignorance. But there is also *saṅkappa* which happens through wisdom, through right understanding, and this we could call ‘aspiration.’ And so this dependent origination can go in two directions at this point, depending on whether there is ignorance or wisdom at play. But whatever, we can say with all certainty that because there is *vedanā*, feeling, there can arise craving. You can’t have craving coming up without there first being feeling; this is absolutely certain.

Now what we’re talking about right now is what happens when there is ignorance. We’re talking about the specific case where there is a lack of correct

knowledge. So when there is feeling the feeling is ignorant; or bluntly we could just say it's stupid knowledge because it happens without any understanding. And then when this feeling arises then there comes stupid desire, once again because there is no understanding. And this is what happens when there is a lack of [wisdom]; and we are talking then about those series of mental events that will lead to suffering (*dukkha*). The other case is when there is wisdom, and then we don't talk about desire we talk about aspiration; but we will put that aside for the moment, that's a matter when we are going to quench *dukkha*. But now we are talking about the dependent arising of *dukkha*, and so this happening under the power of ignorance because there is no wisdom. So we're talking about the case where wisdom is missing. When there is stupid feeling, there arises this stupid desire. When there is this stupid desire, when it manifests fully then there arises a thought or concept in the mind that 'I' must be the one who desires. There must be the 'I' that desires. There's this desire and then there arises the concept the 'I' who desires, the 'desirer,' the 'wanter,' or whatever we want to call it. So because the ignorant mind is deluded into desire then it takes this desire to be 'I,' or it has the concept that there must be an 'I' that desires. This is what we call *upādāna* (attachment) – it's attaching to the desire, attaching to it as the desirer. So this is the next step in the dependent arising of suffering. You notice that it happens in a natural way, according to the natural law. There is no outside force making this happen.

Now some of you may be wondering or thinking that this is illogical. Some of you are thinking that, how can the doing happen before the doer? How can the desiring occur before the one who desires? But this wondering is just a product of misunderstanding. It is based on the assumption that the doer actually exists; but the doer is just an illusion, a deluded concept of our minds. The doer doesn't really exist, but when there is attachment to desire we create the illusion, or the belief, the image of the 'doer,' the 'ego,' the 'self.' To see this point will show very clearly the fact of *anattā* (not-self). That there is no self, no soul, no doer, no 'I' involved here, it's just a natural process unfolding according to natural law. And so it's not a matter of whether it is logical or not, it is just the facts which need to be observed directly from experience.

For example if something cuts the finger. First there is pain; then there is the idea, the 'I who hurts.' If a knife slices into the finger there naturally is pain, that happens first, only then is there the sense of the one who hurts, the pained one. This is very natural. There is no 'I' or 'self' kind of waiting around to get

hurt, to feel the pain. This self or 'I,' ego just arises when there is something like pain. First there is just pain, then the attachment to it, the 'I' who hurts arises. This is a fact that can be verified from human experience if we examine our experience carefully. It's the same with emotions such as love. Love occurs first, only then is there this sense of the lover. First there is just love and then the one who loves, the lover comes afterwards. You can't have the lover without love. Or with hatred, anger it is the same way. First there is anger and only then is there the angry one. The basic activity of pain, or love, or anger happens and only then does the mind attach to it creating the 'I' concept. This is a natural fact that needs to be examined.

Now although this attachment, this *upādāna* is just a deluded concept, it's just created out of human misunderstanding it still has influence over the mind. The thing, the 'I,' the 'self' doesn't really exist, but the illusion has the power to stir up something more. So when this attachment is full in the mind then there arises what we call 'existence' (*bhava*). This existence then is there, it's the being, the having, the existence of the 'self.' It is not the real self, it's just this delusion of self, but now there is this complete sense of existence, of having, of being.

Then once there is the existence of this delusive self, it's born. It's born into the world, this self is born. And once it's born it takes everything as belonging to it. So once there is this self, then things belong to it and there is suffering. And so this how suffering arises, this is the dependent origination, *paṭiccasamuppāda*, of *dukkha*, of suffering.

So this is the thing that you have to know before you are going to meditate. If you don't have enough understanding of this your meditation will be lost or aimless. But if you understand *paṭiccasamuppāda* well enough, then we will know what meditation is all about; and then we can meditate. When we see how the arising of *dukkha* is and we see how *dukkha* quenches, when we see this then we can meditate in order to see this more and more clearly, more and more deeply. And so that we can practice. Meditate solely to have the ability to develop the correct understanding so that at the moment of contact, instead of ignorance there's wisdom. And then so that this arising of *dukkha* doesn't happen. We've talked about how suffering comes into the world, into our lives. But if there is the right understanding that we can develop through meditation then this ignorance process won't take place and suffering will not be stirred up, will not be caused. So this is what we need to understand. We practice

meditation to understand this completely and to have the ability to act correctly according to this natural law. And so for this reason we need to develop our meditation practice, so that wisdom develops, so that insight into the basic facts of nature develops. And then when meditation has developed enough we see that all these things are not-self, they're 'not-I,' they're 'not-mine.' And then when we have this wisdom then the *paṭiccasamuppāda* cannot occur. Or even if there is a slip. Feeling arises and there is some ignorant feeling, if there is enough insight, insight can keep that feeling from developing craving, from conditioning attachment, existence, birth, and *dukkha*. So we need to develop meditation, to develop *vipassanā* (insight) so that we have the wisdom and understanding to deal with this law of dependent origination.

So this is the dependent origination that one must understand, that one must study in order to meditate. So we ask you to study this so that your meditation will be correct. And we ask that you study this as a science, not as a philosophy. If you just study this as theory, as philosophy, it won't do you any good it will just fill you head with more ideas; but you won't benefit from any of these ideas, to just think about it or argue about it philosophically. It is necessary to approach this as a science, to really get in there and experiment. If we do this then this results, if we do this then this results. To experiment and see the results that arise. So do this with your own experience. Study this as a science. If you study dependent origination in this way, scientifically, then it will lead to a growing understanding of life which will certainly be able to end suffering. But it's necessary that it's done scientifically, philosophically it's just mind games and won't really help us. And then through meditation we will understand this more and more deeply.

But it can't be helped that this will start off as a philosophy. That you have to study it intellectually, theoretically first, until through your own practice you can conquer the arising of suffering. Then once we can conquer it, once we can really apply this theory to life, then it truly becomes scientific – meaning the understanding comes fully from our own experience.

Around the world this dependent origination is being studied in all kinds of different ways. Most of what is going on in the West, a lot of the knowledge is studying certain material aspects of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. But because this is always done theoretically, philosophically it doesn't help anybody to quench suffering, to make an end to suffering, it's just more knowledge, more information, more theories.

So this is the explanation of how suffering arises dependent on certain things. And the complete story is both how suffering arises dependently and how suffering successively quenches as well. The dependent ceasing or quenching of suffering happens in the opposite way of the dependent arising. So the dependent arising and the dependent ceasing, or quenching of suffering is what we call *paṭiccasamuppāda*. We can maybe talk about how suffering quenches on a later time. But we want you to understand that *paṭiccasamuppāda* explains both the arising *and* the ceasing of suffering.

So please study this *paṭiccasamuppāda* and learn to practice it. If one sees this *paṭiccasamuppāda* then one sees the Dhamma. Remember what the Buddha said, “The one who sees *paṭiccasamuppāda* sees the Dhamma, the one who sees the Dhamma sees me.” So if you see this dependent origination then you’ll see the Dhamma; and if you see the Dhamma then you will see the real Buddha. And if one see this real Buddha then one has gotten something, has found something of inestimable value, of tremendous value and worth. If you come to Suan Mokkh in this way then you have come as pilgrims not as tourists.

And so if you come here as a pilgrim then you will get the best thing that a human being can receive from life. If you see this law of nature and understand it, then you will have gotten the best things that one get in life. Because understanding this law of nature gives us what we need to end suffering, to eliminate suffering – which is the best thing there is in life, to live without any *dukkha*, without any suffering. So to get this, to receive, or have this law of nature that ends suffering, this is the same as having God, or knowing God; because what else could God do but help us to end suffering, to solve all our problems. So to realize this law is the same thing as to know God, or have God, and this is the best thing a human being can get. So allow us to express our delight, our happiness that you have come here in this way, as pilgrims; and we’ll finish today’s talk at this time.

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