

Week 3 – Cyclic conditionality

Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Wisdom – symbolic Dharma

THE CYCLIC CHAIN OF CAUSALITY

Symbolic & simplified representation of conditioned co-production as it operates in mundane existence. This is the way the Buddha communicated the insight that formed his Enlightenment experience. He was interested to find out how to end “this whole mass of ill”; in dependence upon what does old age / sickness / death arise? Traced back to ignorance.

Consists of 12 *nidanas* or links, explaining the mechanism especially of rebirth, but also of functioning of wheel as whole. They include 3 different “lives” & alternation of karma & karma vipaka within each life.

Sentient existence consists of activities set up through spiritual ignorance; as a result, beings take rebirth as psycho-physical organisms equipped with sense-organs by means of which they establish contact with the external world and experience pleasant, painful, and neutral sensations; developing a craving for the pleasant sensations, they try to cling on to the objects that produce them, which leads to fresh conception...; in consequence of this they again have to undergo birth, old age disease and death.
The Three Jewels, Sangharakshita, ch10

| The twelve cyclic links of conditionality | | | | |
|---|---|---|---------|-----------------------|
| Segment | Image | Notes | Life | Karma / vipaka |
| Ignorance | Blind man with stick | | Past | Karma (cause) |
| Volitions / habit formations | Potter at wheel | | | |
| Consciousness | Monkey in tree | “relinking” consciousness | Present | Karma vipaka (result) |
| Mind and body | Boat with four passengers, one steering | Five “skandhas”; boat = physical form, consciousness steers | | |
| Six sense bases | House with five windows & door | Five physical senses & mind sense | | |
| Contact | Couple embracing | Sense organ contacting sense object | | |
| “Feeling” or <i>vedana</i> | Man with arrow in eye | Pleasant, painful, neutral | | Karma (cause) |
| Craving, thirst | Woman offering drink to man | Moving towards (/away) desirable (/unpleasant) object | | |
| Grasping | Person plucking fruit from tree | | | |
| Becoming | Pregnant woman | ? Bardo experience | | |
| Birth | Woman giving birth | | Future | Karma vipaka |
| Death | Corpse carried to pyre | “this whole mass of ill” | | |

VEDANA (FEELING) & CRAVING

Vedana is the hedonic tone of an experience – of contact – the overall attractiveness or repulsion of the experience: pleasant, painful or neutral. We have a deep belief that satisfying cravings and aversions – pulling in things we want and pushing away things we don't like – is the way to happiness & fulfillment.

Notice how everything “in this life” up to & including vedana is “karma vipaka”: it's given, nothing we can do about it in this moment; but can choose how we respond to it.

| Examples of responses to vedana | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|---|---|
| Sense | Vedana | Examples | Example responses |
| Taste | Pleasant | Nice food | Want more, frustration if can't |
| | Unpleasant | Unpleasant food | Revulsion, blame, criticism |
| Hearing: speech | Pleasant | Praise, warmth, appreciation | Warmth, appreciation, embarrassment, pride |
| | Unpleasant | Criticism, coldness, blame | Self-justification, self-blame, hatred, anger, withdrawal |
| Thoughts & ideas | Pleasant | Remembering happy time, anticipating happy time, sexual fantasy, thinking of buying treat | Disappear into that “world”, keep playing the story, excitement |
| | Unpleasant | Anticipated stressful event, remembered embarrassment, regret, trying to fix problem @ work | Worrying, anxiety, rumination, blame & criticism of others |

The response to a given contact is not “given” – even though it may seem like the only reasonable way to respond is to complain, or fly off the handle etc. We tend to have our own biases.

HOME PRACTICE

- Continue colouring in the Wheel of Life image.
- Once per day, sit in a chair without doing anything for five minutes. Feel the waves of volition come over you – to do something useful, to plan something, to distract oneself by reading or listening to something. Just sit and weather it, and maybe enjoy just being.
- Try to notice the various responses to vedana in your daily life. Try to trace back to the experience of vedana that brought about that response. Do you think you are more strongly governed by pleasant or unpleasant vedana? Do you have any particular characteristic responses (eg. greedy with nice food, angry with peoples' incompetence, frustrated with own limitations...)

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Wheel of Life, Kulananda, ch 11; *The Buddhist Vision*, Subhuti, ch 6

The Dynamics of Being in *What is the Dharma?* Sangharakshita, or CD 024

Explanations of the cyclic nidana chain in the Pali Canon:

Summary: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/canon/sutta/samyutta/sn-12-002-tb0.html>

Buddha retelling the story of the eve of his Awakening

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/canon/sutta/samyutta/sn12-065.html>