

Karma and Dependent Arising, Part Two

The 12 Links of Dependent Co-production

As explained previously, happiness and sorrow are the certain fruit of virtuous and non-virtuous actions of body, speech and mind. Thus our experience, individual and collective, has ethical and spiritual causes.

The depth of karmic structure was first perceived by Shakyamuni Buddha during the night before the dawn of his enlightenment. At dawn venus and the sun were rising in the East, while the full moon set in the West, and Shakyamuni awoke to the utmost right and perfect enlightenment.

During the First Watch of the night, there was the recollection of past human lives and knowledge of The cycle of death and rebirth.

During the Second Watch there was recognition that the cycle of rebirth affects all sentient beings in all worlds, and that the law of karma determines the quality and type of rebirth and its suffering.

During the 3rd watch of the night, there was recognition of the cycle of causality that leads to death and rebirth, and the means of liberation from this cycle.

It was in the Third Watch of the night, before his full Enlightenment at dawn, that Shakyamuni Buddha

understood karma, even down to its subtle depths. He codified his understanding in the teaching of the '12 links of dependent arising'. That was a most subtle and complex idea, and a masterpiece of formulation.

During the Fourth Watch of the night there was the recognition of the state of enlightenment, and the great awakening of the Buddha.

At the root of the samsaric wheel is avidya, the first link of the twelve. It is ignorance of reality, the "fundamental darkness". The karmic seeds generate (via greed, hate and delusion) the samskaras, the second link. Samskaras are the 51 types of impulses that derive from past actions: the 'karmic formations'

These 2 links can be construed as the manifestation of actions in a past life, or as manifestations of the current store of karmic seeds, subtle residues in the mindstream, the energies of past action. Together they generate a cascade of automatic effects that constitute the unfolding of karmic propensities. These can be thought of as events in a moment or as events of a lifetime. (the construct of the wheel of causality works at all time scales.)

Link 3 is called vijnana, 'consciousness', 'dualistic mind'. This is the result of whatever samskaras are operating at the time.

Link 4 is called Nama Rupa, ‘name and form’, the 5 skandhas.

Link 5 is the ‘six sense bases’, the 6 sense organs

Link 6 is “sparsha”, sense contact with an object.

Link 7 is “vedana”, feeling positive, negative, or neutral reaction to a sense contact.

Links 3-7 are automatic, the results of karma sprouting as samskaras. With links 8 and 9, there is choice:

Link 8 is “tanha”, craving. Reacting to a feeling (link 7), There is a tendency to push away the contact with aversion, or to pull it in, in the case of attachment. This leads to Link 9 “upadana” grasping, where there is an action in reaction to the feeling (link 7).

The vicious cycle can be broken at link 8 by applying antidotes to the attachment or aversion generated from the feeling, “vedana”. Then there is no grasping at link 9.

Link 10 is “bhava”, glossed as ‘becoming’. Here the karmic seed is planted; the vibration of the action imprints on the mind-stream. No action, no imprint.

Link 11 is Jati, 'birth'. Birth into a new life or, on a different timescale, the birth of a moment, the arising of dharmas, of phenomena.

Link 12 is ageing and death, and its suffering.

Traditionally, the vicious cycle is broken upon Awakening, when the last vestige of ignorance is removed, and no further samskaras are generated.

The entire cycle collapses when avidya is eliminated.

The cycle of death and rebirth is symbolized in the Bhava Chakra a complex picture with the demon of time encompassing a wheel representing the cycle of cause and effect. In the center are 3 animals representing the 3 poisons: a rooster for greed, a snake for hate, and a pig for delusion. In the next concentric ring are depicted sentient beings rising and falling on the wheel of samsara.

Next there are illustrations representing the 6 realms of rebirth. The gods are in the highest portion. They enjoy the pleasures of paradise, but then fritter away their store of merit, and dying a horrible death, fall back into the lower worlds. The Asuras (demigods) are always attacking the gods and always losing. They are so filled with anger and jealousy that, upon dying, they fall into the hells. The humans are beset by pride and arrogance, and the other afflictions. Upon dying, they can take rebirth in any of the 6 realms. These 3 realms are the upper worlds of samsara. The 3 lower realms are those of the animals, the

hungry ghosts, and the hells, beset by stupidity, unsatisfied greed, and hatred. Buddhas appear in all 6 realms to teach and transform the sentient beings there. Above the wheel are shown a bodhisattva and a monk pointing at a full moon symbolizing Enlightenment beyond samsara.

The outer ring of the bhavachakra has illustrations symbolizing each of the 12 links.

The 1st is a picture of a blind human, representing avidya, ignorance.

The 2nd pictures a potter molding clay, indicating Samskaras, the karmic formations; the impulses to action.

The 3rd picture is of a monkey (the mind , vijnana)

The 4th picture is of 2 men in a boat indicating nama rupa, body and mind, the 5 skandhas.

Picture 5 is that of a 6 windowed house, representing the 6 senses.

The 6th picture is of a couple embracing: sparsha, ‘contact’ of sense organ and object.

The 7th picture is of a man with an arrow in his eye, a symbol of vedana, ‘feeling’, the positive, negative or neutral reaction to a sense contact.

Picture 8 is of a man carousing, showing Tanha, 'thirst'.

The 9th picture is a monkey picking fruit, representing upadana, 'clinging', or 'grasping'.

Picture 10 is of a bride, symbolizing bhava, 'becoming', wherein the karmic seeds are planted.

The 11th picture shows a woman giving childbirth. Birth or the arising of another moment.

Picture 12 is of a corpse being carried to the charnel ground, depicting old age, decay and death.

The emblem of the bhava chakra is to be found at the entrance of many monasteries, including Sakya Monastery in Seattle. It is used for instruction in the laws of karma. It can be explained without the use of written material, as could the stained glass images to be found in Christian cathedrals, vivid representations of key ideas.

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