

12 Links of Dependent Origination

In order to gain the powerful motivation required to follow the path to the end, we need to begin with a clear realization of what's wrong with samsara.

We crave birth in samsara because we do not know what a thoroughly miserable place it is. That is one of the main causes for not being able to gain freedom from it.

Through studying, analyzing, and meditating on the 12 links we can come to understand quite clearly how cyclic existence evolves and this can lead us to a direct and clear understanding of selflessness.

When you replace ignorance, the first link, with wisdom, you naturally bring about a revolution in your actions, your karma... the second link. Up until now, everything we do has been on the samsaric side.. but once you begin acting out of wisdom.. everything turns around completely and whatever you do becomes the practice of purification.. leading to emancipation.

By understanding this causal process, you will come to a firm understanding of selflessness.

The multifarious effects we experience as life in samsara arise from a conjunction of many many different causes and conditions.

What we will be discussing here is primarily the dependent arising of affliction. **This is the way impure, samsaric phenomena arise based on causes and conditions having at their root the obscuring affliction of ignorance** .. you could also talk about the dependent arising of purification in which you look at the causes and conditions that cause liberation.

Ignorance

Ignorance is the root cause of everything in samsaric life.. from rebirth to all the experiences you have in all your lifetimes. All the experiences are the ripening results of karma. Karma depends on afflictions and all the afflictions depend on ignorance.

There are different systems of explaining ignorance

Vasubandhu' system doesn't consider ignorance the mere absence of knowing, but ignorance is something that is contrary to and directly opposed to knowing.

Here knowing is knowing the true nature of the self and the true nature of phenomena. The cause of cyclic existence is *not knowing* the true nature of the self and then grasping at self that is contradictory and opposed to its true nature. Ignorance is not a mere absence of knowing wisdom, nor something other than that wisdom,

-- it involves holding affirmatively to a conception that is contradictory and incompatible with knowing wisdom.

Here, the antidote, knowledge is understanding the truth, meaning the selflessness of the persons. It's opposite is the view of the transitory collections, which grasp at a self of persons.

- Dharmakirti - Commendium of Valid Cognition

The antidote to ignorance is knowledge, which is seeing the truth, understanding the meaning of selflessness. The opposite of that is the view of *the transitory collections* which regards the 5 aggregates and based upon that collection imputes a substantial self, which is then conceived of as real, independent, and substantially existent.

Vasubandhu and his brother Asanga do not agree that ignorance is actually grasping at an incorrect conception of reality. They say that ignorance is mere *not knowing* the true nature of reality.

These are the 2 definitions of ignorance:

1. Wrong understanding of reality - Vasubandhu
2. Mere not knowing the true - Asanga

Regardless of the disagreement, they both agree that the principle antidote of ignorance is the wisdom that realizes selflessness.

According to Asanga's Compendium of Knowledge, there are **2 types of ignorance**:

1. Not knowing about the cause and effect of karma and its results. The ignorance of the consequences of virtuous and non-virtuous actions underlies nonvirtuous action and it is the type of ignorance that gives rise to the lower rebirths.
2. Not knowing the true nature of ultimate reality. It is this type of ignorance that leads you to be born in the higher realms of cyclic existence. To be born in the higher realms you must perform virtuous actions, but those virtuous actions are still motivated by an interest in gratifying a self that does not exist.

The root motivation of samsaric virtuous karma is ignorance of the true nature of the self.

Although each individual act has its own immediate, proximate motivation, the fundamental motivation that underlies them all is this grasping at a false conception of self.

For both these types of ignorance, the antidotes are knowledge, understanding, and realization; and the ultimate antidote to the fundamental misconception of self is wisdom realizing emptiness.

2. Formative Activity

These are the actions that arise because of ignorance, which become the causes and conditions that eventually bring all future results... in short, this refers to karma. Karma is action of body, speech, and mind and there are 2 types, virtuous which produce happy rebirths and nonvirtuous which create lower rebirths. There are 2 types of virtuous karma.. 1) **Meritorious** karma which projects rebirth in the desire realm and 2) **immovable karma** which projects rebirth in the form and formless realms. **For all samsaric karma the underlying cause is ignorance.**

3. Consciousness

In general, the sutras speak of 6 consciousness'. The 5 sense consciousness plus mental consciousness. The 3rd link refers to the mental consciousness.

Motivated by the ignorance of self-grasping you take actions of body, speech, or mind. Each action deposits a seed or impression on the consciousness which carries that seed forward as a potential, and will eventually ripen and yield a result in the form of some type of future life experience.

To make this clear we can divide the consciousness into 2:

1. Casual consciousness - the consciousness that receives the impression deposited by a seeding action and carries it forward until it meets the conditions for that seed to ripen. **In general, it is the causal consciousness that we call the 3rd link.**
2. Resultant Consciousness - The first moment when that consciousness becomes conjoined with the new life right after ripening.

The consciousness that receives and carries forward those karmic seeds is called the **causal consciousness**. The consciousness at the first moment when such a seed ripens as birth in one of the happy migrations is called the **resultant consciousness**.

4. Name and Form

Name refers to the combination of the 4 non-physical aggregates... feelings, discrimination, mental formations, and consciousness.

These nonphysical parts of the mind-body continuum which combine to create the mental life of an individual are what we are really talking about when we talk about a 'person', a 'being', a 'personality, or a life.

Form refers to the physical aggregate that we call the body.

For all beings except the formless realm, the mental aggregates join with the body at the moment of conception.... as the 5 aggregates come together life begins. **That development period is called 'Name and**

Form'.

These 5 aggregates between the period of conception and the stage when the 6 sense organs have developed are given the designation '**Name and Form**'. The body consisting of the combined blood and semen before the 6 consciousness' have formed is called **form**. The four mental aggregates as they exist in this developmental period are designated 'name' because they form a basis or referent for naming.

In brief, the period during which the fetus is developing through these five stages, up until the six sense organs are complete, is designated 'name and form'

5. The 6 Sense Bases

We have the continuation of the mind-body complex that is developing in the 4th link. The 6 sense bases refer to this development phase during which the person develops the **capability** to experience an object through the coming together of sense faculty, object, and object.. although that contact has not yet taken place. With name and form you have an actual body, and with the 6 sense bases the specific physical properties of that embodiment are fully developed, and the sensory faculties thereby become utilizable instruments

6. Contact

Once the sense faculties are formed they begin to operate. Contact is the moment when a faculty, and object of cognition, and a moment of consciousness meet. In dependence on this moment of contact, the object is distinguished as attractive, unattractive, or neutral. There are 6 kinds of contact corresponding to the 6 faculties and 6 consciousness.

7. Feeling

Depending on whether you have contact with an attractive, unattractive, or neutral object, you experience a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. When contact and feeling are complete, the experience is complete.

This is how you experience life. Sometimes you have pleasant feelings, sometimes you have unpleasant, and sometimes neutral. **Feeling is the experience of the ripening of your karmic seeds.** One feeling after another, that is the way you experience your life. Most of your life is directed at experiencing pleasant feelings.

Each experience of feeling is the ripened fruit of karmic seeds you planted in the past and results of causes you created by your previous actions.

Beings in the form and formless realm experience only pleasant feelings during their whole life, while beings in the hell and lower realms experience suffering. Humans and some other beings in the desire realm experience mixed good and bad. But for all beings in cyclic existence, the feelings they experience are the ripening of the

previous karma.

Contact is the point at which the subjective components of experience--- the faculty and consciousness -- meet and utilize the object; at that point the object role in the experience is complete. From that contact -- feeling -- the subjective react arises; this is the experience of the object as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This feeling is the ripening of previous karmic seeds, and once that feeling has arisen, the entire experience is complete -- the karmic seeds have yielded their result

8. Craving

Craving is attachment. When an enjoyable feeling arises, you become attached to it. You don't want to separate from it -- on the contrary, you want more and better. Even when pain and discomfort arises there is craving, but in this case, the craving is to be from that unpleasant feeling.

Tsongkhapa says that the phrase 'craving arises out of the result of feeling' needs to be qualified. Feeling itself is not the ultimate cause of craving. Craving is caused when feeling is accompanied by ignorance. When a feeling arises it is rooted in ignorance and is dominated by ignorance.

Therefore when a feeling of pleasure or aversion arises towards an object, that object is being perceived in a distorted way. Because of ignorance the feeling arises based on this mistaken perception; when that feeling is pleasurable you desire the object and want to possess it when unattractive you desire separation. In either case, the feeling gives rise to the craving only because it is dominated by ignorance.

Craving is another word for desire. Not all desire is non-virtuous, like the desire to be a bodhisattva, etc. When a desire that is free from ignorance or other afflictions it does not operate to perpetuate entrapment in cyclic existence.

Once ignorance is cut out, feeling still arises, by craving does not.

ex. arhats experience pleasant feelings, and buddhas experience blissful feelings, but because the feelings are not dominated by ignorance, they will not give rise to craving or attachment.

The nexus between the 7th and 8th link provides a good illustration of how these 12 links operate as a chain of causation.

A feeling is a result of a culmination of a previous set of causes -- ignorance, karma, consciousness, etc. And when that feeling arises that particular sequence of cause and result is complete. But at the same time that feeling is giving rise to a new craving, which may take the form of attachment, aversion, or some other affliction. That new craving will motivate new karma, and a whole new-cause result sequence will be set into motion by the completion of the last one. In this way, the chain of experience within on lifetime, and the chain of lifetimes within cyclic existence, perpetuate themselves. That self-perpetuating process is what the 12 links of dependent origination is really talking about.

These points make it clear that the 8th link of craving, or attachment, plays a central role in perpetuating and structuring samsaric existence.

9. Grasping

In 8 we took a form of desire or attachment and we called it 'craving'. This craving then gives rise to a more intense and powerful form of attachment called 'grasping.' Craving is a general attachment to objects. Grasping augments craving in a way that strengthens and actualizes the ripening of karmic seeds into samsaric rebirth or other experiences.

Grasping is divided into 4 different categories based on the 4 types of objects

1. **Grasping out of Desire** - Attachment to the sensory objects we enjoy in the desire realm -- form, sound, smell, taste, and tangible objects -- which are referred to as the **attributes of the desire realm**'. Here in the desire realm, the mind is dominated by sense consciousness. In this realm beings spend their whole lives chasing after attributes of the desire realm such as attractive forms, delicious tastes, and nice smells. They feel happy when they find such objects and displeasure when they don't. Higher up in the form and formless realms the beings don't use the tongue or nose because they don't even eat or smell. The beings of these upper realms survive on the very subtle food of samadhi, the nourishment of meditative stabilization.
2. **Grasping for Views** - This refers to grasping at any of the various types of wrong view with the exception of the transitory collections. These 4 wrong views relate to certain misguided behaviors and religious practices that are based on mistaken dogmas, philosophies, and beliefs. Grasping for views arises when you have a strong attachment to these kinds of wrong views.
3. **Grasping for mistaken morality and asceticism** Wrong view in which you hold some distorted system of ethics or mode of religious behavior will lead to emancipation, such as sacrificing other beings. Although you are convinced you are on the right path, such perverted ethics and practices lead only to negative karma and future suffering.
4. **Grasping for a self** - This is a strong attachment to the self that comes from holding the mental and physical aggregates to be a real 'I'. This grasps at a false imputation of an absolute inherently existing self, where there is in fact, only a transitory aggregation of elements. This leads you to hold onto this self with pride, egoism, and attachment. This 4th type of grasping is equivalent to the view of the transitory collections. All of the other afflictions -- pride and jealousy come out of this basic misunderstanding -- the wrong view that imputes a self on the perishing aggregates. If you do not make this mistake, then all these other faults and wrong attitudes will not develop.

These are the 4 types of grasping taught in the sutras.

This powerful form of attachment we call grasping acts as moisture that awakens, stimulates, and nourishes the dormant karmic seeds you have deposited on your mental continuum by previous actions. The latent seed

of past actions are always present, but they require the moisture of attachment to ripen and bear fruit. Once the 2 levels of attachment -- craving, and grasping actualize the potentiality of a karmic seed, it ripens quickly into a resultant experience.

Ex. In an arhats mind there are many latent karmic seeds deposited by actions taken in innumerable past lifetimes. But these remain as dry seeds because they will never be nourished and actualized by attachment.

We can see how these 2 levels of attachment -- grasping and craving -- are the critical factors in actualizing and ripening karmic seeds, and thereby bringing about rebirth and all the experiences of cyclic existence.

10. Existence

Generally, refers to the subsequent rebirth brought about by the ripening of the seed planted by the action of the second link. Specifically, the 10th link refers to the moment just before that next life happens, at the point when the karmic seed is fully actualized and ready to yield its fruit. So the name 'existence' is the case of giving the name of the result to the cause. The result is a new existence and that name is given to the moment when the cause of that new existence have all come together and are about to produce that result

There are 3 supportive causes that actualize the main karmic seed. Craving and grasping are the afflictions that act as the moisture awakening and activating the seed, and then a final karma -- which is usually a mental action -- a thought at the time of death acts as a third supportive cause. This final karma will be similar in its ethical tone(virtuous, etc) to the main karmic seed.

If the first 2 factors are like moisture, we can say the 3rd nourishing factor is like warmth.

If the projecting karma is nonvirtuous at the time of death nonvirtuous thoughts -- which are mental karma -- arise and act as this third supportive condition.. the same with virtuous.

In this way, the thought of a person who is approaching death act as an essential condition that nurtures and activates the main projecting karmic seed.

We can say that this tenth link, existence, is actually the potency that was established by the karma of the second link to bring for the next rebirth when it has been fully nourished by craving, grasping, and a final secondary karma. At that point, it is fully empowered to produce the next life, **and it is that fully empowered potential that is called 'existence'**

This is the last link in the previous life, the moment just before rebirth.

The next existence has not yet come into being, but at the stage of the 10th link it is about to do so; that is why the name of that result, existence is given to its full potentiated cause.

11. Birth

The result of that fully potentiated cause is rebirth. The first moment of that new life, when the consciousness enters its new body, is the eleventh link, called birth. Birth can take place by any of the 4 modes -- from womb, egg, heat, and moisture, or miraculous birth. Hell being, intermediate state being, and devas always have miraculous birth. Hungry ghosts usually experience this type of birth as well, but some are said to be womb born. Humans and animals share all four types of birth.

12. Aging and Death

Begins in the second moment after birth. From the moment after a humans mental and physical aggregates conjoin there is called birth, and by the second moment, you have already begun to age. From that moment on aging never stops; you are moving irrevocably towards death.

Aging is the maturation of the aggregates and the unceasing, unstoppable change they undergo in each moment.

Although you are getting older, and the aggregates are different in every moment, there is a continuity and an identifiable similarity that distinguishes one being aggregates from another.

Death is the cessation of the continuum of that seemingly identical set of aggregates. The continuity of the present aggregates comes to an end at the moment of death.

Aging and death are combined into one link, because death can occur without the common signs of aging, such as white hair, bent body, loss of memory, etc. In fact, death can occur immediately after birth so there is barely and aging.

It is traditional to mention, in connection with this link of aging and death, the sorrow, lamentation, and anguish of losing those you love, and the suffering of dying yourself; this is done in order to bring to mind the unsatisfactory nature of cyclic existence.

The previous 11 causes and conditions function in their interdependent fashion to produce and experiencer; a being living a life.

But regardless of the nature of that life, in the end it will undoubtedly culminate in the suffering of death.

Although practitioners who have maintained excellent ethical conduct die with their minds and bodies at ease -- the death process, in general, is one of severe pain and sorrow.

The chain of dependent origination by which beings continue to cycle in samsara inevitably ends with the pain and sorrow of its final link: death

