

INTRODUCTION TO WHAT THE BUDDHA THOUGHT

What the Buddha taught, *in his own words*, was “Suffering, and the end of suffering.” He had no intention of establishing a religion, nor of teaching philosophy, cosmology, and metaphysics, and he said so repeatedly.

As it turns out, though, the end of suffering involves a kind of wisdom that encompasses both the nature of human experience, and the ultimate nature of reality. And the end of suffering, the nature of human experience, and the ultimate nature of reality are key issues in religion, philosophy, cosmology and metaphysics. Thus there was no way for him to guide people towards the end of suffering without broaching topics associated with all those domains. As a result, beginning even before he died, people have been turning his wisdom teachings into religions, and have used them as the foundation for a variety of philosophies, cosmologies, and metaphysical descriptions of reality.

As the Buddhadharma becomes more widely known and appreciated in the West, we are attracted by many insights that have direct application to our 21st century experience. Inevitably, we find ourselves looking to these teachings for answers to our own religious, philosophical, and metaphysical questions. Before we do so, though, we need to try to understand, as clearly as we possibly can, what the Buddha himself actually thought. This means stripping the Buddhist teachings we have received of all the religious and philosophical baggage that has been added in other times by other cultures.

A question that often comes up is, “How can we know if something we read or hear about Buddhism really reflects the Buddha’s own teachings.” On the one hand, it’s not easy to know for sure, but at the same time, there are several tools we can use. I will point out three of them here.

First of all, when delivering his first teaching to his former companions, who were quite familiar with the various spiritual teachings of the times, he said,

“There arose in me the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the insight, the illumination *concerning things not heard before.*”

Therefore, any doctrine that belongs to another, non-Buddhist tradition, and most especially any religious teaching that was widely accepted prior to the Buddha’s birth, should automatically be considered suspect.

Second, the genuine teachings of the Buddha display an astonishing level of internal consistency. Any time you come upon an inconsistency, one side or the other of it needs to be discarded or reinterpreted in a way that brings about a return to consistency. When you must choose between two statements, always choose the one that is most consistent with *everything else* the Buddha said and did.

Finally, recall that the Buddha was hesitant to teach following his Awakening, thinking to himself:

“This Dhamma that I have attained is profound and hard to see, hard to discover... not attainable by mere ratiocination, subtle, for the wise to experience... If I taught this Dhamma others, would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.

Enough of teaching the Dhamma
That even I found hard to reach;
For it will never be perceived
By those who live in lust and hate.
Men dyed in lust, and whom a cloud
Of darkness laps, will never see
What goes against the stream, is subtle,
Deep and hard to see, abstruse.”

Fortunately, the Buddha decided to go ahead and teach anyway. But anything that seems too simple, too easy to grasp without serious reflection, may at the very least be an over-simplification. At worst, it may be a doctrine that has crept in from another religion. At the same time, remember that the Buddha’s thinking is *subtle* rather than *complex*. Anything that is intellectually convoluted and complicated probably did not originate with the Buddha either. What makes the real teaching of Buddha difficult to understand at times is that it is so very different from the way we are used to thinking of things. All of the logic behind the Buddha’s teachings is very straightforward, but it does require us to let go of some fundamental assumptions. If we are not willing to do that, the teachings will seem impenetrable. And if we try to distort those teachings to fit preconceived ideas, we will find ourselves immersed in all kinds of elaborate rationalizations.

Suffering and the End of Suffering: The Four Noble Truths

With regard to suffering, the Buddha distinguished between unpleasant experiences that originate in the body, and the kind of displeasure and unhappiness that is mental in origin. He pointed out that it is actually the mind’s reaction to unpleasant bodily sensations that makes physical pain into a source of suffering. And furthermore, every kind of suffering we experience *other* than physical pain is generated *entirely by the mind*. The significance of this is that, although illness, injury, aging and death are inevitable, and it’s not within our power to keep them from afflicting our bodies, *we potentially have much greater power and influence over what happens in our minds*. We can sum this up by saying, “Pain is inevitable, but (with the proper mental training) suffering is optional.” This is called The Truth about Suffering.

The Buddha goes on to point out that resistance to what *is*, wanting things to be different than they are, is associated with *every* instance of suffering. He further points out that, when we find ourselves suffering, if we can identify specifically what it is we are resisting and let go of that resistance, the suffering disappears in the same moment. This can be summed up by saying, “Craving for things to be different than they are is the root cause of all suffering.” This is called The Truth about the Cause of Suffering.

With regard to the end of suffering, the Buddha tells us that our craving is driven by ignorance and delusion. So long as we are trapped in delusion, our craving will continue without end, and so will our suffering. But ignorance can be eliminated through a profound Wisdom that overcomes the delusion we are trapped by. Once we are freed from delusion, both craving and

suffering cease as well. In other words, “When Wisdom brings about the complete and permanent end of craving, there is also a complete and permanent end to suffering.” This is called The Truth about the End of Suffering.

The Buddha outlined a Path with eight parts leading to that Wisdom: 1. Right Understanding, 2. Right Intention, 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action, 5. Right Livelihood, 6. Right Effort, 7. Right Concentration, and 8. Right Mindfulness. This is usually described as, “The Eightfold Path to the End of Suffering,” and is also known as The Truth about the Path to the End of Suffering.

The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is divided into three parts: The first division consists of Right Understanding and Right Intention. It provides an *intellectual* understanding of the Wisdom that overcomes ignorance, and so this division is called Wisdom. Here the Buddha lays out in detail his own observations about the way things really are, and asks us to verify the truth of these observations by carefully investigating and reflecting upon our own experience. This is where the foundation is laid for the next two divisions.

The second division of the Path, called Virtue, consists of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. These are practices performed in the course of daily life in order to change our conditioned ways seeing and reacting to things. Basically, by practicing Virtue we condition ourselves away from the wrong views and understandings that derive from our ignorant and deluded view of reality.

The third division is Meditation, consisting of Right Effort, Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness. These are the mind-training practices that allow us to have the sort of experiences that validate the Truths we have studied and understood intellectually. The combined effect of all three divisions, all eight parts of the Eightfold Path is that we achieve an intuitive realization of the Wisdom that ends ignorance, craving, and suffering.

We will learn about what the Buddha thought by studying the Buddha’s teachings on the Wisdom division of the Path. These are the same thoughts that have been used in formulating various Buddhist religious philosophies and metaphysical systems over the ages. Please keep in mind when examining the source teachings, that the Buddha’s primary purpose was always more practical rather than theoretical. This is reflected in the different ways of speaking and the different philosophical and religious assumptions he entertained when talking to different people – warriors and kings, merchants, uneducated lay people, his own disciples, Brahmins, followers of other teachers, and so forth. It is easy to assume that he agreed with the religious beliefs of the people he was speaking to, simply because he didn’t contradict them. But this is not necessarily the case. Quite often, rather than challenging the beliefs someone already held and pronouncing some sort greater truth, he simply met people where they were and tried to guide them to a better, deeper understanding. This can be confusing for someone who comes along later searching in these many and varied teachings for information of an absolute nature. Thus the Buddha’s teachings must always be interpreted in the context they were given, taking into account who he was talking to, and the point he was making at the time. Nevertheless, if we are careful, we can still get a pretty good idea of what the Buddha really thought.

WHAT THE BUDDHA THOUGHT

Dependent Arising I

At the very core of the Buddha's teaching we find the idea of Dependent Arising. Whenever you encounter this term, it will be used in one of two ways: either to describe an overarching general principle — that all things arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions; or as a specific description of a key mental process — namely the “twelve links of dependent arising.” Here we address Dependent Arising in its more general form.

We begin our discussion of what the Buddha thought with Dependent Arising because, in both its general and specific usages, it is the basis for the other uniquely Buddhist concepts of karma, rebirth, the way suffering is perpetuated, and the possibility of liberation from suffering through the realization of impermanence, emptiness, and no-self. These are “uniquely Buddhist concepts” in that, although they share common terminology with other belief systems, these terms take on a completely different meaning in the Buddha's teachings of them. Unfortunately, this creates a great potential for misunderstanding, and indeed these misunderstandings have become quite widespread within the many different religions commonly described as “Buddhism.”

Dependent Arising in the general sense is expressed in the simple formula:

When this is, that is.

When this arises, that arises.

When this isn't, that isn't.

When this ceases, that ceases.

To most of us today, this just seems like common sense. Nevertheless, very few of us fully appreciate all of the implications of these simple statements. The Buddha was very aware of how difficult it is for people to fully understand Dependent Arising. The Ven. Ananda once told the Buddha he found the doctrine of Dependent Arising evident and easy to comprehend. The Buddha replied,

“Ananda, do not say so. The doctrine of dependent arising is so profound that sentient beings are unable to comprehend it. They are unable to understand what I teach because they are unable to perceive the process of dependent arising. Consequently, they are perplexed just like with a ball of entangled thread, a jumble of munja grass. They cannot free themselves from suffering, states of deprivation, degeneration, and transmigration.”

The subtle implications of Dependent Arising are as follows:

1. Nothing stands outside of cause and effect.

In other words, anything that happens has a cause. No exceptions. Nothing can happen without a cause.

Furthermore, anything that happens produces effects. Always. Nothing that happens is ever without consequences.

Therefore, anything that appears to be “supernatural” or “magic” only appears that way because we don't fully understand the causes. The laws of causality are never violated.

2. All that arises due to causes and conditions must also pass away.

When the cause is absent, there can be no effect. When there is no effect, it is because there is no cause.

When the cause ceases, so does the effect. When the effect ceases, it is because the cause has ceased.

Everything, therefore, is impermanent.

3. Anything that arises does so in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions.

We usually think of cause and effect in a linear relationship, with one cause leading to one effect. But any real event actually involves the simultaneous presence of multiple causes and conditions.

And if we enumerate all of the immediate causes and conditions necessary for a particular effect, each of those in turn depends upon multiple causes and conditions.

And so on it goes, in an ever-widening web of causality.

Each individual thing or event is the nexus of a massive causal convergence.

4. Causes and effects always arise together.

We usually think of cause and effect as two separate entities, with the cause always preceding the effect.

But the potential effect is already present in each contributing cause, even before all of the other necessary causes and conditions have arisen. And all of the contributing causes are inherently present within every effect. Cause and effect are not separate entities, arising and passing away in sequence.

Rather, they are part of a continuous process, with every contributing cause and every possible effect inherently present in every part of the process.

The arising and passing away of separate “things” is an illusion. There is just a single, continuous process.

5. Everything, everywhere is causally interconnected.

Because causality is a single continuous process, and because absolutely everything has multiple causes and conditions, and because absolutely everything produces multiple consequences, everything is interdependent with everything else.

Dependent Arising is sometimes called Interdependent Co-arising for this very reason.

Absolutely everything and everyone is an interpenetrating, inseparable part of a single, indivisible, causally interdependent whole, best conceived of as a process.

Most scientifically educated Westerners will find themselves perfectly at home with the Dependent Arising as a general principle, yet few will have ever fully thought through the five implications listed above, especially the last three.

As one Buddhist scholar, Rupert Gethin, has put it "...the secret of the universe lies in the nature of causality—the way one thing leads to another." Dependent Arising as a universal principle was arrived at by the Buddha through a combination of logic and experience. We will come to exactly the same conclusions if we carefully analyze our own experience of the world. It is not possible, of course, to observe every possible event and examine its underlying causes. Nor is it necessary. Later Buddhist logicians have provided rigorous logical support for this particular teaching of the Buddha. But each of us needs to satisfy our self that it is true.

The Nature of the Individual Person

Who or what am I? Like so many others before and since, the Buddha, asked himself this question. His answer has come down to us as the Five Aggregates: Consciousness, Form, Perceptions, Feeling, and Mental Formations. Let's do this same exercise for ourselves to see how the Buddha arrived at the Five Aggregates as a description of a person.

The Aggregate of Consciousness (*Viññāṇa Khandha*).

If I seek to answer the question "What am I?" while making the fewest possible assumptions, the most immediate answer is, "I am conscious." There is no need to define consciousness beyond this most obvious fact of subjective experience. Conscious of what? Conscious of this thought, this question. I am also conscious of seeing shapes and colors, hearing sounds, feelings of warmth, touch, pressure, and other bodily sensations. Other things that I can be conscious of include tastes and smells, memories, emotions, and all manner of thoughts and ideas.

With a brief moment's reflection, I realize that the entirety of my subjective existence, from as far back as I can remember right up to the present moment, has consisted of similar instances of consciousness. These appear to have occurred in a sequence, following rapidly upon one another, and my life history is defined by this sequence. In a very real sense, "I am" this collection, this aggregate of conscious experiences.

Every instance of consciousness that I observe or can recall is "consciousness *of*" something. While consciousness itself is difficult to pin down and examine, all of these "objects of consciousness" can be readily divided into categories and investigated further. Many of these objects can be catalogued according to the traditional five senses: the seeing of visible objects; the hearing of sounds; the feeling of the body and its movements, and of tactile sensations where tangible objects contact the body; the smelling of odors; and the tasting of substances contacting the tongue. The rest are different sorts of mental objects, such as thoughts and ideas, emotions, memories, mental images, and so forth that are all known directly by the mind. These six categories (the five kinds of physical sense objects plus mental objects) encompass every possible object of consciousness, and can be grouped into two general types – the mental and the physical, mind and body (*nama* and *rupa*).

In other words, this aggregate of conscious experiences that constitutes my nature as an individual person can be distinguished as consisting of mind and body. And I can further pursue the question of "What am I?" on the basis of that distinction.

The Aggregate of Form (*Rupa Khandha*)

Objects of consciousness corresponding to the five senses are all material in nature and belong to the physical domain. The sense organs by which they are known are part of the body, which is also material in nature. Reflecting on this, I find a certain circularity here: Objects within the physical domain are being known to the mind through other objects belonging to the physical domain.

When I examine what I actually know about these objects more closely, I find only sensations. The various "objects" I perceive are merely ideas and concepts constructed by the mind to make sense of those sensations. First come the sensations, then, so quickly as to seem instantaneous, come the perceived objects. I really know nothing at all about material objects of any kind, the world

of form in general, or even my own body, except through sensation. From these sensations, my mind has constructed an image of a body with its sense organs, right along with a whole world of other material objects.

Realizing this, I can now more accurately describe that part of my self I experience as my body. It is another collection, an aggregate of sensations this time.

The Aggregate of Perceptions (*Sanna Khandha*)

I now realize that I haven't been experiencing events and objects out there "in the world" at all. All of the *material* objects I thought I was perceiving are actually *mental* objects my mind has concocted to account for sensations that I experience. My mind assembles colors and shape into visual objects, combining them with auditory, tactile, and other sensations to produce these perceptions.

I have now identified another important part of the answer to the question "What am I?" It is yet another collection, an aggregate of mental constructs I can call perceptions.

The Aggregate of Feelings (*Vedana Khandha*)

Running as a constant theme throughout the continuing stream of my moment-to-moment conscious experiences, I notice pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Some sensations are pleasant, others unpleasant, and still others are neither. The same is true of thoughts, memories, and other mental objects – some are pleasant, others unpleasant, while still others are neutral. These feelings, I realize, are just another kind of mental object, yet another construct of the mind.

I am, in part, this aggregate of feelings that accompanies every other kind of experience I have.

The Aggregate of Mental Formations (*Sankhara Khandha*)

Both perceptions and feelings are components of my conscious experience that are generated by my own mind. But when I reflect on it, my mind is constantly producing a whole variety of other mental objects that get presented as objects of consciousness. These include things like concepts, ideas, and the thoughts that get elaborated out of those concepts and ideas. Memories of past events, imaginative fantasies, and projections about the future are other examples of mental formations. And emotions are yet another kind of conscious experience that comes directly from the mind itself.

Thinking more deeply on it, I realize that there are many other mental formations that are an important part of who I am, but that operate mostly in the background rather than appearing as objects of consciousness. For example, all of my accumulated loves and hates, desires and aversions, worries, hopes, fears, and the intentions that drive my behavior. Indeed, all of those characteristics that I or someone else might describe as my "personality" are a kind of mental formation.

In other words, a very important part of who I am is this other great collection, this aggregate of mental formations.

Taken together as a whole, these Five Aggregates fully account for me as an individual person in mind and body, a psycho-physical entity active in the world. Yet within them, I find nothing that I can legitimately claim as I, me, or mine. Moments of consciousness arise and pass away together with their objects, whether those objects are sensations, perceptions, feelings, or other mental formations. They are impermanent, and cannot be clung to, "owned," or in any sense controlled.

There is nothing unique to me about the fact of being conscious. As far as I can tell, there are many other conscious beings, and other than the *objects* of consciousness in the moment, there is nothing to distinguish one consciousness from another.

As best I can discern, we all experience sensations, feelings, and perceptions that are more or less similar, all of which are transient, and all of which arise and cease dependent upon causes and conditions, whether we wish them to or not. Likewise for every other kind of mental formation. I have no power over these Five Aggregates that “I am.” In all of this, there is nothing to cling to as Self.

Yet at the same time, I am unique. The particular sequence in which objects of consciousness have arisen and passed away in my mind is unique to me and me alone. The particular mental formations that my mind has generated are likewise unique. In fact, each and every person, every such *collection of Aggregates* in this or any other world, is totally unique, completely special, and exquisitely precious.

The Three Characteristics

The ignorance that the Buddha identified at the root of craving is ignorance of three particular facts that characterize human existence. These Three Characteristics are:

- Impermanence (*anicca* in Pali and *anitya* in Sanskrit)
- Dissatisfaction (*dukkha* in Pali and *duhkha* in Sanskrit)
- No-Self (*anatta* in Pali and *anatman* in Sanskrit)

The delusion corresponding to ignorance of the Three Characteristics is the mistaken belief that:

- we are separate, enduring entities in a world of other, separate, enduring entities, and
- our suffering and happiness depends upon what happens to us, upon our interactions with these other entities.

The Wisdom that eradicates ignorance and overcomes delusion comes from Insight into the Three Characteristics.

Impermanence

Impermanence refers to the fact that all conditioned things are in a constant state of flux [see #2 of the five Implications of Dependent Arising].

We often act and react as though things are more permanent than they really are, becoming upset and unhappy when they change, although we all know better. This kind of impermanence requires no special insight to understand, even if it takes more insight than most of us have to live accordingly. But the Buddha was pointing to a much more radical kind of impermanence that goes entirely beyond this.

In reality, there are no “things” at all. Not even temporarily existing “things” that briefly come into being and then pass away again due to causes and conditions. Ultimately, there is *only* flux [see Implication #4 of Dependent Arising], and the mere *appearance* of things arising and passing away in the process of changing from one form to another. But make no mistake, this does not mean that “nothing exists.” It means, rather, that there is only pure process. This is the middle way of the Buddha that avoids extreme views such as “all exists” and “nothing exists.”

No-Self

No-Self is the denial that there is some individual essence to a person, a true *Self*, or *Atta*, or *Atman*. There is, of course, the unique and constantly changing complex of psychophysical processes, of mental and physical phenomena, the mind and body that we ordinarily identify as a person. But there is no single, separate, enduring entity apart from that.

Knowing that we will die, the very belief in a separate Self causes us to suffer at the prospect, and though the answer can never be known, the question of what happens after death assumes great importance. Are we born to struggle and suffer through life, only to be annihilated at death? Some form of continued existence may at first seem preferable. But for those who believe in a continuously reincarnated Self, the prospect soon becomes one of an endless, lonely suffering, forever separate from and in constant conflict with all that is Other. This is so horrible to contemplate that, prior to the coming of the Buddha, the highest spiritual goal of many was to find an escape from the endless cycle of reincarnation. Often this meant spiritual practices specifically intended to bring about annihilation of the Self at death. On the other hand, those who believe the Self is inevitably annihilated at death, regardless of what we do, often tend towards an amoral nihilism and hedonism.

The other, truly major problem associated with the belief in a separate Self is that it is accompanied by the belief that happiness and suffering are the result of what happens to the Self. This makes the boundary between Self and Other into a battle line. The Self must constantly strive to obtain the things and create the circumstances that bring happiness and satisfaction, struggling against other separate Selves in order to do so. Likewise for the avoidance of all those things and circumstances that cause the Self to suffer. But this takes us back to the first two of the Buddha's Truths, the Truth of Suffering and the Truth of the Cause of Suffering: What happens *to us* can certainly cause pleasant and unpleasant sensations to arise. But it is only our own mind's reaction to what happens that transforms an unpleasant sensation into an experience of suffering. Likewise, happiness also comes from within, from the mind itself, not from what we possess or from what happens to us. *There can be no end to suffering before the Truth of No-Self has been realized.*

The notion that there is a Self that exists apart from the mental and physical phenomena we call a person is called *eternalism* (regardless of whether that Self is thought to last forever or for just some finite period of time). Eternalism is the basis for the belief in a Self or soul that survives after death. However, as we have seen, each individual thing or event, including an individual person, is the nexus of a massive causal convergence [Implication #3]. And all that arises due to causes and conditions is impermanent and must also pass away [Implication #2]. Furthermore, separate "things," including a separate Self, are just an illusion. Ultimately, there is only process [Implication #4].

However, it would be a mistake to think that the No-Self doctrine just makes the Self into a set of mental and physical processes, rather than a separate entity. If that were the case, then when those processes end at death, the Self would cease to exist. This is no different than saying that the Self is just the body and mind, and that this Self ceases to exist when the body dies. That is called *annihilationism*, and is just as much a wrong view as eternalism. Both eternalism and annihilationism are wrong views that the Buddha repeatedly us warned against.

The No-Self doctrine is far more radical, and ultimately far more appealing, than either of these mistaken views. It states that there is no Self either to survive or be annihilated at death, simply because *no such Self exists now, ever has existed, or ever could exist*. If we look at the notion of

selfhood more closely, we see that it has no meaning except in contrast to something that is *not* Self, that is *other than self*. The very essence of Self is duality and separateness, so *to be a Self is to be separate*. Yet we have seen that absolutely everything and everyone, including an individual person, is an interpenetrating, inseparable part of a *single, indivisible, causally interdependent whole* [Implication #5]. In this wholistic view of reality, there is no room for separate processes that come to an end independently of the whole.

For those who have realized the truth of No-Self, there is no need to ask what happens after the death of the body. Indeed, the Buddha steadfastly refused to answer all such questions, suggesting they were pointless and a waste of time. However, speaking in the common idiom of the day, since the goal of spiritual practice was so often the end of cyclic reincarnation, the achievement of Awakening was commonly referred to as having achieved the “final birth” and the “end of rebirth.” As we shall see later, the Buddha often used popular terminology, changing the meaning to suit his own teaching. When we examine the specific application of Dependent Arising known as the “Twelve Links,” we will find that the very idea of rebirth has been given a new, very different meaning than reincarnation. Thus the “end of rebirth” also comes to mean something totally different.

Emptiness

Although not originally articulated as such by the Buddha, Emptiness is a more all-embracing term that combines the Truths of Impermanence and No-Self. Emptiness refers to the fact that all things, including the Self, are Empty of self-existence, and Empty of self-nature.

All appearance of “thingness” is an illusion, projected by the mind onto different aspects of a single, interconnected process in its indivisible wholeness. What we call “things” are nothing more than momentary convergences of causes and conditions, continuously evolving nexuses of causal relationships. And a “momentary nexus” has no independent existence either. Remember, the reality is that any such nexus belongs to a totally interconnected whole, and so anywhere you look in that reality, you will find such a causal nexus [Implication #3 of Dependent Arising]. Like an eye looking through a tube at a piece of empty sky, the mind looking through the sense organs designates a particular causal convergence, out of an infinity of such convergences, as an object in any particular moment. Each such nexus is real and unique, “existing” in dependence upon causes and conditions. But its *independent* existence, its *separateness*, is an illusion projected upon it by the mind.

In other words, the “existence” of separate “things,” such as they are, depends not only upon causes and conditions, but upon the *perceiving mind* as a cause as well. Our subjective experience of a “thing” is called a *dhamma*. *Dhammas* are mental phenomena, created by the mind, and existing only in the mind. The actual *content* of any particular *dhamma* is also created by the mind and exists only in the mind.¹ This is what it means to say that, “**all things are Empty of self-existence.**” But that does not mean that *dhammas* are not real. Just that the *specific contents*, the objects of conscious experience, have no separate existence outside of the mind. And that applies to the personal Self as well. Nor does it mean that “*nothing* exists outside of the mind.” There is an Ultimate Reality. We are a part of that Ultimate Reality, and it is the source of our sensory experiences. It is just that we cannot know that Ultimate Reality in itself. All we can ever know are the mental representations, the “stories” fabricated by the mind to account for those experiences.

¹ The one important exception to this is the unique *dhamma* whose content is Nirvana or Emptiness. The content of this *dhamma* is an absence, which is uncreated.

In each instance in which the mind imposes thingness, it takes the information provided by the sense organs and organizes and labels it in a way that makes it meaningful to the mind. That meaningfulness is then the perceived “nature” of the thing. Different minds will impute different natures to the same sense objects, and so will the same mind impute different natures to the same object at different times. This is what it means to say that, “**all things are Empty of self-nature.**” The mind creates its own reality, and imputes a nature to that reality. This does not mean that Ultimate Reality has no self-nature of its own. It simply means that Ultimate Reality is Empty of any *other*, mind-imputed nature. In other words, the nature of Ultimate Reality is not what it appears to the mind to be, and can never be known directly to the mind. But this doesn’t mean we can’t know anything about the nature of Ultimate Reality. Dependent Arising, Impermanence, and Emptiness are all very important things that we know *about* Ultimate Reality through inference.

Dissatisfaction

Dissatisfaction refers to the fact that life, by its very nature, is difficult, flawed, and imperfect. Deep, lasting satisfaction, true happiness, complete freedom from suffering can never be achieved so long as we misunderstand the nature of human experience and the true nature of reality.²

The mind-created contents of *dhammas*, and the dependently arising reality they attempt to represent can never be the source of more than the most fleeting pleasures. That which is impermanent, fabricated by the mind, and devoid of any self-nature of being what it appears to be can never bring happiness. So long as the mind posits the objects of experience as real in themselves, grasping to them as sources of happiness or seeking to avoid them as the cause of suffering, the result will be dissatisfaction. A mind that perceives itself as being, or being part of, a separate Self, will always be in a state of perpetual and futile struggle with what it perceives to be Other. The fact of Dependent Arising means that all attempts to control what happens to us are doomed to fail. But it is the very nature of our human minds that we perceive ourselves as separate, and that we assume that our transient states of happiness and suffering are the result of our interactions with other separate entities. It is only by transcending our nature through the wisdom that Insight brings, and by abandoning the delusion that leads to craving, that we can ever find true and lasting happiness.

Karma

The belief in karmic retribution was very widespread in India, and had already been around for a long, long time before the Buddha. The belief in reincarnation was also very widespread, and had also been around for a very long time. We need to take an historical look at the form of these ideas prior to the Buddha’s arrival on the scene in order to appreciate how he transformed them.

The theory of karmic retribution was quite straightforward: That every action has consequences is an obvious fact, well-known to everyone. Karmic retribution refers quite specifically

² The term *dukkha* has a broad range of meanings, and the different ways the Buddha use it at different times fall into several distinct categories. The Truth about Suffering makes a distinction between *dukkha* as unpleasant physical sensation or ordinary pain (called *dukkha-dukkha*), and *dukkha* as mental suffering (sometimes called *domanassa dukkha*). Here *dukkha* refers both to the stress of trying to hold onto things that are constantly changing (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*), and to the subtle dissatisfaction of life because Empty objects and conditioned states can never fulfill our hopes and expectations (*saṃkhāra-dukkha*).

to consequences that reflect the moral quality of an action. People are constantly doing things that are good or bad to some degree or another. And all kinds of different, seemingly random, things happen to people, some of which are beneficial and others are harmful. The theory of karmic retribution simply links these two together to make the world a fair and just place. According to this theory, the consequences of morally good actions are beneficial events that reward the performer of those good acts. Likewise, morally evil actions produce painful consequences. It is a simple step from here to an all-embracing theory of karma in which *everything* that happens is the moral consequence of good or bad actions done in the past. Once a person understands how karma works, then they also know what they need to do to insure a happy existence in the future.

This theory of karmic retribution had a major problem, though. People are often seen to benefit from cruel and unjust actions, while just, kind and generous behavior often appears to go unrewarded. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Reincarnation resolves this problem, since it allows karmic acts and karmic consequences to happen in different lives. Out of necessity, the notions of reincarnation and karmic retribution came to be tightly linked. Not only did the “law” of karma require reincarnation in order for it to make any sense, but karma came to be seen as the actual *cause* of reincarnation.

This combination of karma and reincarnation helped make sense of what otherwise seems an arbitrary and unjust world. It gave an easily grasped method for achieving health, wealth, and happiness, provided a solid rationale for behaving morally, and made the inevitability of death a little bit more palatable. But it still left a lot to be desired. *This* life in *this* world continues to be full of suffering. And even if, through understanding the law of karma, a person makes good karma for their next life, they won’t remember having done so. Thus they may very well end up squandering the fruits of their good karma while creating more bad karma for themselves out of ignorance. Not only that, but with the accumulated bad karma of an uncountable number of past lives, there is a lot of suffering yet to be harvested. One only needs to look around to see that life is pervaded by many different forms of suffering, beginning with birth, and continuing with loss, injury, sickness, aging and death.

The suffering of this life together with the continuing cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth (perhaps better described as the cycle of “suffering, death, rebirth, more suffering, and re-death”) came to be known as *Samsara*. By the time of the Buddha’s birth, the goal of many, if not most, spiritual and religious traditions in India had become liberation from karmic retribution and an escape from the “wheel of Samsara,” the perpetual process of reincarnation. In other words, the common theme of many different religions *before the Buddha ever spoke his first word* was “liberation from samsara.” This liberation occurred only after death had terminated this present life, was considered quite difficult to achieve, and might well not be attained for many, many lifetimes to come.

If this all sounds very much like the way you’ve heard Buddhists describe karma, you are right. That being the case, you should be asking, “So is this really the Buddha’s teaching on karma, and if not, how does his real teaching differ from what preceded him?” That is precisely what we want to look at here. There is a subtlety to the Buddha’s version of karma that is far too easily and too often missed by even the most ardent Buddhists.

For starters, the Buddha himself did not achieve his liberation after death. Rather, he became fully Awakened, completely liberated from Samsara at age 35, and *continued to live and teach in the*

world for 45 more years! This notion of achieving liberation while still alive and active in the world was quite revolutionary. In fact, the first person who met the Buddha after his Awakening, an ascetic monk named Upaka, noticed there was something very special about him and asked about it. When the Buddha told him he was fully Awakened, that person just scoffed and walked away shaking his head. No one but fools ever said such silly things! The scoffer would have been much more comfortable talking with later Tibetan or Theravadan Buddhists who would agree that Awakening is extremely rare and takes many, many lifetimes of arduous effort to achieve!

But the Buddha spent 45 years not only telling everyone that Awakening can be achieved in this life, but guiding thousands of people to succeed in doing it for themselves. He taught that *anyone* who followed his method could be liberated *in this very life*, not after death, and certainly not after some uncountable number of future lives. For that matter, the Buddha discouraged anyone from even thinking about where we come from or what happens after death. He considered such questions a waste of time and a distraction from the only matter of real importance, which is liberation from suffering, and Awakening *in this life*.

Furthermore, after his Awakening the Buddha is said to have dwelt thereafter in the perfection of Nirvana. So for those 45 years between his Awakening and his final passing, Nirvana took the form of a human existence *in this very world*. This is very different from the pre-Buddhist view that identified this life and this world as Samsara. The Buddha's example tells us that the difference between Samsara and Nirvana has nothing to do with whether or not you are in human form, and whether or not you live in this world. Liberation and Nirvana are NOT about escaping from this world and this life. Rather, liberation from suffering and Awakening from ignorance allow you to embrace life and live more fully. Notice the other important shift that has taken place: Nirvana, has been entirely internalized. *Nirvana has nothing to do with where you are and the outward form of your existence.*

Now back to karma. It is very difficult to reconcile Dependent Arising with the idea that everything that happens to you is a moral consequence of your past actions. This theory of karma would have absolutely everything depend upon a very limited set of causes. But one of the implications of Dependent Arising is that anything that arises does so in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions [Implication #3 of Dependent Arising]. Even if we restrict karma to the specific moral consequences of certain specific moral acts, we have to somehow suspend every other kind of causality that might otherwise interfere with the fulfillment of that karma. But another of the implications of Dependent Arising is that nothing stands outside of cause and effect, that the laws of causality are never violated [Implication #1].

The older theory of karmic retribution also leads us to focus on making good karma so that good things will happen to us in the future, and avoiding bad karma so that bad things won't happen. This makes sense so long as we believe that good fortune always makes us happy, and misfortune always causes suffering. But that just doesn't fit with real life experience. Many very fortunate people are unhappy, and vice versa. Furthermore, recall from the Truths of Suffering and the Cause of Suffering, and from Dissatisfaction as one of the Three Characteristics, that *suffering and happiness are not about what happens to you*. In fact, believing that suffering or happiness depend on what happens to you is part of the delusion that causes suffering. *Suffering and happiness are about how your mind reacts to what happens to you*. If this is true, then there is no guarantee that doing good acts will bring happiness. Worse yet, the good acts we do motivated by the belief in and hope for future rewards only reinforces the delusion that is at the very root of our suffering.

With these problems in mind, let's have a closer look at karma according to the Buddha. The Buddha's view of *causality* can be expressed as follows: The experience of the present is shaped by intentions *and* actions in both the past and the present. Intentions *and* actions in the present shape both the present and the future. The results of the intentions *and* actions of the past and present continually interact. Notice that every statement includes *both* intentions and actions. As we shall see, the special way the word karma is used in reference to intention is precisely what makes the Buddha's version of karma so very different from the older ideas of karmic retribution. Intentions and actions are two distinct categories of causes. Thus it is very important that we not conflate or confuse actions and intentions with each other, and that we clearly understand the differences between them.

Intention as Karma

Although the word karma literally means "action," by the time of the Buddha it had come to mean, very specifically, an action that produced *moral consequences for the doer of the action*. The Buddha very famously redefined karma, saying:

"Intention I tell you is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind."

Redefining karma in this way makes a subtle but profound difference. Saying that karma is NOT the action, but rather the *intention behind the action* means that the *moral* consequences result from the *intention*, not the action. The action itself may produce all kinds of other effects on the doer of the action, pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. But these are the result of material causality. They are not moral consequences. The moral consequences are the result of a kind of mental causality that *acts directly on the mind of the intender*.

Just as he did with Nirvana, the Buddha has moved both karma and its consequences out of the material realm and into the mental realm. This allows actions and their consequences to obey the laws of material causality according to Dependent Arising, and refocuses karma and its consequences as an inner process. Furthermore, these moral consequences are unaffected by the success or failure of the intended action. *So long as the intention is there*, the karmic result will be produced.

Actions and Intentions

We can distinguish two kinds of actions with respect to intention. First, there are involuntary reflex actions that don't involve intention. These are things like knee-jerks, the way you blink when something is coming at your eye, and pulling your hand away when you touch something hot. The other kind of action is *intentional* action. These actions are intentional in the sense that they always involve some kind of conscious volition, either now or in the past.

Intention is the forerunner of *all* acts of speech and body except for purely reflex movements. Granted, some intentional actions *can* become automatic. They can be so automatic that they seem just like reflexes. But they are not reflexes, they are driven by *unconscious* intentions. But these actions were not originally automatic, nor were the intentions behind them unconscious. So some intentions are conscious, subject to reflection, evaluation, and modification *before* the action occurs. Others are unconscious, automatically producing some act of body, speech or mind before we even become aware of the intention. But before any intention can ever produce an action for the first time, it must become a *conscious intention*. This means that any unconscious intention that produces an automatic reaction in the present must have been a conscious intention at some other time in the past.

Actions only became automatic through *conscious, intentional repetition*, and so we can still say *all acts, even automatic ones, ultimately originate in conscious intention*.

So intention causes action, but what is intention? We can define an *intention* as: An *impulse*, towards a *particular activity*, that is directed towards a *particular goal*. Intentions are mental formations that produce effects directly on the mind, and indirectly on the material world via the body. Every movement of the mind – every thought, idea, and emotion – is a mental activity driven by an intention, and it has some goal that it's meant to achieve. Every word and every bodily action is preceded by an intention as well, and just like movements of the mind, our words and actions are the *means to a specific end*. Both the end goal and the means for achieving that goal are *inherent within the intention*. For example, when you feel an itch, it is accompanied by an urge to scratch. The scratching is the means, the relief of the itch is the goal.

How does karma as intention cause an increase or decrease in future suffering? The cause of suffering is craving. The cause of craving is the ignorant view that we are a separate Self in a world of Other, and that our happiness and unhappiness depend upon what we can get or avoid from the world of Other. The goal and the means to achieving it inherent in any given intention has been shaped by the operating worldview of the mind generating that intention.

Unwholesome intentions are rooted in ignorance of the Three Characteristics, and the delusion corresponding to that ignorance. The motivating force behind unwholesome intentions comes from craving as greed or aversion. When such an intention arises in consciousness, it will be either blocked, modified, or else approved and allowed to give rise to an action. If it is approved in consciousness, both the worldview it represents and the motivating force behind it are validated and reinforced. Thus it is that unwholesome intentions deepen our ignorance and delusion, and make us even more subject to the forces of greed and aversion in the future. Since ignorance and delusion are the root of craving, and since craving is the cause of suffering, the karmic consequences of unwholesome intentions are more suffering in the future.

Wholesome intentions are rooted in Wisdom, in Right Understanding, and are, therefore, Right Intentions. Their motivating force is some form of non-greed and non-aversion, such as generosity, loving-kindness, patience, and compassion. When such an intention is approved in consciousness, Right Understanding is strengthened and ignorance and delusion are undermined. The power craving holds over us is weakened, and we are less subject to suffering. Thus the karmic consequences of wholesome intentions are not only less suffering in the future, but a movement towards Nirvana and away from Samsara.

In other words, acts motivated by ignorance, desire and aversion rebound upon you by strengthening ignorance and craving, making you *more* vulnerable to suffering in the future *no matter what happens to you*. Conversely, acts motivated by unselfishness, harmlessness, generosity and loving kindness rebound upon you by making you *less* vulnerable to suffering and *more* prone to happiness, *no matter what happens to you*. It's as simple as that.

The material consequences of good and bad *actions* in the world are not unimportant. What actually happens *to* you is the result of physical, biological, and psychological causality, and certainly depends, at least *in part*, upon what you say or do that evokes these kind of effects. But what happens *to* you is not a moral consequence. The *moral* consequences of good and bad *karma*, which is to say good and bad *intentions*, manifest not through what happens to you, but through the kind of person

you are that those things happen to. And who we are, the fruit of our karmic intentions, also has an influence on what happens to us. Where we find ourselves, the circumstances we are in, the company we keep, how we are thought of by others, and many other factors are determined by *who we are* as well. But these, too, are worldly rather than moral consequences, and they, too, are the result of other kinds of causality, not karma.

Good karma in the form of good intentions moves us in the direction of Nirvana and liberation and away from suffering. Bad karma in the form of bad intentions moves us towards Samsara and increased suffering. This is the law of karma taught by the Buddha. Viewed this way, karma can be used as a powerful force to bring us closer to Awakening in this very life. And since karma doesn't negate other forms of causality, we have every bit as much reason as ever to work to make positive change in the world through our actions.

Dependent Arising II: The Twelve Links

The “Links of Dependent Arising” refers to a series of specific mental events describing the cyclic process by which ignorance perpetuates suffering. The Buddha spoke of this process on many different occasions, and the number of “links” mentioned was not the same every time. However, by comparing different discourses of the Buddha, we can assemble a total of twelve links that have since come to be known as the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising. Following the formula, “when there is this, there is that,” these twelve are:

When there is

1. **Ignorance** (*avijjā* in Pali, *avidyā* in Sanskrit), there are
2. **Mental Formations** (*saṅkhāra* in Pali, *saṃskāra* in Sanskrit).

When there are Mental Fabrications, there is

3. **Consciousness** (*viññāṇa* in Pali, *viññāna* in Sanskrit).

When there is Consciousness, there is

4. **The Mind and Body of an Individual Person** (*nāmarūpa*), also know as the Five Aggregates (*panca khandha* in Pali, *pañca skandha* in Sanskrit).

When there is Mind and Body, there is Consciousness. Notice how these two, Consciousness and Mind and Body, “fold back” on each other in a relationship of mutual causality. (To better understand this reciprocal relationship of mutual dependence, see the earlier section on The Nature of the Individual Person.)

In the continuation of the sequence, when there is Mind and Body, there are

5. **The Six Sense Bases** (*saḷāyatana* in Pali, *saḍāyatana* in Sanskrit). (The mind sense and mental objects constitute the sixth sense base.)

When there are Senses, there is

6. **Contact** (*phassa* in Pali, *sparsa* in Sanskrit).

When there is Contact, there is

7. **Feeling** (*vedanā*).

When there is Feeling, there is

8. **Craving** (*taṇhā* in Pali, *trṣṇā* in Sanskrit).

When there is Craving, there is

9. **Clinging** (*upādāna*). Clinging reifies the illusion of Self and Other that fuels Becoming.

Where there is Clinging, there is

10. **Becoming** (*bhava*).

Where there is Becoming, there is

11. **Birth** (*jāti*), the coming-to-be or coming-forth of an Individual Person (i.e. a return to links 3 & 4). This refers not to birth at the beginning of a lifetime, but to rebirth as new person following any major change in life circumstances, such as the acquisition of a new status or position; upon awakening from sleep each day; with each shift in preoccupation throughout the day; with each movement of attention; and ultimately, with each new moment of consciousness.

Where there is Birth, there is

12. **Agīng, Death, and this Entire Mass of Suffering** (*jarāmaraṇa*).

The first two links introduce us to the core cycle: Ignorance -> Craving -> Clinging -> Ignorance. **Ignorance** gives rise to unwholesome karmic **Mental Formations**, which include **Craving**, and the reification of deluded beliefs by **Clinging**, all of which perpetuates **Ignorance**.

The next eight links are an expansion of this basic description. Deluded mental formations arising from ignorance become the objects of **Consciousness** of an individual person. An individual person in the form of **Mind and Body** possesses **Six Senses**, which inevitably results in **Contact** between sense organ and sense object. With contact comes a **Feeling** of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. These feelings lead to the arising of **Craving** in the form of desire for the pleasant, aversion towards the unpleasant, and dissatisfaction with what is neutral. Craving leads to **Clinging**, which reifies the idea of a Self separate from the perceived object of desire, aversion, or dissatisfaction. Clinging leads to **Becoming**, where the reified Self engages in action for the sake of satisfying craving, and thus a suffering being, afflicted by craving, is reborn.

Links five through ten describe a cycle that repeats itself over and over again throughout every day of our lives. The action produced by becoming results in the generation of new sense objects, physical or mental, resulting in **Contact, Feeling, Craving, Clinging**, and a return to **Becoming**, which then leads back to **Contact** once again. Through repeating cycles, individual conscious events get woven together to become episodes in a day in the life of the “person” born from this causal process.

The last two links form a sort of summary: Each repetition of the cycle leads to the “re-birth” of a separate Self, burdened with its load of unwholesome karmic formations, which must then play itself out in the form of suffering before triggering the next repetition of the same Samsaric cyclic.

The Buddha presented this process as a continuously recurring in our minds, moment by moment, hour by hour, and day by day. Once again, the Buddha had taken a popular notion, the endless cycle of reincarnation in this case, and redefined it, shifting it from the material plane to the mental. The cycle of rebirth driven by the Links of Dependent Arising describes the endless perpetuation of ignorance and suffering, the continuous process by which craving and the delusion of being a separate Self in a world of Other results in suffering.

The most important purpose of this formulation is to show how the cycle can be broken. By working on our intentions in order to change our karma, we change the nature of the link called **Becoming**. As a result, with each new “rebirth” we are less ignorant and the link of **Craving** is weakened. Study and practice brings Tranquility and Insight, which generates powerful Equanimity that further weakens **Craving**. Eventually the link of **Craving** is broken. When that happens, with the

cessation of **Craving** comes the cessation of **Clinging**, with the cessation of **Clinging** comes the cessation of **Becoming**, with the cessation of **Becoming** comes the cessation of **Rebirth**, and with the cessation of Rebirth, the **Entire Mass of Suffering** comes to an end.

Unfortunately, the commentarial tradition, which developed long after the Buddha's passing, presents these Twelve Links as a linear sequence spanning three different lifetimes in a 2-8-2 schema. The first two links represent the past life. The middle eight represent this life. The final two represent the next life. This interpretation shifted the theme away from a continuous process repeating throughout a single lifetime, making it instead into a sequence of "incarnations." But no such description of the Links is to be found anywhere in the Suttas. This is a later formulation generated by staunch believers in reincarnation who had not fully grasped the import of the Buddha's teaching.

If, when reading the Suttas, you understand that "rebirth" refers to this process of Dependent Arising rather than to reincarnation, everything else the Buddha says will make much more sense.

In joy and service,
Culadasa
March 22, 2013

PS:

The practice that leads to understanding Dependent Arising as it pertains to the world at large and phenomena in general:

Meditation on the arising and passing away of phenomena.

The practice that lead to understanding Dependent Arising as it pertains to the perceived Self:
Meditation on the links of Dependent Origination.