

THE TWELVE LINKS OF DEPENDENT ORIGATION

From Gampopa's "Ornament of Liberation", chapter 15, slightly abridged

When ignorance (lack of awareness) prevails, we contemplate the links of dependent origination. These are explained [by the Buddha] in the *Rice Seedling Sūtra*:

"Engaged practitioners! Whoever understands this rice seedling, understands dependent arising. He who understands dependent arising, understands the Dharma. He who understands the Dharma, understands Buddhahood." [...]

The Inner Arising of Saṃsāra depending on Causes

[...] To this we read [in the *Rice Seedling Sūtra*]:

"Engaged practitioners! Because this is present, that comes forth. Because this has arisen, that comes into being. It is like this: ignorance causes forces of formation [etc. - one causes the other - up to:] Birth causes old age and death, as well as misery, lamentation, suffering, an unhappy mind and agitation. Thus it comes to a gigantic accumulation of nothing but suffering."

Among the various realms of existence, this explanation [of the twelve links] applies to the realm of desire and [...] in particular to the birth from a womb.

1. The beginning is called "blinded *ignorance* in relation to what should be known."
2. Due to its influence arise stained (literally: conditioned by instinctual flows) wholesome and and non-wholesome actions, the *formative forces*. These are called "formative forces conditioned by ignorance."
3. The mind, which is further influenced by the seeds of these actions, is called "*consciousness* conditioned by formative forces."
4. The consciousness clouded by the karmic forces of these actions errs, takes on a new existence by entering a womb and goes through the embryonic development. This is called "*name-and-form* conditioned by consciousness."
5. In the further development of name-and-form, the complete sensory faculties of the eyes, ears, etc. are formed. These we call "the six *sense sources* conditioned by name-and-form".
6. The coming together of the three aspects - the sense faculties, such as the eyes, with the sense objects and the consciousness - causes the actual perception, which is called "*contact* conditioned by the six sense sources."
7. The pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensation (feeling tone) resulting from this contact is called "*sensation* conditioned by contact."
8. The well-being, longing, and strong longing when experiencing a sensation is called "*desire* ('thirst') conditioned by sensation."
9. Not letting go of what we desire because we do not want to be separated from it and want to have it again is called "*grasping* conditioned by desire."

10. This wanting to have leads to acts with body, speech and mind, which produce the next existence. This is called “*becoming* conditioned by grasping”.
11. The actions cause the five factors of existence (aggregates) to come together again. This is what is called “*birth* conditioned by becoming.”
12. The further development and maturation of the aggregates after birth is “aging” and their destruction is “death”. This process we call “*aging and dying* conditioned by birth”.

Due to ignorance, dying leads to intense inner sorrow accompanied by strong yearning and clinging. This is *sorrow*. Expressing this sorrow in words is *lamentation*. Experiencing unpleasant sensations through the five processes of sensory perception is [bodily] *pain*. The mental sorrow accompanying mental perceptions is *unhappiness*. All other emotions of this kind are called *agitation*. Know that these twelve links belong to three groups, [...] so the *Verse Commentary on Dependent Origination* explains:

“We need to understand that the twelve links of dependent origination belong to three groups, since the Mighty One (mūni) grouped them into three categories in his teachings: emotional delusion, karma and suffering. Limbs one, eight, and nine are emotional delusion, limbs two and ten are karma, and the remaining seven are suffering.”

In the example, ignorance is like the seed, karma (action) is the soil, consciousness is the seed, desire corresponds to moisture, name and form are the sprout, and the other limbs correspond to branches, leaves, and so on. Without the occurrence of ignorance, there is no manifestation of formative forces and so on, and so without birth, there is no aging and death. But since there is ignorance, there is indeed the occurrence of formative forces, etc., and since there is birth, there is the manifestation of aging and death.

But it is not that ignorance would think, “I will manifest formative forces,” nor do formative forces think, “We were generated by ignorance” (etc.), nor does birth think, “I will manifest old age and death,” nor do old age and death think, “Birth generated me.” Rather, the mere presence of ignorance causes formative forces to manifest (etc.), and likewise, the mere presence of birth causes old age and death to manifest. Thus, the inner arising in dependence is regarded as a concatenation of causes. [...]

The reversal of the sequence described is the dependent arising of nirvāṇa (freedom from suffering). The realization of empty nature, the true nature of all phenomena, terminates ignorance (lack of awareness) and its cessation subsequently terminates all further limbs up to old age and death. Thus we read [in the *Rice Seedling Sūtra*]:

“When ignorance has an end, the formative forces find an end (etc.), and when birth has an end, old age and death, as well as sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness and agitation all come to an end. Thus, this vast accumulation of nothing but suffering comes to an end.”