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Dependent Origination

In the Buddha's teachings, the second noble truth is a description of a process that is not a theory about what happens to somebody else, but it describes a process which is going on over and over again in our own life, through our days, countless times every single day. This process in Pali is called *paticcasamuppada*, sometimes translated as dependent origination or codependent origination or causal interdependence.

This process of dependent origination is sometimes said to be really the heart or the essence of all Buddhist teaching. What is described in the process is the way in which suffering can arise in our lives, and the way in which it can end. That second part is actually quite important.

The Buddha once said that whoever sees dependent origination sees the dharma, and that whoever sees the dharma, sees dependent origination, and that, whoever sees the dharma also sees the Buddha. So this process is described as something more than the way in which suffering, contraction, or limitation arises. It is also the process in which freedom is really understood.

The Buddha once said that this dependent origination is actually all we really need to understand—not only what we need to understand, but all that we need to live. What that means is that this is not just a theory, but actually shows us a way to live founded on a sense of freedom rather than being bound.

Patichcasamuppada is said to be the heart of right view or right understanding. It is an understanding that is also the beginning of the eight-fold path, or an understanding that gives rise to a life of wisdom and freedom. The Buddha went on to say that when a noble disciple fully sees the arising and cessation of the world, he or she is said to be endowed with perfect view, with perfect vision—to have attained the true dharma, to possess the knowledge and skill, to have entered the stream of the dharma, to be a noble disciple replete with purifying understanding—one who is at the very door of the deathless. So, this is a challenge for us.

What the patichcasamuppada actually describes is a vision of life or an understanding in which we see the way everything is interconnected—that there is nothing separate, nothing that stands alone, everything affects everything else. We are part of this system. We are part of this process of dependent origination or causal relationships affecting and being affected every moment in our lives--affected by everything that happens around us and, in turn, affecting the kind of world that we all live in inwardly and outwardly.

It is also important to understand that freedom is not found separate from this process. It is not a question of transcending this process to find some other dimension,

but the freedom is found in this very process of which we are a part. And part of that process of understanding what it means to be free, depends on understanding interconnectedness, and using this very process, this very grist of our life, for awakening.

Doctrinally, there are two ways in which this process of paticcasamupada is approached. In one view it's held to be something that takes place over three lifetimes, and it goes into the issues of rebirth and karma. My own approach today is the second view which I think is really very vital, very alive, which looks at paticcasamuppada as a way of understanding what happens in our own world, inwardly and outwardly, on a moment-to-moment level. It's about what happens in our heart, what happens in our consciousness, and how the kind of world we experience and live in is actually created on a moment-to-moment level.

To me, the significance of this whole description is that if we understand the way our world is created, we also then become a conscious participant in that creation. It describes a process that is occurring over and over again very rapidly within our consciousness. By this time in the day, you have probably all gone throughout countless cycles of dependent origination already.

Perhaps you had a moment of despair about what you had for breakfast or what happened on the drive out here, a mind-storm about something that happened yesterday, some sort of anticipation about what might happen today—countless moments that you have gone through where you have experienced an inner world arising: I like this; I don't like this; the world is like this; this is how it happened; I feel this; I think that.

Already this early in the day, we could track down countless cycles of this process of paticcasamuppada—when we've been elated, when we've been sad, when we've been self-conscious, fearful—we've been spinning the wheel. And, it is important to understand this as a wheel, as a process, it's not something static. It's not something fixed, something that stays the same. You need to visualize this as something alive and moving, and we'll get into how that happens.

The basic principle of dependent origination is simplicity itself. The Buddha described it as saying

When there is this, that is.

With the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, neither is that.

With the cessation of this, that ceases.

When all of these cycles of feeling, thought, bodily sensation, all of these cycles of mind and body, action, and movement are taking place upon a foundation of ignorance—that's called samsara.

The perpetual wandering as if in a dream where one thing follows after another—one cycle of reaction, one cycle of response, one cycle of being locked into an opinion or a feeling or a mind-storm. When all of that is happening—that feeling of wandering, being pushed from one state to another, seemingly without choice, sometimes not knowing how we got there. We end up in certain places and ask “How did I get here?”—sometimes places very far from where we want to be. That sense of wandering in confusion or blindly from one state of experience to another, one state of reaction to another, one state of contraction to another is called samsara. Samsara is a movement through a dream—the wandering from one state of perception and experience to another without knowing what's going on.

It's also, I think, helpful to see that this process of dependent origination happens not only within our individual consciousness, but also on a much bigger scale and on more collective levels—social, political, cultural. Through shared opinions, shared views, shared perceptions or reactions, groups or communities of people can spin the same wheel over extended periods of time. Examples of collective wheel spinning are racism or sexism or the Starr report, or the hierarchy between humans and nature, political systems that conflict, wars—the whole thing where communities or groups of people share in the same delusions.

So understanding dependent origination can be transforming not only at an individual level, but it's an understanding about interconnectedness that can be truly transforming on a global or universal level. It helps to undo delusion, and it helps to undo the sense of contractedness and the sense of separateness.

In classical presentations, this process of dependent origination is comprised of twelve links. It is important to understand that this is not a linear, progressive, or sequential presentation. It's a process always in motion and not static at all. It's also not deterministic. I also don't think that one link determines the arising of the next link. But rather that the presence of certain factors or certain of these links together provide the conditions in which the other links can manifest, and this is going to become clearer as we use some analogies to describe how this interaction works.

It's a little bit like a snowstorm—the coming together of a certain temperature, a certain amount of precipitation, a certain amount of wind co-creating a snow storm. Or it's like the writing of a book: one needs an idea, one needs pen, one needs paper, one needs the ability to write. It's not necessarily true that first I must have this and then I must have this in a certain sequential order, but rather that the coming together of certain causes and conditions allows this particular phenomena or this particular experience to be born.

It is also helpful to consider some of the effects of understanding *patīcasamuppāda*. One of the effects is that it helps us to understand that neither our inner world, nor our outer world is a series of aimless accidents. Things don't just happen. There is a combination of causes and conditions that is necessary for things to happen.

This is really important in terms of our inner experience. It is not unusual to have the experience of ending up somewhere, and not knowing how we got there. And feeling quite powerless because of the confusion present in that situation. Understanding how things come together, how they interact, actually removes that sense of powerlessness or that sense of being a victim of life or helplessness. Because if we understand how things come together, we can also begin to understand the way out, how to find another way of being, and realize that life is not random chaos.

Another effect of understanding causes and conditions means accepting the possibility of change. And with acceptance comes another understanding that with wisdom, we have the capacity to create beneficial and wholesome conditions for beneficial and wholesome results.

And that's the path—an understanding that we have the capacity to make choices in our lives that lead toward happiness, that lead toward freedom and well being rather than feeling that we're just pushed by the power of confusion or by the power of our own misunderstanding. This understanding helps to ease a sense of separateness and isolation and it reduces delusion.

Wheel of Samsara as Interdependently Arisen

A convenient place to start in order to gain some familiarity with the process of dependent origination is often with the first link of ignorance. This is not necessarily to say that ignorance is the first cause of everything but it's a convenient starting place.

With ignorance as a causal condition, there are formations of volitional impulses. With the formations as a causal condition, there is the arising of consciousness. With consciousness as a condition, there is the arising of *nāma-rūpa* or body and mind. With *nāma-rūpa* as a condition, there is the arising of the six sense doors. In Buddhist teaching, the mind is also one of the sense doors as well as seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, tasting.

With the six sense doors as a condition, there is the arising of contact. With contact as a condition, there is the arising of feeling. With feeling as a condition, there is the arising of craving. With craving as a condition, there's the arising of clinging. With clinging as a condition, there's the arising of birth. And, with birth as a condition, there's the arising of death. That describes the link.

This process, when reversed, is also described as a process of release or freedom. With the abandonment of ignorance, there is the cessation of karmic formations. With the cessation of karmic formations, there is the falling away of consciousness, and so on.

Ignorance: We should keep in mind that ignorance is used in Buddhist teachings in a very different way than it is used in our culture. In the Buddhist usage, it's not an insult; it is not an absence of knowledge or describes someone as being impaired intellectually—it doesn't mean we're dumb. There can be a tremendous amount of knowledge, and yet, there can still be ignorance. Ignorance is sometimes said to be the condition that allows the activation of other links—to come together as a kind of contractedness. Ignorance can be deeply rooted in the consciousness. It may be very invisible to us. And yet, even as it is invisible or inaccessible to us, it can be exerting its influence in all of the ways in which we think, perceive, and respond.

You may yourself why you like certain things, or dislike other things. Look at some of the views that you might hold about yourself or other people, or the world. When we look deeply, we see the ways we inherit and absorb, all of us in our lives, almost by a process of osmosis, cultural and social and political values and beliefs. We inherit the stories of other people in a way that's not always visible to us about what we should like, what we should value, what we should reject, what should be important to us, what shouldn't be important to us. This process of absorption, of course, is happening to us often throughout our life and days.

We can have so many views about what leads to happiness and what doesn't lead to happiness, what leads to unhappiness, what we should avoid, what we should pursue, what we should go after in this life. Where does this all come from?

Sometimes, this is rooted in this absorption and misunderstanding. Ignorance is often described not as lack of knowledge, but as a kind of blindness, of not being so conscious in our lives of what is moving us on a moment-to-moment level. Now this kind of blindness, which can act as a veil, is, in Buddhist teaching, broken down very distinctly.

Sometimes ignorance is described as not understanding the four noble truths—not understanding what suffering is, not understanding what causes suffering, not understanding that there's a possibility of suffering ending, and not understanding the way to the end of suffering.

Sometimes, in a parallel understanding, ignorance is described as perceiving the unsatisfactory to be satisfactory. For example, we might find it fairly satisfactory to be lost in our lives in daydreams or fantasies—we think that's fun, that's great stuff, it's exciting, it's juicy. We might find it satisfactory to devoting our lives to armoring ourselves against the world, to grasping hold of as much as we can possibly grasp hold of. We might find it satisfactory to overeat at lunch. It makes us feel bad, but it tastes good.

There are so many ways that we can accept as being satisfactory—that which is actually not satisfactory because it's not free. Not because it's bad or wrong, but because it's not free and, because, it's kind of driven or compelled. Because it's not arising out of awareness or consciousness, but because it's arising out of this accumulation of beliefs or misunderstanding or confusion.

Sometimes ignorance is defined as believing or perceiving the impermanent to be permanent—this is not an unusual experience. Often in moments of the unpleasant or the difficult, in those times, we often become strong advocates of impermanence. But in moments where there is a lot of pleasure or attachment or grasping, we often have bouts of amnesia around impermanence, “this is forever; this is going to last; I've finally arrived; this is going to stay here.” This amnesia can be projected onto many things, “I finally found the right belief system; I found the right relationship; I found the experience that's the right one to have,” and so on. This is a shell game of perception of permanence within the impermanence. It's ignorance because it's a set-up for trouble. It's a set-up for tragedy and disaster in our lives.

Ignorance is sometimes perceiving that which is not beautiful to be beautiful—as a cause of attachment. This one is a bit complex because this is where we get into all this “miserable” Theravadin stuff—this is a denial of the body and denial of life and similar kinds of views at times held about Theravadin Buddhism because in the sutras we hear about contemplating the disintegration of the body, going to meditate in cemeteries, contemplate aging, and so forth.

Sometimes people hear these teachings and they think of it as a rejection of life. I don't think it's meant to be a rejection of life. It's really meant to invite us to understand the actual nature of everything that appears including our bodies. Sometimes people would say, “I don't want to think about it; it's depressing.” I don't know about you, but I find that as I age there is a more natural contemplation of aging in the body.

Sometimes you contemplate the body with the help of, say, the medical experts. You contemplate your pancreas or your thyroid or your uterus and all this stuff that's going on. It becomes more natural. It's not a rejection of the body. It's not a rejection of those moments which delight and we appreciate them, but it is not projecting our sense of well being onto holding onto something.

Sometimes ignorance is defined as believing in an idea of self to be an enduring and solid entity in our lives when there is no such thing to be found. Along with this belief in the self to be an enduring and solid entity in our lives come all the countless actions that take place in our lives out of a desire to preserve, perpetuate, maintain, and assert the existence of self.

How much of our lives is engaged in that pursuit? And being engaged in that pursuit, we are, of course, also engaged in the perpetuation of separation and the

denial of interconnectedness, which is why this is sometimes said to be one of the most powerful and devastating expressions of ignorance.

Ignorance is sometimes described as believing that life is just a random process in which both the good and the wholesome and the unethical and the unwholesome actions actually bear no fruit. So, we can do anything in this life and it doesn't matter. Ruth Denison, whom some of you may have encountered, has this wonderful line, when some asked her about karma, she said "You don't get away with anything darling."

But ignorance actually believes that we can get away with everything—that nothing makes an impact and that we can live our lives as if we are not in a process of constantly affecting everything around us—just as we are affected by everything.

Another way that ignorance is defined is not seeing things as they actually are, but seeing life, seeing ourselves, seeing other people through a veil of beliefs, opinions, et cetera. I am like this. You are like that. Each one of us is like that. We want to see the world organized according to our likes, dislikes, projections, clinging, attachments, et cetera, et cetera. Ignorance flavors what kind of speech, thoughts, or actions we actually engage in.

Sankharas: Ignorance is the causal condition or climate which allows for the arising of certain kinds of sankharas or volitional impulses or karmic formations. In a general sense, we're all formations; we're all sankharas. This room is a formation. Everything that is born and created out of conditions is a formation.

The link called formations in the chain of dependent origination gets a little more specific because it talks about mental and bodily formations of thought, speech, and action. It talks about intentional actions as body formations; verbal formations or intentional speech as both body and mind formation; and it talks about thoughts and states of mind as mental formations.

Sankhara or volitional impulses is really describing the movement and the generation of action, speech, and the organization or shaping of a thinking process in accordance with accumulated habits, preferences, opinions. All of the conditioning of our actions, our speech, and our thoughts—the way in which our actions, speech, and thoughts are actually flavored and shaped and colored on a moment-to-moment level by the presence of ignorance or misunderstanding.

We, each one of us, are organized inwardly in accord with that accumulation of sankharas. It's the way in which ignorance takes form, takes a particular shape or a particular activity—almost the way it rises out of being invisible or unconscious into a more generated or active form that can actually be seen—in body, speech, or mind.

Sankharas are a particular kind of energy that lends a certain fuel to the spinning of the wheel. But it's important to keep see that you leapfrog back and forth; it's not

just linear, so there's no beginning or end. Within a given cycle, they keep interacting and keep forming more and more of themselves. There is also a constant interaction of the inner and outer in which the whole cycle keeps getting perpetuated.

Now, some of the sankharas, some formations, arise spontaneously in the moment. But we also probably see in our lives that we have some rather historical sankharas as well. These formations, as ways of seeing or ways of reacting, have been built up throughout our whole life. Perhaps we have been very accustomed to dwelling in the territory of anger or of fear, or of judgment. Due to their repetitive use, these sankharas become somewhat locked or invested in our personality structures, and stay close to the surface as more automatic or habitual ways of response.

However, it is important to have the understanding that each sankhara is in some ways actually new in every moment. They arise through contact, through certain stimulations. The way we tend to think of them as habitual or ever-present is because of how we grasp them in the present as something solid. But in our encounter with them in the present moment, they are not presented to us as history or as something that is there forever.

Consciousness: Sankhara is the base condition for consciousness. In these links of dependent origination, consciousness is used in the sense of an awareness of all the sensations that enter through the sense doors. So there's seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, feeling consciousness, thinking consciousness, body consciousness and thinking consciousness. At any given time, one or the other of these sense doors consciousness dominates and there is wakefulness to it if we are paying attention.

Consciousness also describes the basic climate of the mind at any particular moment—the way the consciousness, or mind, is actually shaped, flavored at any moment, whether it's aversive or dull or greedy. Now, it's interesting to see that without interest or intention some of these consciousness within the body may not be noticed. For example, if you're sitting in a movie and you're really caught up and watching the movie and it's really exciting and really exhilarating and you're really absorbed in it, you may not notice somebody behind you crunching popcorn. You may not notice that in your body there are sensations going on. You may not notice that there's a mosquito biting you. Because consciousness actually holds that element of interest or intention.

Consciousness also begins to shape, of course, how we see the world because as a faculty consciousness is flavored rather than being neutral. It's flavored. So the same object will appear differently to different people, depending on each person's consciousness and the sankharas that are present. For example, if we all walked out to the field behind the center, depending on who we are and what kind of consciousness or sankharas are present, a child would see it as a playground, a builder would say "it's a great plot of land to build on," a farmer would say "let's get some planting done here," an environmentalist might say "oh, we need to do this to preserve it."

The interactive part of consciousness is that it is not only shaped by sankharas and by ignorance, it is also shaping what is around us. This interactive part of consciousness is constantly going on regardless of whether we pay attention to it or not.

Consciousness gives rise to nama-rupa. Sometimes that's translated as being body/mind, but that's a little too simplistic. Rupa, or body, describes not only our body but all other bodies. All appearances or phenomena are rupa in the sense of form or activated organism. So rupa describes a kind of materiality element.

Nama, or mind, describes the feelings, the perceptions, the intentions, the contact, the kind of attention that we give to what appears in the field of our awareness. So nama describes the whole movement of mind in all its components in relationship to materiality. So the way it works is that there's the arising of rupa and then nama creates concepts or attitudes about it. The kind of relationship we have with any rupa, including our own body, is shaped by what's going on in the mind whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

So the shape of the mind and our body, this nama-rupa, is always changing, always moving, never staying the same. Consciousness, body, and mind are always interdependent. Consciousness leads the body and the mind to function in a certain way. If a consciousness has arisen flavored by anger or by greed, by depression, by anxiety, whatever, it provides the conditions for the body and mind to organize itself in a particular way. We can have a sad body, an angry body; we can have an attentive mind, a fearful body, and that sense of body is not only what is happening physically but also what is happening in the mind.

A good example of this is to think of someone watching a game of football or basketball or whatever sport that makes the most impression on you. Now the body and the mind are really attentive, right? They're interested, they're passionate about this, they're engaged, they're excited. The body and the mind are really attentive—they have arisen in relationship to this thing that's being observed. In doing that, the body and the mind really aren't interested in anything else. Have you ever seen somebody really passionately watching a game of football? They're not hearing the cars on the road nearby. The body and the mind are shaped in a particular way by what has gone on before.

Now, all of the events that have taken place so far in these links of ignorance, karma formations, consciousness, and mind/body—these are actually the most important steps in the generation of karma. These volitional impulses—what is happening in the body and the mind—are actually the generation of karma.

Six-Senses: We go on from body and mind to the six sense doors or the six sense spheres. One of the deeper understandings we can have is to acknowledge that the mind is one of the sense-spheres. Just as the ears have sounds, the body has sensations, the mind has thoughts, images, perceptions that arise and then pass. Mind

arises and passes according to its own tendencies. Sometimes we have the impression that mind is constant—you know, “there are no breaks here.” We have the impression that the mind is always “on duty,” but a little bit of a deeper exploration of what happens within the mind actually shatters that perception.

Contact: When the sense doors are functioning there’s the arising of contact. Contact is this meeting between the sense door and the sense information—I ring the bell, hearing arises. You have an itch in your body, your body consciousness arises. You smell something cooking in the kitchen, the smell sense door arises. The arising always involves the coming together of the sense door, the sense object and consciousness. Those three elements together is what contact is.

The Buddha once said that with contact the world arises. And with the cessation of contact there is the cessation of the world. It doesn’t mean wipe-out. What it means is that there’s a cessation of the world that is perceived according to sankharas and ignorance. There’s a cessation of a “personal” perception of the world. Each moment of contact is the isolating of an impression out of the whole stream and presence of impressions that are present for us in every moment as we sit here. There’s a vast number of impressions, obviously, phenomena going on—sounds, feelings, sights. Contact is what happens when something jumps out of that background and becomes the foreground. We’re paying attention to it, there’s that meeting of the sense object and consciousness and the sense door. It stands out for us. That is contact.

Feeling: Contact is the foundation or the condition for the arising of feeling. And when we use the word feeling in these links, we distinguish it a little bit from the complex world of emotions. In speaking about feeling we’re not speaking about a more complex stage of anger or jealousy or fear or anxiety, but the very fundamental level of feeling impact that is the basis not only of all emotions but of all mind states and responses. So when we speak about feeling we’re really speaking about the pleasant feeling that arises through any of the sense doors, the unpleasant feeling that arise through the sense doors, or those feelings that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Sometimes the word “neutral” is used, but I have to say that in all of my reading and study I think that the Buddha is not inclined to describe things as neutral. I think “neutral” often has an association for us as kind of nothingness. But the neutral is that which makes no impression of being pleasant or unpleasant. If you think of you moving through a day, there are countless impressions in a day passing our sense doors but we are aware of relatively few of these impressions. It doesn't mean they're not there; they are there for sure, but they're not making a particular impression of either a pleasant feeling or an unpleasant feeling. They don't really evoke any kind of feeling response in us.

Those impressions and sensations and experiences that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant are actually some of the more interesting data received by our system. Because our response to that which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant is to say “oh, it doesn’t matter,” or “it’s not worth anything,” or “it’s valueless,” and our own personal response often to it is one of “I’m bored;” “Something’s missing.” “Something’s absent,” and so on. But this is of course a description. Boredom is more of a description of our way of being present rather than of reality, or the reality of anything at all.

It is important to acknowledge that the links of contact, of sense doors and feeling that we have been talking about are neither wholesome nor unwholesome in and of themselves but they become the catalyst of what happens next. The sense doors, the feelings and the contact are almost the forerunners of complexity. They’re the forerunners of how we actually react or respond and how we begin to almost weave a personal story out of events or impressions that all of us experience at all times. Therefore, contact, feeling and sense doors are pretty important places to pay attention to, because when we move on the next link of craving that we begin to see more precisely the process suffering and complexity that begins to emerge.

Craving: Where does craving come from? Craving comes from our relationship to feeling; from feeling is the birth of craving. This craving is sometimes translated as “unquenchable thirst” or a kind of appetite that can never be satisfied. In the way that craving builds up on what has happened around feeling and sense doors and contacts, craving begins to be that movement of desire to seek out and sustain the pleasurable contacts with sense objects and to avoid the unpleasant or to make them end. It’s the craving of having and getting, the craving to be or to become someone or something, and the craving to get rid of or to make something end.

The pleasant feelings or impressions are hijacked by the underlying tendency for craving; the unpleasant feelings by those of aversion. And that which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant is hijacked by the underlying tendency of events in the sense that when we encounter that which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant we dismiss it from our consciousness and say it doesn’t matter, it is valueless, it doesn’t mean anything. Our sense of self finds it very hard to have an identity with any impression or sensation which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

It is at the point where craving arises in response to pleasant or unpleasant feeling that our responses becomes very complex. And it’s also a place where we run into a world of struggle. The important thing to remember is that craving is also a kind of moment-to-moment experience; it arises and it passes. Within our conditioning it becomes the foundation of developing specific attitudes and values. Because of craving and because of the relationship that begins to be established through the sense doors and consciousness and the sense object, there begins to be an evaluation of specific sense objects, and attitudes towards them are developed that become things in themselves. It is, again, a process of reinforcing separation. We get conditioned so that a certain promise or threat is projected into the sense object. So we say, “this has the

power to make me happy.” Or “this has the power to make me unhappy.” “If I get this thing or I get this meal or I get this experience, then I’m going to be happy. If I don’t get it, or if I get something that I don’t want, then of course I’m going to be unhappy.”

So what happens through craving is that in a way we delegate authority to an object or to an experience or to a person. And of course, in delegating authority or power to that separated entity, something else is happening at the same time, namely that we are depriving ourselves of that authority. As a result, our sense of well being, our sense of contentment or freedom comes to be dependent upon what we get or don’t get; or our success in being able to get or to get rid of that element. This again is a kind of reinforcement and the terrible anxiety of separation because, through the projection of power into sense objects, through the sense doors, we feel separate.

And yet this separation never ends because the promise is never fulfilled. As you know from your own experience, we get the thing we thought we always needed to make us happy, and then we lose interest in it, or get bored. So in a way there’s a kind of anxiety generated through ignorance and through sense of separation which can never be satisfied. A Christian mystic once said that the mood of ignorance is anxiety. It is that feeling of being separate and, in being separate, not feeling that there’s ever enough. You all know that kind of restlessness of appetite—there’s never enough; just one more thing is needed; one more experience, one more mind state, one more object, one more emotion, and then I’ll be happy.

What we don’t always see through when we are in the midst of ignorance is that the way such promise is projected, externalized, objectified, is actually something which always leaves us with a sense of frustration. Here we are dealing with a basic, never-ending hunger. Our world is organized according to this hunger in projecting the power to please or threaten in other things. If you are going to be outside, and there are a lot of birds around, each person’s projection into the birds is going to be slightly different. One person says “the bird is beautiful. It makes me so happy.” But if the other person had a corn field they’d say, “oh it’s a pest.” You know?

Again, what has really happened is this activation of feeling and solidity into the perception. The desire for something to arise or to disappear is *tanha* or craving. Now, you may have noticed that there is a certain power in craving, there’s a kind of tunnel vision—think of falling in lust where my entire world depends on this. So long as we are living and dancing with those promises and projections, craving becomes stronger and turns into clinging.

Clinging: Craving and clinging, or grasping, are very close together. We know from our experience that we tend not to be really balanced in our cravings. Craving has a certain momentum, a certain one-way direction, and when it becomes intense, it becomes clinging. Now, one way that craving becomes clinging is that very fixed positions are taken; things become good or bad; they become worthy or unworthy; they become valuable or valueless. And the world is organized into friends and

enemies, into opponents and allies according to what we are attached to or what we grasp or get hold of. That sense of becoming fixed reinforces and solidifies the values that we project onto experience or objects. But it also reinforces belief systems and opinions and the faculty of grasping holds on to of images of self. “I am like this.” “I need this.” “I need to get rid of this,” and so on. And, often, many things in this world are evaluated according to their perceived potential to satisfy our desires.

What all this does is, it actually makes us very busy. Think about the situations when you really want something, how much activity starts to be generated in terms of thinking and plotting and planning and strategizing, you know, the fastest route to get there from here; a faster and more direct route to make this happen.

Clinging is often broken down into four different ways in which we can make ourselves suffer. There is the clinging to sensuality or sense objects. The understanding here is that pleasant feelings, rather than satisfying us and making us feel this way or that, often produce a desire for more as well as a preservation of them which in turn creates more clinging. Our disappointment in not getting what we want in terms of sense objects generates even more activity as we then search for something else for gratification and fulfillment.

In the light of impermanence and the light of reality this is the place where the working of ignorance is very clear because nothing really lasts; nothing stays the same; everything changes. But when we are in the grip of ignorance, this is simply not acceptable. It’s not okay, this impermanence; you know, it’s simply not acceptable that something shouldn’t last. So the movement of clinging is constantly trying to reaffirm this sense of ownership. “I am, I have, I know.”

The other side of clinging to sense objects is clinging to views, theories, opinions, beliefs, philosophies—they become part of ourselves. We say “I know.” “I know this.” “I know this is the way life is.” “I know this about someone else.” “I know this about myself.” “This is the kind of person I am,” and so on.

We can see the suffering involved in clinging to views, theories, opinions, belief systems because contradiction of them is hardly welcome; you know, it’s seen as a threat.

However, it’s also true to say that at times that one of the ways in which the desire for freedom gets diverted may be into clinging. Another way it gets diverted is through clinging to certain rules—the belief that if I do this, I get this. “I believe in this, I practice this, then I’ll be free.” Or one says, “this is my path. This is going to take me from here to there.” In such an approach sometimes there’s a kind of overlooking the way in which the Buddha talked so much about not only letting go of one’s attachment to that which is unhelpful but also letting go of one’s attachment to pathways, to models, to ways of being, and the belief that if I do this, I will end up there. That clinging to rules and rituals and pathway, I mean there is a sense of balance here, because one practices a pathway as a way of alleviating suffering, but the important thing is getting out of that loop of “me” sensing it.

I think there's an easy way to distinguish between craving and valid need, and that is that one can be satisfied and the other isn't. If you're very hungry and you eat, it's enough, right? The hunger is gone and you move on. If it's an insatiable hunger say, or addiction to food, it's never satisfied, is it? If you have a valid need to eat, sleep, to be sheltered, you know, sometimes your pathway is often very clear, isn't it? It's not complicated. The intention is very clear. But that doesn't seem to be true of tanha or craving; often there's a kind of floundering, obsessiveness, busy-ness around it, you know. It's not so simple.

The last of the forms of clinging that the Buddha talked about was the clinging to the notion of "I am."— the craving to be someone, and the craving not to be someone, dependent on clinging to an idea and an ideal of self. This notion of self is perhaps the most delusionary force in our lives. Clinging to self makes it very difficult to acknowledge life according to its own cause and effect because there is that feeling of "I need to make things happen." "I need to do this in order to become this." "I need to get rid of this in order to be happy." "I need to organize the world in order that I can have the kind of ideal self that then is acceptable to me and acceptable as I believe to the world." This kind of thinking is one of the most powerful energies in our lives, to organize this sense of self in a way that we feel we're finally going to arrive at the self that's okay.

It's hard for us to acknowledge the way that this very notion of self is so dependent upon all of these other factors that we're not in control of all the time. And moreover what we are not in control of is what comes through the sense doors. Our self-created notion of self is constantly arising, picking this up, putting this down, but still we can hold onto or foster this idea that at some point we arrive at this solid, stable, refined, very enlightened sense of self that's going to stay the same.

This is actually an interesting paradox because it straddles a very fine line. One part of mediation, for example, is the capacity to be in harmony with what is. At the same time, there's a visionary part in every spiritual practice which is about what is possible. Holding these two together is the challenge of the paradox; being with what is through our meditation training, we need to separate from any sense of resignation or passivity. Positively, being with what is means seeing the true nature of what's happening in the moment—it is arising, it is passing, it has its own flavor, etc. On the other hand, knowing what is possible means giving attention to our own capacities for awareness and wisdom, and clarity to hold what is happening in the light of wisdom. That's the visionary part.

So it's not about changing the world; it's not about changing myself into a more enlightened self. It is about that sense of trusting the vision that freedom, clarity, and very deep and powerful levels of understanding are possible, that they begin and are born in what is within the field of our experience right now. We don't meditate in order to stay the same. We also don't meditate in order to reject whatever is present

in that moment. We meditate in order to find the possibility in that moment, first through seeing the capacity for freedom within that moment.

Becoming: Clinging is followed by becoming or arising—the entire process of fixing or positioning the sense of self in a particular state of experience. Any time we think in self-referential terms, “I am,” “I am angry,” “I am loving,” “I am greedy,” “I know,” “I’m this kind of person,” and so on, an entire complex of behavior is generated to serve craving and clinging. I see something over there that I’ve projected as “this is going to make me really happy if I get this,” and I organize my behavior, my actions, my attention in order to find union with that. This is the process of becoming—becoming someone or becoming something other than what is.

Birth: Birth, the next link in the chain of dependent origination, is the moment of arrival. We think “I think I got it!” “I found it (the union with this image or role or identity or sensation or object),” “I am now this”—the emergence of an identity, a sense of self that rests upon identifying with a state of experience or mode of conduct, the doer, the thinker, the seer, the knower, the experiencer, the sufferer—this is what birth is. And there is a resulting sense of that birth, of one who enjoys, one who suffers, one who occupies, one who has all the responsibility of that birth.

Death: Birth is followed by death in which there is the sense of loss, change, the passing away of that state of experience. “I used to be happy;” “I used to be successful;” “I was content in the last moment,” and so on. The passing away of that state of experience, the feeling of being deprived or separated from the identity, “I used to be...” is the moment of death. In that moment of death, we sense a loss of good meditation experience, the good emotional experience. We say it’s gone. And associated with that sense is the pain and the grief, the despair of our loss.

These different factors interact to create certain kinds of experiences in our lives. What is important to remember is that none of this is predetermined. Just like the climate for snow, the presence of certain of these links is going to allow other experiences to happen. Not that they must happen, or definitely will happen, but they allow for certain experiences to happen. This may sound like bad news in the beginning but we get to the good news later.

Path: The second noble truth of dependent origination describes a process than happens every single moment of our lives. But clearly there is a distinction between a process and a path, and it is an absolutely critical distinction. One doesn’t actually want to continue in life just as a spectator, watching the same process happening over and over and over again; being a spectator at our own disasters.

Thus awareness is something a bit more than simply seeing a process take place. In choosing to be aware, we make a leap which is really about an application of a path

in our lives, otherwise mere seeing of the process becomes circular and we continue to circle around. The path is what actually takes us out into a different process.

Now, what is now being revealed in the third noble truth is not a value judgment in itself; it is simply a portrayal of the way in which it is possible to step off a sense of being bound to this wheel of samsara or to the links of dependent origination. It is significant to remember that it just doesn't have to be any one link that we step off or that there is only one place where we can get out of this maze. In fact, we can step out of the maze and into something else at any of the links.

The well-known Thai meditation master Buddhadasa Bhikkhu describes it as the radiant wheel. It is also called the wheel of understanding or the wheel of awakening in which the fuel of greed, anger, and delusion give us the feeling of being bound to the wheel of samsara is replaced by the fuel of wise reflection, ethics, and faith.

One portrayal of the alternate wheel is that wise reflection, ethics, and faith lead to gladness of heart and mind, the absence of dwelling in contractedness and proliferation. The gladness is in itself a condition for rapture, a falling in love with awareness. The rapture is a condition for calmness and calmness is a condition for happiness. Happiness is a condition for concentration; concentration is a condition for insight; insight is a condition for disenchantment or letting go, and letting go is a condition for equanimity, the capacity to separate the sense of self from states of experience so that an experience can be just an experience rather than be flavored by an "I am"-ness of a self. Experience. Equanimity in itself is a condition for liberation and the end of suffering.

Wise attention formed by wise intention.

When the sense of self is identified with a particular experience, equanimity is often impossible because in that identification the binding factor is often craving or aversion. When equanimity is elusive, it means that we cannot be with things just as they are because we only want to be with things in terms of what they mean to us.

When the alternate fuels of ethics, wise reflection, and faith are consciously cultivated parts, they become significant facets of the path that breaks the cycle of suffering.

We should never underestimate the role of ethics in our life. [I know, it's not very fashionable to talk about it in our culture; once we taught a retreat at Gaia House on ethics and I think three people signed up. That says a lot, doesn't it?]

The Buddha speaks about this triad of ethics, attention, and understanding in which each element is inseparable from the others. Ethics is the foundation of calmness; wise attention is built upon ethics; and upon wise attention is built liberating understanding.

In many ways, cultivation of ethics is a way of stepping off the wheel of pursuit and aversion. It is an acknowledgment of an essential interconnectedness, that every single thing we do in body, speech, and mind actually affects something else, just as our body, speech, and mind are affected by others. And it really is a question of making a shift in our life so that our choices around body and speech and mind are based upon that acknowledgment and recognition of deep interconnectedness. Such recognition allows us to make choices that are really in the service of what leads to the end of suffering rather than what leads to suffering.

Within the context of dependent origination, ethics is not just about precepts or guidelines but the essential fundamental acknowledgment of interconnectedness in which everything matters. And that everything then can be in the service of well-being, of oneness rather than in the service of separation.

Quite frankly, without an ethical foundation it's very difficult to actualize any of the other links in the pursuit of stepping off the wheel. I think U Pandita Sayadaw phrased this very well when he said, "Why bother to meditate if you're not living an ethical life because all you're doing is creating the conditions for unpleasant mind states to arise." That sums it up!

Creating the conditions for unpleasant, difficult mind states to arise, which we know in terms of remorse, regret, guilt, aversion, anger, and the way that those get embodied. And how when all of that is moving and active in the mind and heart, it's not possible to be calm; it's not possible to come to a place of stillness, and it's very difficult really to really go very deep in that penetrating wisdom, because the mind gets so caught up in all of that activity. So ethics here is not meant or intended in any way to describe a kind of, say, a spiritual corset, that binds us or constricts us. It is meant to open us to the sense of interconnectedness which every single thing is of value because it makes a ripple or a mark upon our inner and outer worlds.

Faith is one of the second part of the alternate fuel, and the way in which faith is interpreted or intended to be used in this context is not about having faith in the Buddha or having faith in some system; it's not about having a blind faith but something that from wise reflection. Faith, then, becomes the capacity to reflect on our lives and investigate and see what does lead to suffering and what leads to the end of suffering. That's wise reflection, and it is the beginning of an authentic understanding of the four noble truths.

In this context, faith is intended to be the embodiment of wise reflection. It is the sense with which we begin to practice and explore pathways that we feel or intuitively sense are going to lead to the end of suffering. In this sense faith is a very practical thing; it's not about some belief system but it means that in our lives we're beginning to explore possibilities; for example, instead of engaging in anger, maybe I'll cultivate loving-kindness instead and see what happens.

So faith becomes a living exploration of possibilities instead of just living in familiar territory of what we know. It is the beginning of exploring unfamiliar territory which we don't know so well, but we sense it may be an avenue of possibility.

Suffering is often very much a condition for the arising of faith. If we didn't suffer, if we didn't have pain in our lives, there's often very little desire to explore new pathways. It may be in that in a number of ways the arising of faith and suffering are inseparable and may often come together.

The wise reflection is a quality of investigation that can be evoked by many different things in our lives. Sometimes we're exposed to a teaching, or we hear something, we listen to a poem and suddenly a door opens up, "Oh yes, maybe there is another possibility, another way of being. What does that mean in my life and for me? what does that mean for me?"

You know, we may meet someone who actually seems happy and we say, "What is that all about?" "How did this person get there?" For me the beginning of the path was going to India when I was very young, and stumbling into this village of refugees who should have been depressed but were not. They seemed cheerful and happy, and my response was, "How does that happen? "

That kind of question can generate so many sparks into our lives, as it did in mine, that forces us look at our own experience and our own story and say, "Maybe there's another possibility in my life compared to what's happening now and how something else may happen?"

Wise reflection and faith and ethics are really simple guideposts in our lives; they are not about some complicated body of knowledge that we have to learn. All of us begin in this place of ethics, faith, and wise reflection. And in themselves they are a way of re-collecting our energy, and re-collecting our attention, re-collecting our sense of focus on what's called a path. That's what's a path is—we collect our energy and sense of focus and we begin to put things into practice.

In the practice application of the path to the process of dependent origination, mindfulness, wise reflection, and investigation can be brought into any of the links at any time and the cycle stops. The response of wise reflection and investigation to ignorance is the cultivation of what in the Buddhist tradition is called sammaditthi or wise view, or right understanding.

Right understanding in this sense means beginning to question what is suffering and what is its cause. It means in some ways withdrawing the delusion or belief around the unsatisfactory as being satisfactory. Right understanding is to see that the satisfactory is that which leads to the end of suffering, and the unsatisfactory is that which leads to more confusion and suffering.

The cultivation of sammaditthi or wise view, is beginning to cultivate an understanding of the four noble truths and acknowledging all that is confusion and suffering in our lives and to see how it is caused. How does it begin? How things actually are? Knowing that life is not a random process, that things are caused by conditions, things don't just happen to us.

Right understanding allows us to question or to begin to come a little closer to an understanding or a perception of change, because this is a pretty radically transforming insight in our lives. We might all do it intellectually and say, "Oh yes, life's impermanent, everything's impermanent." But what does it mean to live in that spirit? To truly live in the spirit of that insight merely means that we don't grasp or hold on to a single thing, that we really do cling to nothing.

Beginning to question this whole notion of solidity around self. Not to say it's bad or it's wrong, but perhaps even to have the interest in tracking it in a single day, how many selves have you experienced today? You know, the self that was so excited at breakfast, is it the same as the self that felt so aversive towards someone over lunch? You know, how many have we seen today, and where does it come from? How is it created, how is that born, on a moment to moment level? I mean, all of those[...unclear], the formation of wise view it comes through investigation, and it's not just some good idea that investigating some theory or neat book or some principle. It's about investigating our lives. You know, about investigating what really happens for us.

So that is part of actually dissolving ignorance, and if sometimes it is ... but really the penetration of ignorance that there is nothing in this life that deserves more attention. Understanding how suffering is caused and how it is ended. You go to the link of karmic formations or sankharas. Now sometimes when sankharas is mistranslated into just meaning conditioning then I think you'd often assume some really rather negative connotation, you know, like

"Oh, sankharas... my sankharas, my conditioning, get rid of it."

There are many sankharas which are not negative. I might say that mindfulness is a sankhara. Mindfulness is a sankhara. Lovingkindness is a sankhara. Wise intention is a sankhara, it is a formation. So sometimes in the [...unclear] ethical formations cultivating ethical wise formations in body, speech, and mind as a path. As a path...of cultivation. Not saying that I have to get rid of all of this other stuff, but what does it mean to cultivate wise formations including mindfulness in the moment.

Well, I can tell you now it pretty much actually disempowers sankharas which are loaded with anger or greed or delusion. When the Buddha speaks about finding freedom within what is present, not outside of it, so it is the arising of sankharas that lead to suffering that we give birth to sankharas that lead to freedom. And that is part of the understanding of interconnectedness. You know, think about even not in different analogy where do you find true generosity in your life, where do you find true compassion, where do you find true acceptance? Often not really genuine levels of

those qualities in times in our lives when we're undisturbed surrounded by people who love us, you know, everything's just hunky-dory and terrific and we're flattered. We really learn about compassion in moments when we're challenged. It's a different sankhara.

We really learn about acceptance often in those moments when we can feel very contracted around judgment or tension or aversion. You know, we really learn about lovingkindness on a very deep level in those moments in our lives when we face that person or that part of ourselves that is difficult to be with. So it is really understanding that wise view or samadhitti a clearer understanding. Gives us access to cultivate and foster sankharas or formations that lead to the end of suffering. And that those formations in themselves are a response to sankharas that lead to suffering, and not separate from them.

We have then moving into consciousness a kind of consciousness that is born of wise formations. A kind of consciousness that actually arises and again that is fostered. So instead of consciousness that is being driven or bound by formations that are dragging us into pain and conflict, the effect of skillful sankharas is that the consciousness stays very open, very receptive, very spacious, very free. It doesn't dwell, it doesn't dwell or proliferate.

The body and mind - When body and mind are primed by sankharas, we see that they are often driven in certain ways to isolate perception. To isolate this, to isolate that. What we learn to bring into the body and mind mechanism is bare attention. Again, one of the sankharas. Instead of remembering that mind is about volition, about thoughts, about mind states, about perceptions, we learn to cut through proliferation and papanca, the construction of mental realities, through learning to cultivate bare attention. It takes us out of that. It takes us out of that. It's one of the basic skills of all meditation. Learning to cultivate bare attention so that the body and mind is not contracted through dwelling and proliferation, but rather learns to stay in contact with what is what is actually happening. With what is actually happening, without adding anything, without subtracting anything.

Also bearing in mind that what happens here with sankharas, with consciousness, with body and mind is also the places where karma is actually generated. So actually it is actually putting body and mind into a different stream.

The six sense doors. Well, the Buddha had a lot to say about the six sense doors. But basically it is all summed up in restraint. Sometimes what he talked a lot about was guarding the sense doors. Now I think sometimes we hear that term and we hear it as being a very defensive stance, you know, and blocking things out, I'm guarding my sense doors. I think it's more about making wise choices. About making wise choices. It's almost considered a virtue, I think, in our world to do overload, you know, multitasking's considered a virtue. And there's often a kind of grade element

behind sense door function. You know, more; as much as possible; and hopefully all of it happening at the same time.

We have that phenomenon where we can be stuffing our mouths, listening to music, reading a book, jiggling our bodies, and thinking about tomorrow, all in the same moment. And we like to call that fun.

And we think that's part of reversing that philosophy that is actually not fun, that is actually inner vandalism. Guarding sense doors actually really means bringing wholehearted attentiveness to the sense doors. Learning to do that, rather than a fragmented attention that only rests upon that which pleases us or tries to get you to [...unclear?] which doesn't please us, dismisses that which makes no impression.

We want to bring wholeheartedness to the sense doors. This is actually a way of guarding the sense doors. It's like walking down a city street, you know, there's many different ways of doing that. One can walk down that street totally fragmented. You know, just drawn by whatever is making the most powerful impression any moment, trying to hear everything, trying to see everything. There's another way of walking down that street. You know, well maybe one is really paying attention to really listening, to really seeing, to really touching the earth. But there is a sense of focus and choice within that.

Contact - As I mentioned before, the Buddha said, with contact the world arises, with the cessation of contact there is a cessation of the world. Wise attention. Wise attention is defined as not grasping at the sense object or the associations with it. Unwise attention is either grasping at the sense object or the associations with it. So, the sense object really is isolated or jumps into life with contact. It's a place where we can make a lot of choices. You know, I walk out of here, and I go in the car park and I see a car, you know. Maybe it's a car, [...] around. You know, grasping at the sense object and the associations with it. "Oh ...I'd like to have one like that, why don't I have a car like that. I remember when I drove in a car like that and had such a good time when I was a teenager. Da-da-da-da-da-da. It is a creation of contraction, grasping at the sense doors and the associations with it. But it is more than that, I feel, it doesn't allow anything to be unknown in our life. You know, it likes... the way that we grasp at the sense door in our associations...have you wondered why when we walk in the world we feel obliged to have a name for everything. And a label for everything and a story about everything. I mean, the world doesn't really ask for it. And all of the activity that is generated, and the busyness, and the complexity of mind that is generated around that. And around how sometimes that contact and then having a label for it is actually a way of grasping the sense object and trying to make it known and controllable. If it's familiar to me, if I have a name for it I feel safe with it, my sense of self is also confirmed.

So it doesn't mean trying to get rid of concepts. Because the concepts in themselves obviously have a very functional use in our life. I mean, it's good if I go in

the car park and I need to drive away in my car that I have an understanding of what a car is. But it is really looking how often our concepts are loaded, are actually loaded with a whole story, and a whole world of association about what has happened before in relationship to that. You know, think about that in another context in our life, perhaps meeting somebody. You know, maybe they had an unpleasant encounter with them last time we met them. And how, when we meet them, how quickly the sense object and the association with it is grasped [unclear]. And how in doing that the [unclear]

is actually frozen into what has happened before. How there's very little sense of a possibility, very little sense of change allowed within that freezing. But we also think of this in relation to...we do this to ourselves. And that is also looking at the sense door and the associations with it also at what happens in our own minds and body.

You know, the commonly used analogy that I have a sensation in my knee that's unpleasant and I immediately anticipate that this is going to be a repeat of the last nightmarish sitting I had, you know, when my body fell apart. Or I have a thought that arises, or a feeling that arises, an image that arises, perhaps a memory of myself, I'm like this. You know, the grasping at the sense door and the association with it is a way, of course, of freezing things into what I know. But in doing that, acting also as a kind of completion.

So there's a tremendous liberation in actually practicing wise attention. At this place of contact. Of not grasping at the sense door or the association with it, in a way it liberates the world. And in a very real way it also liberates us, doesn't it? It's like, I don't have to fit into something that I already know. Other people don't have to fit into what I already know. The world doesn't have to fit into it.

So the sense of wise attention at the sense doors at contact is actually something that is very profound. And it is a practice in life. It's more than just a good idea. This is something we can actually practice in our lives. All of this we can actually practice in our lives.

When the Buddha said that there was cessation of contact with the world, obviously what is meant by that is the cessation of this contracted personal world. That this is what I know, this is how this is, that is laden with projection and association.

Feeling - the pleasant, the unpleasant, and that which is neither. This is really to do with what happens through the intrusion of the underlying tendencies around feeling. To really have the understanding to see the way in which the intrusion of the underlying tendencies of craving, aversion, and ignorance around the pleasant, the unpleasant, and that which is neither. How the intrusion of those tendencies actually is the beginning of most of our mental constructions.

You know, when we speak like emotional storms, and mind storms, those places that we can get into, that can feel very contracted, very complex, they begin here. They

begin with these very essential levels of communication with the world that begins with pleasant, unpleasant, and that which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Now, with those feelings there is often a very automatic leap into those underlying tendencies - oh, that's unpleasant, I have to get rid of it. This is bad, this is wrong, I'm like this, you know, oh, this is so awful. If it's pleasant, there's often a very quickly into this whole other construction around - oh yes, excitement, elation, anticipation. Think about the emotional storms we get into of depression, of anticipation, of anxiety, of fear. This is their beginning. This is how they actually begin. So there's a tremendous level of understanding that is asked for to really see how we do respond to the pleasant, the unpleasant, and that which is neither in our lives.

I mean, this is equally something which is so accessible to us. This is not complicated. We are encountering these feelings all through our day. Look at the leaps that happen in relationship to them. It's really a way of not doing the storms. A way of not doing the storms. It's like, do those underlying tendencies actually add anything to our understanding of what's going on? Or do they just lead us into some very familiar places?

Craving - Disenchantment. This is really good, disenchantment. Sounds terrible, doesn't it? It's often interpreted as being sort of cold, or indifferent. Disenchantment is the withdrawal of projected promise. That's all it means. The withdrawal of projected promise. That is all. In ways that we, you notice we talked about craving, and that a part of craving is this projected promise into things - this is going to make me happy, this is going to make unhappy, this is going to make me into something wonderful, this is going to threaten me - this is all projected promise. Which actually is never fulfilled and actually which charges the world, charges objects, charges people, charges experiences or invests them with authority to define our well-being.

So, all that disenchantment is is this withdrawal of projected promise. How would we see the world if we didn't invest that promise in it? I mean, what would our relationship be with people, with things, with experience if we didn't rely upon it to this invested promise of what it is going to make me? Disenchantment has nothing to do with rejection or dismissal or indifference. It's actually a liberation from all of those. And the disenchantment, I feel, the withdrawal of that projected promise and that invested promise, in a way where on one level it's a reclaiming of authority. Because we don't delegate that authority any more to something to define our well-being. So, on one level there is a kind of reclaiming of that authority. How is our happiness, how is our well-being actually defined? What other way can that be defined inwardly - that's not dependent on what we get or what we don't get? So, in a way it is a reclaiming of that authority.

It also, I feel, opens the door to a sense of appreciation of things as they are. You know, the capacity to delight in the pleasant. And equally the capacity to hold the unpleasant without being threatened by it. And really the capacity to be really interested in that which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Because it doesn't actually

have that label of not meaning something to me. So [unclear] the world suddenly becomes something very meaningful. You may have noticed that when you bring your attention to anything which you had previously described as being neutral, it doesn't stay neutral. In a way something being described as being neutral relies upon our being inattentive to it.

I mean, you can just experiment with this, you know, that the bushes that you may have walked by about twenty times today and it means nothing or it's just neutral. Turn your attention to it and see what happens. It's not neutral any more. You know, there is nothing which is neutral, but we take phenomena out of that realm of just being pleasant, unpleasant, or in between and actually appreciate the way that the world comes to life as we come to life. The moment that we actually give wholehearted attention to it. Nothing stays neutral.

It's like when people do metta practice and they come to the neutral person and they select someone who hasn't meant anything to them in the past, they have not story about, and generally that person stays neutral for about two seconds, you know, and then they're no longer neutral and either they find themselves weaving some huge story about them, about how lovely they are or they find themselves, if the metta's not going so well, weaving some story about really just what a stinker they are, but they certainly don't stay neutral.

So, disenchantment in the Buddhist tradition is something that is something that is really consciously cultivated, you know, because in a way disenchantment and enchantment are almost the same things. You know, that when we withdraw the promise and the reliance of, you know, this is going to give me this or not going to give me that we actually can be enchanted with it for what it is rather than for what it promises me or for what it threatens to take away from me. So in that sense disenchantment and enchantment, I think, are really so close together.

Does anybody have any questions?

Student: I was intrigued with something that you said this morning when you were talking about negative, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. And you said sometimes we had a hard time [unclear] neutral, because it's hard to [unclear] our sense of self so that we might be unconsciously do something that's pleasant after.

Christina: When I think about what happens often because often the mind state that follows the perception of neutral is boredom, and how often we try and fill up, I mean boredom is probably one of our greatest terrors in the Western world.

Being bored, you know, and how we try and fill up those moments with some sense of something exciting or something...

Student: You know, it gave me an insight in terms of eating habits.

Christina: Yeah. Yes indeed. Indeed. Very good.

Student: So when you're feeling that way what do you do? Just stay with a feeling of boredom or nothing's happening?

Christina: Well, what happens when you pay attention to boredom? You know, I feel that what happens when we really pay attention to boredom and begin to try and investigate it and find out what it is. But it's very much the same thing happens as when we really turn our wholehearted attention to something which we've previously considered to be neutral. Actually what we discover is that boredom is very difficult to find, for one thing. You know, it is a state of mind, it is a state of mind that blankets perception. In many ways I feel that boredom in our culture, it's almost like a kind of surrender of sensitivity, you know, it's a symptom of disconnectedness. Put it that way. It's a symptom of disconnectedness.

And part of that symptom of disconnectedness relies upon a certain background of relying upon excitement and interest in order to be something. You know, it's like are we happier the higher the roller coaster rides, the ever more-frightening movies, you know, like it's not we have to keep moving on here because our sense of being awake has almost become dependent upon something exciting or interesting us.

So boredom then, I think, in many ways becomes a symptom of that kind of slander of sensitivity where the simplicity of what is is rejected as not being enough. And I feel a lot of times in meditation we actually turn that around because we really become interested in what is. Including boredom. If we look for it we see often that it is this kind of overlay of a mind state that is actually just, it's not saying something about what's happening it's saying something about how we're perceiving what's happening. And as we pay attention we find that as we begin to penetrate that layer of sameness which is what boredom produces. Things feel the same. Nothing stands out. As we begin to penetrate with attention actually we come to life. We come to life. And sometimes then the simplicity of what is really is enough. It really is enough. And that's such a tremendous liberation in our lives. Not to feel so dependent on waking ourselves up through having something or getting something. But waking ourselves up through being. Rather than through becoming.

You know, it's sometimes hard to appreciate what a gift, what an incredible gift, that is. And how it allows, really liberates us from such a cycle, momentum, of busyness and becoming which can become such a tyrant in our lives.

Student: It seems like that [unclear] or projected [unclear] is like conforms [unclear] and I don't want to sound negative but it does [unclear] .

There's such a [unclear] for hope... I hope this and I hope that. But this sounds like it's a type of craving, hope is a type of craving and a type of...

Christina: Well, what do you hope, I mean there are many different ways of hope, isn't there?

Student: Well, hope for like, you know, it's all something that you project in the future isn't it, usually hope that ...

Christina: Usually, if it's what's happening in the present there wouldn't be hope. Yes. That's true.

Student: And isn't it that if you withdraw that, isn't that a projected promise?

Christina: Hope?

Student: Yeah.

Christina: Well, there are different layers of that and I don't want to be too blanket-like in kind of saying yes, hope is projected promise. In some ways think about, it depends on what is behind the hope. I mean, clearly hope often arises in relationship to something that's not happening, otherwise it wouldn't be hoped that it would. But hope can take many different forms, can't it. I mean, you know, we can be sick and say I hope I'll get better. I hope I'll get better tomorrow. That's pretty fine intention. Actually, it's not invested with a rejection of what is, you know, I mean, in a way isn't that [unclear] somebody like metta, you know, like lovingkindness in a way is a quality of intention, isn't it, that aspires for a way of being that may not actually be present in the moment. You know, may you be free from suffering, may you be free from conflict. Well that may actually not be the reality of the moment but it's the aspiration of heart that is drawn upon that allows us to embrace what is happening. Right, it's not separate from what's happening.

I think the place where hope probably gets us into trouble is when it is rooted in a denial of what is. You know, if I see somebody very distressed I really hope they find some happiness. But that doesn't mean that I say that the distress should be somehow avoided or suppressed or ignored because it's not acceptable. But I really hope that they find some happiness. You know, in many ways metta embodies that. I think that's a very different kind of intention that is reaching for the end of suffering, that is probably qualitatively different than, you know - I hope I get rid of this or I hope this disappears - it depends what's behind it. It depends what's behind it. That's my sense. It depends really on the intention behind it. I hope I win the lottery - you know, that's not really in the service of the end of suffering. Well, could be perceived that way, but it may not work out that way. It really depends on what's behind it.

Student: Just as you were talking I [unclear] and acknowledgement that you don't know the whole story.

Christina: Can be. And it can also ...

Student: ...that things are possible...

Christina: Yeah, an acknowledgement of possibility. An acknowledgement of possibility, it can also be, have that kind of vision element within it, that even though

this is a mess right now or you're very distressed right now, I hope I may be happy. It can be an acknowledgement of possibility.

Student: Yeah, or I was thinking of taking the striving, craving part of is to [almost?] say that I realize that I'm limited but that there are things out of my control. You know what I mean, that that rubber band can stretch to, it's sort of like craving, just kind of snap back.

Christina: Because the craving element really takes us, it is an elastic band, it takes us away from where we are. We love what we don't have. Or we love what's going to happen when what we have disappears. It takes always, almost always, into what might happen. What might be gained, which is different than a sense of possibility. You know, because that has the promise with it. You know, if that happens, then I'll be happy. Anybody else?

Clinging - the antidote to clinging, or the way of stepping off, I mean we all know what clinging is, right? It's the closed hand. Not [unclear] hand, all right. Okay. We've all seen other people cling, right. Now. The closed hand, you know. The holding on [unclear] must stay. So the antidote to clinging is probably renunciation. The cultivation of our willingness and capacity to let go. Now this actually involves an element of trust, letting go involves an element of trust and faith. Because even in the midst of clinging, even when it can be quite painful to cling, you know - I'm really holding on to something or to someone or to some view - the experience of it is painful. I mean, the very nature of clinging, nobody enjoys clinging, right. This is not a pleasant experience, it is an unpleasant experience. I think, probably always.

Yet there's so much motivated by fear. So much motivated by fear that even though the experience of clinging is painful it appears to be less painful than the prospect of letting go. You know, that the clinging actually offers some sense of self, some sense of familiarity, some sense of being someone, some sense of having, and even when that clinging is so painful, at least we know it. And the letting go really has within it that element of then - I don't know. I don't know what will happen, I don't know who I will be, I don't know how I will experience things if I let go.

So in many ways I always feel that renunciation is actually a very powerful cultivation of trust. Of being comfortable in that place of not knowing. And this works on so many levels. Even in meditation, you know, when we talk about coming back to the breath, that in itself is a very direct expression of learning how to let go in our lives. Because when we come back to the breath, we're often coming back from places and territories that are very familiar and very secure for us, you know. Some story, some fantasy, some memory of the past, some projection about the future, that actually provides a sense of identity, and safety.

So actually learning to cultivate that very practice of coming back to the breath, we're actually learning to cultivate that aspect of trust. Of letting go. Of what I don't

know. I don't know what happens when I unstick myself, you know, from this particular glue or this particular experience. I don't know what's going to happen. [Unclear] a place where the trust is really almost responding to the fear and doubt that makes us cling.

Now, I often feel that people have a little bit of a problem with renunciation, because it sounds austere, you know, it sounds austere you know, you think of going around with a begging bowl, you know, and you give everything up, you know, and you're homeless and you're bereft and you shouldn't have anything if you're really a renunciate. And I think we're really far too grandiose in our ideas about renunciation.

I also feel that sometimes there's this kind of misperception that it just happens once. You know, we're going to kind of practice it for awhile and then we're going to really do the big one. The big breakthrough, the big letting go, and then we're going to live happily ever after. This, I feel, really gets in our way. That kind of idea. And I think it is really important to appreciate that renunciation truly is a present-moment practice. And the moment that it is really asked for is every moment something less.

So. You may have had a thought that lasts. A mind state that goes on. A thinking process that goes on or repeats itself more than once is already clinging. Most likely. Unless it's intentional. Unless it's an intentional reflection. More than once is already clinging.

So, letting go is a pretty major practice. Learning how to let go. Sometimes, you know, [name -unclear] was, said that renunciation is not about getting rid of the things of this world but accepting that they pass away. Which I think is really a helpful way to look about living. So that in letting go is really just not getting in the way of a process that's already happening. You know, because renunciation is already is already happening. There's actually nothing that stops that because of impermanence. You know, so renunciation is actually happening all around us and all within us every moment in our lives. Accepting that things go away. Accepting that things change. And so the actual conscious part of renunciation is actually not getting in the way of that process of living that is already occurring. It's not trying to put the brakes on life, but seeing that renunciation is the nature of life. It's being the nature of the seasons, it's being the nature all the seasons of our own lives from birth through childhood through adolescence to adulthood. It's being through all the seasons of joy and sadness and grief and despair that we experience. Renunciation is the nature of life. Nothing stays the same.

So in a way what we do is we learn to harmonize our personal reality with the reality of life. And that's renunciation. That's the nature of renunciation. Instead of trying to make something hang around because I like it or make it go quicker because I don't like it, it's actually harmonizing our inner reality with the reality that is already taking place, and then our lives are so simple. You know, they are so uncomplicated. And there is so natural about that kind of renunciation, you know, sometimes we think

of renunciation of being this big heroic contrived path. But it's actually something so much more natural than that. Of harmonizing our inner reality with what is true. With what is actual, with what is real.

And although I do really believe that that is the basis of genuine renunciation, this oneness of reality, I also feel that even upon that basis it doesn't mean that renunciation is always effortless. Renunciation does happen really in very different ways. Sometimes renunciation happens so naturally and if you notice the times when renunciation really happens so naturally are those times in our lives when there's really a lot of calmness and clarity. Do you notice when there's a lot of calmness and clarity you don't struggle? And notice how things really don't stick that much.

Because there is happiness when there's calmness and clarity. When there's happiness, for one thing, there's less craving. You know, we don't think - oh, I could have this and make this better. You think - there's happiness, there's contentment here, there's that sense of enough. So there is a very natural allowing of life to be as it is. You notice when there's a lot of calmness and oneness inwardly, those are the times when there's much less stickiness in our thinking, isn't there? I mean, thoughts come and they go. You don't have to do anything with them. We didn't have to make any intention around them, we didn't have to try and let go of them. They just come, and they go. There's very little stickiness in the mind of calmness and contentment.

So there's a very natural letting go that occurs in those times. But there are also times when letting go actually requires a little more intention and a little more effort, and, you know, this is spoken of in number of different ways. That sometimes letting go comes through insight. Sometimes we see ourselves, perhaps, really holding on to something and there's a point where we may recognize that that is actually suffering. That what we're doing and how we're doing it really is causing suffering. For ourselves.

And in that moment that depth of understanding, that depth of insight can be clear enough and strong enough where there's a kind of releasing and opening. And I'm sure probably you've experienced that in your life too. That the insight comes and the insight actually is the renunciation. We say - just let it go. You kind of breathe out. Rather than holding your breath. There's that kind of letting go.

There's also a letting go that comes, I feel, through clear intention and even resolve. And part of this, sometimes when you read Buddhist sutras, you know, we don't usually mention this in meditation retreats because it sounds too much for everybody, the Buddha talks about the kind of effort where you're clenching your fists and your tongue's up against the roof of your mouth and you're sweating blood. So sometimes there's a place for this kind of effort. And the place for that kind of effort is when we have, perhaps, seen ourselves really traveling down familiar pathways that we've been down a million times before. Pathways of judgment, pathways of greed, pathways of aversion, pathways of guilt, pathways of fantasy, pathways of dullness that perhaps have [unclear], pathways that [may?] lifelong companions for us, and

sometimes it is almost a kind of addiction to those pathways. It's like, they're so familiar and there's a kind of an almost addiction to them. And part of the addiction, I think, because sometimes what kind of fuels that addiction is that thought that comes that there's something I haven't yet learned here. That's why I need to keep doing this.

It's not a good thought to have. It's not often really not a helpful thought. Like there's something more I need to learn, therefore, I'll go and overeat that one more time or I'll do that fantasy one more time or I'll enact that aversion one more time because there's something in it I didn't get. Yeah, there is. But part of it is that it's a habit. It's a habit, it's one of those sankharas actually that is so familiar and so habitual that there's almost a kind of magnetic attraction to it.

And sometimes letting go in those moments, I feel, actually, we become sort of powerful, clear intention, of not consenting to it. And really the difference between suppression and clear intention is suppression is the unwillingness to see something. But clear intention is the willingness to see something but the unwillingness to engage in patterns of suffering. That's a pretty major distinction.

And so sometimes we have that and we see that and we just say - I'll not consent. Like giving the permission to keep traveling those pathways means just a repetition of suffering. And part of letting go in those moments actually might be that you know we really consciously turn our attention away from that pathway. We consciously turn our attention to something else. Maybe we practice lovingkindness, you know, we find some way of stepping out of the rut.

Often through making a connection with something else. And it's a way of letting go, it's a way of easing that contractedness.

Do you have any questions on renunciation?

Student: There's an affirmation of independence? Renunciation, a lack of dependence? An affirming it?

Christina: Sure, that you don't really want to relegate your authority in that way. It's a helpful reminder.

Student: ...more positive ways...

Christina: But I would like to reclaim this.

Student: Renunciation, at least in English, has such a negative connotation.

Christina: It's really a pity isn't it?

Student: But the concept you're talking about is, I think, is more affirmation and a stepping back.

Christina: It's not about getting rid of anything. It's actually really reclaiming a path of happiness and well-being. And a path of freedom. You know, and all we're renouncing really, I mean, why do all these spiritual paths encourage renunciation? Not in order to punish us. Not in order to make us suffer, to feel bad about ourselves or to feel deprived. The reason that renunciation is so emphasized is because it's a gift. It's really a gift of freedom. I mean maybe yes in the service of happiness and authenticity. And that's the part where we need to almost kind of undo our own associations with the word, which kind of spells out sometimes a sort of destitution. It may actually be spelling out a real sense of richness.

There's a tradition in Japan of toilet-cleaners, it's a spiritual path, of cleaning...asked one of the nuns who went out. They go out in buses every morning to villages and clean. And when somebody once asked one of the nuns: why do you do this she said we (unclear...) a simple life with great affluence. ... that wonderful sense of enough. Enough. No matter what happens, it's enough. Remember, even when it's unpleasant, it's enough. It's the heart of one.

Okay, we go from the response of renunciation to clinging, really loosening those bonds, into becoming. The response of becoming is actually to end it.

The identifying of oneself with the (story?? unclear) of experience. The "I am" - I am the thinker, I am the doer, I am the enjoyer, I am the sufferer. This is not a magical process. But the Buddha said that the cessation of becoming is liberation. When there is not clinging and craving, there are no conditions for becoming. There are no conditions created for identifying with any state of experience as being "I am; I used to be; I will be; I want to be." That whole movement and energy of identifying simply ends.

So when there's no becoming, either identifying with a position or with a role, with a feeling, with a state of experience, there is a cessation of identity as such. Cessation of "I" and "you" as such, actually. And that's sometimes what is called liberation, and that's why we don't have any antidote to birth and death, because they don't happen, they don't happen. And it is the understanding of that dependent origination takes you to the door of the deathless.

Now we're not speaking literally here about death not happening.

Death does happen but what doesn't happen is this arising and passing of "I am, I used to be, I will be." There's that cessation of those links are actually stepped out of.

Another of the fuels which is really important in terms of this reflection and in terms of any of the ways of stepping out of these links is, of course, what the Buddha called wise effort. And wise effort perhaps as it addresses some of these questions that have arisen before. Wise effort is not about getting rid of or getting. Wise effort is about really finding the ways, understanding what leads to suffering and understanding what leads to its end. So one of the wise efforts that the Buddha spoke about was

fostering and cultivating that which is wholesome and skillful qualities of heart and mind that are not present. That are not already present.

Fostering and cultivating the wholesome and the skillful that is not already present, and this perhaps ties in a little bit with those questions of vision and hope and reconciling that relationship with what is with what can be. So he speaks about fostering and cultivating those qualities of heart and mind that lead to well-being, that lead to happiness. Fostering attention, fostering lovingkindness, fostering compassion, fostering clarity and wise intention, fostering all those qualities of heart and mind that we do in meditation practice, that's partially what meditation practice is about, fostering and cultivating that which is not already present. Talks about one of the wise efforts about sustaining and deepening the wholesome and the skillful that is present. And I think this is also actually pretty important.

I think especially amongst very Western culture which has really often more of a tendency to focus on imperfection. You know, about what's wrong with us, what's wrong with life. But often one of the qualities that is somewhat stunted or underdeveloped in us is a sense of appreciation, and sustaining and acknowledging the wholesome and the skillful that is present. You know, sometimes that gets really extreme, I mean I've met people you know who find it impossible to trust or value some sense of calmness that has risen in them. They say, "I feel calm, but I'm sure it's not going to last. It just means I'm not seeing something." This kind of denial even of the wholesome and skillful that can be present, that it is actually very real, that we practice that sense of inner thanksgiving. Of appreciating the wholesome and skillful that is present.

And then really giving attention to it and exploring it. You know, what is this calmness, what is this contentment, what is this appreciation, what is this sensitivity, how does it actually inform my perceptions of life, my perceptions of myself? How does it shape how I see the world and how I see myself? How is it experienced inwardly? How does it affect me? What does it lead to? Often we tend to rather gloss over the wholesome and skillful that is present which is I think is a quality of effort that is well worth developing. It's a quality of fostering thanksgiving. Which is a good kind of effort.

The Buddha speaks about the effort of letting go of the unwholesome and the unskillful that has arisen, and again remembering that the unwholesome and unskillful does not have the connotation of being bad, wrong, but unwholesome and unskillful because it leads to more contractedness and more suffering. And the capacity to recognize it and explore some of these avenues of renunciation that we just talked about. What is really needed that allows us to step out of those places where we feel very contracted? Where we feel very stuck?

And the fourth kind of effort that the Buddha talked about was the avoiding of the unskillful and the unwholesome that has not yet arisen. Now again I think with

some of our psychological backgrounds we hear the word avoidance and alarm bells go off, you know, and we say, "You're not supposed to avoid anything, you know, we have to confront everything, and we have to meet everything, and we have to go into everything. Well, sometimes we've done that and sometimes, as I mentioned before, we have already done those avenues, and we can actually sometimes draw on our experience and the wisdom that we've gained from having traveled down those avenues to really know what doesn't contribute to well-being, and what doesn't lead to spaciousness. If then I'm an alcoholic it's a good idea for me not to go in a bar. You know, if I'm a fantasy junkie there may be ways of being that are helpful for me to avoid. Not because I think I have to suppress it or deny it, just because I know where it goes. If I'm a judgment junkie, the moment that I see it arising, it's a good place for me to say, "I'm off," step out of this. Remembering that wise effort is always in the service of well-being.

So, to end I just wanted to again go over those last links that I mentioned at the beginning of this afternoon.

That wise reflection, ethics, and faith lead to gladness of heart and mind. That gladness is a condition for rapture; that rapture is a condition for calmness; that calmness is a condition for happiness; happiness is a condition for concentration; concentration is a condition for insight; insight's a condition for disenchantment and disenchantment or letting go is a condition of equanimity, and equanimity is a condition of liberation and the end of suffering.

So, that's it folks, thank you for your very acute attention. It's been a full day. Okay.

Student: ...mention a couple of books.

Christina: Oh, yes, a couple of books I would recommend if you're interested in reading a little bit more on dependent origination, Ajahn Buddhadasa, he's no longer alive so this was past tense, but the book is still alive. And I believe it's called Dependent Origination. And there's a bhikku called A Payutto and he also published a book which is available through Wisdom Publications on dependent origination. And both of those books I really heartily recommend as being so clearly written and so accessible and so free of too much kind of terminology or cultural stuff. They're both really clear.

Good. Okay. Thank you.

Dependent Origination
by Christina Feldman

This article has been excerpted from a program offered by Christina at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies on October 18, 1998. Please note that this represents only a small portion of the material offered in the full program.