



Awakening to a New Decade

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*Whoever knows dependent origination knows the Dhamma.
Whoever knows the Dhamma knows dependent origination and whoever knows
the Dhamma knows the Buddha.
--Buddha*

Well, it's a new year: a new decade, a new location, and the world seems topsy-turvy. I feel a heaviness that I haven't felt for some time. It reminds me of my college days when I had procrastinated away time to complete my homework until the pressure of getting it done was overwhelming enough to make me do something. It feels like the world has procrastinated away time around the climate, the political situation of this country, and the devastating plight of the poor, the marginalized, and the forgotten. With the apocalyptic fires in Australia, the threat of war with Iran, and rising hatred, fear, and costs of living, I can't help but think of a conversation between Buddha and King Pasenadi Kosala.

Buddha happened to see the King in the middle of the day and asked what he was doing. The King replied that he was caught up in his royal affairs. He was intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty and obsessed by greed of sensual pleasures and control over his country and rule. Buddha then asked the King a series of repetitive questions about what the King would do if a trustworthy and reliable person were to come to him and inform him that a great mountain was coming towards him from every direction, crushing all living beings in its path. The King replied that if such a fate were coming his way, with no escape, then practice in the Dhamma, right conduct, skillful deeds, and meritorious deeds was the only rational response. Buddha agreed and told the King that he was there to inform him that aging and death are rolling in from every direction, crushing living beings. Wealth, power, or prestige are of no use. Practice in the Dhamma, right conduct, skillful deeds, and meritorious deeds are our only refuge¹.

This is one of my favorite suttas. I think it's an important look into the nature of social engagement for lay practitioners. You will note that Buddha never said that the King should turn away from the world, nor did he imply that the worldly life of the King was somehow of less value than that the life of a monastic. To the contrary, Buddha acknowledged the King's realization that refuge for him would be found in both his Dhamma practice and his actions in the world. This is at the heart of urban practice. We are practitioners within the world and need to learn to find refuge in both.

I really felt this sense of refuge at our Monday night Refuges and Precept Ceremony. I realized that being in a room with practitioners is how I make sense of the world and find the courage and willingness to stay engaged. Moreover, I don't think it's a coincidence that we are about to enter the world of dependent origination as our annual teaching theme for 2020. We have been moving in this direction for some time now. Tim and I started holding the sangha in 2017 and spent the year with the heart qualities of the ten Paramis. In 2018, we moved into the Four Noble Truths, including each factor of the Eightfold Path. This is the way Buddha taught. He would start by teaching generosity and practices that open the heart. It was only after he felt that the sangha's heart was opened that he would begin to teach suffering and renunciation. Naturally, when you investigate the nature of suffering, you will come face to face with reactivity. This reactivity is the five hindrances, which include non-reactivity of the seven factors of awakening. Both of which were last year's theme. Now it's time to explore the causes of suffering.

I know of no better way to start an inquiry into the causes of suffering than through the lens of dependent origination. Dependent origination is the study of the self and the twelve aspects or links that come together to make up the self. Often, dependent origination comes across as a dry, exoteric discussion into the notion of "no self." This is so far from the truth of what dependent origination really represents. At its simplest, dependent origination is the awareness that "this happens because of that" or to put it another way, everything happens in relationship with something else. We do not exist in a vacuum. We exist in relation to the world we live in and the world we live in exists in relation to us. Understanding each of the twelve links allows us to engage with the world from a source of inner strength rather than from ignorance and habit. It means that we could relate to this new decade from a self that is intoxicated with greed (control), hatred (aversion) and delusion (fear) or from a self that is firmly rooted in Dhamma practice, right conduct, skillful deeds, and meritorious deeds.

Tim and I really want this year's theme to be a practical application for today's world. Let us take heed to Buddha's warning and King Kosala's advice and continue on this journey to awakening together.

Deep bow,
Tuere