

# THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

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### THE EIGHTFOLD PATH -- RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

#### THE TWELVE NIDANAS

##### NIDANAS #2 TO #8

###### 2) Sankhara

In the Pali scriptures, the link between each nidana is described thus:

“Avijja - paccaya sankhara.” Ignorance conditions the karma formations.

Each succeeding nidana is introduced in the same manner: The third nidana is conditioned by the one before it, the fourth by the third, and so forth, until we come to the last nidana. No matter where we are in the chain, we can always follow each link back to the beginning nidana of ignorance (delusion or forgetfulness). By any other name, it is avijja.

The crucial word that describes this linking together is *paccaya*, or “conditions.” Here, the Buddha has anticipated the psychological field of Behaviorism by twenty-five hundred years. Just as Pavlov’s dog was conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell, each succeeding nidana is conditioned to “respond” in a predetermined way.

Sankhara means “formations,” and, in the second nidana, it refers to a particular type of formation, *karma formation*. But before we discuss the meaning of karma formations, we need to add this pivotal word *karma* to our growing Buddhist lexicon.

The Buddha taught his disciples that Right Understanding begins with the law of karma. What we sow, that shall we reap. But the literal meaning of karma is *action*. One volitional act (something you intend to do) is a karma. Literally, it is *one* karma. Just as ignorance of the law does not excuse us from the consequences of breaking a law, avijja does not necessarily excuse one from the law of karma. If there is an intention to do

harm and I act on that intention, that is karma. If I intend to do an act of kindness and follow through with the intention, that, too, is karma. The tricky part is intent. For instance, if I am sitting in meditation and suddenly feel a mosquito's sting on my arm, I may instinctively splatter that little pest to smithereens. Thwack! But was there an intention to do harm? Probably not, and thus it was not a karmic act. On the other hand, let's say that I have been working with mindfulness for quite a while and have begun to note intention. If I feel another painful sting, recognize anger rising, and have the desire to send that damned mosquito to insect heaven, is that a karma? If I swing into action, you better believe that it is.

Oddly enough, the Buddha said that it is far better to commit a harmful deed *knowingly* (thus incurring karma) than to do a harmful act without the slightest clue that it is wrong: for instance, instinctively killing every little critter that you can squash, step on, or spray with some lethal chemical concoction. Without the law of karma, there would only be random, accidental, consequences for any of the actions that we take. Thus, we would have no chance to learn from our intended acts. Karma is our greatest teacher.

While the law of karma is not unique to Buddhism, and is, in fact, sacred to Indian culture, here at the second nidana, the Buddha's genius comes into play. How is it that karma produces a result? He answers this vexing question by introducing two concepts that explain the machinelike process of dependent origination. The first concept is paccaya or conditioning. The Buddha makes this startling assertion: The human mind has been conditioned by greed, hatred and delusion since the beginning of time. (That would be you, and that would be me, dear friends.) And certainly the endless wars and misery we have visited upon one another give ample evidence that the Buddha was dead on. If what he says is true, that our responses are conditioned just like Pavlov's dog, where is our freedom? This is his first concept. His second concept is sankhara or the second nidana.

Think of sankhara as an energy field that lingers like a ghost after each karmic act. (In this sense, there really are good ghosts as well as very bad ones.) It is not a bizarre theory when you think about it. When I really get angry, I feel a burning sensation at the top of my head. One thing, anger, causes another, a burning sensation. So, where does that energy go as it slowly breaks up and disperses? We pretend that it has no lingering effects, and on we go with our daily lives. But this is not the teaching of

sankhara. A karmic action leaves an energy field just like the exhaust fumes of a race car after it has vanished in a swirl of dust. Karma formations (sankhara) are an energy field left by skillful or unskillful actions, and they “lean us” (condition us) toward a future response. Their potential to produce a future act is heightened by the presence of avijja, which already conditions our mind. In other words, we don’t even have a clue that an energy field lingers after an action.

Obviously, the energy left from giving five dollars to someone on the street is considerably different from the energy left from stealing five dollars from the collection plate at your church, but both actions are karma and will leave an energy field of sankhara. The more powerful the act, the more powerful the energy left behind. And that energy is an active force that *leans us* in the direction of a future act. To repeat the old refrain, it is machinelike. You hurt me; I feel anger (at the top of my head!) The anger seems to dissipate, but can energy ever be destroyed? In fact it merges into a deep well of hurt and anger (sankhara) left from all the slights, insults, and hurts in my life that have never been illumined by the light of mindfulness. What is the result? One fine day (perhaps not tomorrow or even next week, but someday), I’ll pay that sucker back in spades. And if I don’t pay that particular person back, I’ll find a substitute target that *feels* like that person. What did my “new” action create? More exhaust fumes.

William Blake describes the process with uncanny perfection.

“I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,  
Night and morning with my tears:  
And I sunned it with smiles,  
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.  
Till it bore an apple bright.  
And my foe beheld it shine,  
And he knew that it was mine.  
And into my garden stole,  
When night had veiled the pole:

In the morning glad I see:  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree."

Blake's poem cuts through our denial of the shadow side with the precision of a surgical instrument. If you let yourself *feel* the power of his words, they can shatter an illusion of innocence. And doesn't everyone cling to an illusion of innocence?

"I was angry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end." In these clear and simple words, Blake has described the healing power of mindfulness. I was angry with my friend, but because I truly care for her, I refused to let my anger slip into the garden of avijja (or the shadow side of my personality). Perhaps I even told my friend that I was angry with her. What is important is that I stayed *with* my anger, and in the presence of mindfulness, my anger was transformed. (Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but it can be transformed, thank the good Lord!)

Then, Blake captures the lethal power of avijja and sankhara in the next two lines: "I was angry with my foe: I told it not, my wrath did grow." I don't know about you, but these two lines nail me to the wall. I do not choose to do the work of mindfulness when I feel anger toward someone that I dislike. It feels quite innocuous and innocent: "I have a *right* to feel this angry. What he did to me was entirely mean and uncalled-for." This is avijja's soft whisper, and soon we entirely forget that we were ever angry.

But this is only the beginning, because in our passive self-righteousness, we have opened the door to the unconscious processes. Let's try an experiment: Read the remainder of the poem in the voice of your shadow, rather than your conscious ego. I call my shadow side, "Frank," and here is what he would say: "So I watered it in tears. Who cares? I was so hurt! And yes, indeed, I sunned it with smiles mixed with a little deceit." (Ever smile at someone you would like to strangle?) Avijja and sankhara are now running the show. The end result is an apple bright, some poisonous act of revenge. You see the person lying on the ground and bleeding, but you swear that you are innocent and had nothing to do with this unfortunate turn of events.

Blake's poem brings us perilously close to an evil potential that lives in the shadow side of our personality, so near and yet so very far away. I think this is why many of us have a rather blank stare when we listen to his

poem, as if to say, “surely he is not talking about *me*. I could never be *that* cruel.”

Avijja finds a partner in *sankhara*, the second nidana. However you conceptualize the link between the two nidanas - as a cell that splits into two, or as two separate threads weaving themselves together -the only power *sankhara* has in our lives comes from its *link* with *avijja*. If *sankhara* is a thread, *avijja* is the dye.

3) Vinnana (“*Sankhara - paccaya vinnana.*” The karma formations condition consciousness.)

Avijja, the darkening force and original cause of separation from the whole, merges (morphs, or links up) with *sankhara*, the karma formations, or energy field lingering from past actions (both good and bad). But these two nidanas are blind and powerless without the third nidana, *vinnana* or consciousness. Consciousness will steer the vehicle that *avijja* and *sankhara* have begun to create. *Vinnana* refers to “individuated” consciousness, which is to say that it already has an “I am” sense, a sense of separateness from the whole. This “I am “ sense of *vinnana* is the result of its marriage with *avijja* and *sankhara*.

This is extraordinary to contemplate. *Vinnana* existed long before you and I were conceived? It has no physical form, nor does it have a brain which is necessary to operate the physical machine. So the chain must continue, and the fourth nidana comes into existence.

4) Nama-rupa (“*Vinnana - paccaya nama-rupa.*” Consciousness conditions name and form.)

When *vinnana* morphs into the fourth nidana, *nama-rupa* (name and form) the entity incarnates into the physical world. In our case, the fourth nidana manifests as a human embryo in the mother’s womb. *Nama* does not mean “name” in the sense of the name given to us by our parents. It refers to mind (or “spirit” in the Hindu religion). In India, people greet each other with their palms together and say, “namaste.” (“I bow before the divine in you.”)

The Buddha distinguishes between mind (*nama*) that has formed in combination with the body (*rupa*) at conception, and consciousness (*vinnana*), which enters the chain at the third nidana. I think of *vinnana* as

the *impersonal* mind or even cosmic mind, and somewhat analogous to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. It has individuated, in the sense that it grasps onto a sense of "I am," but it is not human at this point, let alone Bob, Bill, Mary or Susan. Nama, on the other hand, refers to the human mind that entered the chain of nidanas at the fourth link. It would be likened to Jung's notion of the personal unconscious.

Rupa refers to the physical part of our being. Thus, we are a combination of matter, mind, and individuated consciousness (*vinnana*). At the fourth nidana, our biological, psychological and psychic heredity is complete, including the genetic code we have received from our parents. From the second nidana, *sankhara*, we inherit the karma formations that may come to fruition in this present life. And, reaching back to "beginningless time," is the darkening cloud of *avijja* which created duality in the first place.

5) *Salayatana* ("*Nama-rupa - paccaya vinnana.*" Name and form condition the six senses.)

The tiny fetus, looking more like a walnut than a human, begins a stretching and shaping process where arms, legs and a human form emerge. (See page 27, where Kalu Rinpoche describes this painful stage of development as "Twisting Wind.") At long last, *vinnana* (consciousness) has incarnated into human form (*nama-rupa*). But how is *vinnana* to experience the environment, or itself? It needs a way to collect information. Thus comes the fifth nidana, called *salayatana*.

Over the years, NASA has sent landing crafts to Mars, such as the rovers Spirit and Opportunity. They are equipped with different "data collecting" instruments that send information back to the main computer on Earth for processing. Among those instruments are a panoramic camera, so it can "see," and a thermal emission spectrometer so that it can "feel" and identify Martian rocks and soils. This allows the main computer to decide whether the rover should examine the rocks and soil more closely or move on its merry way. Of course, each rover has "arms" to collect rocks, and "legs" (wheels) so it can move. How did we come up with such a clever device? Just look in the mirror!

*Salayatana* is the means by which our own personal landing craft collects information. It has six ways of gathering data, and, to date, we have not invented any machine that comes close to approximating the

processes of salayatana: feeling, smelling, seeing, hearing, tasting, and the sense mind, which sorts out the information coming in from the other five senses. (I hear, and the sense mind notes “hearing.”) With these six senses in place, our landing craft is ready to go exploring. Well, not quite yet.

6) Phassa (“*Salayatana - paccaya phassa.*” The six senses condition contact.)

Remember that the six “sense strands” (sometimes called “sense doors”) are *internal* organs. They still need external devices that can make contact with the external object in order to do the work of sensory processing. (Necessity requires more work from poor old Mother Nature.) This ability to make contact, to “reach out and touch someone,” arises with the sixth nidana, phassa. The external eye camera is able to take a picture of an object “out there” (contact) and then send the data back to the internal seeing center in the brain. The seeing organ processes the information, and an image arises in consciousness. The color of that object is red, and it has a round shape. Perhaps the external smelling device (the nose) also gathers information about the red object. And the inner olfactory organ processes the data and a sweet odor arises in consciousness. The sense mind says, “It’s a rose.” Phassa, or the sixth nidana, is the actual meeting (contact) between the sense organ and its object.

Joseph Goldstein has taken countless meditation retreats and during one retreat in particular, he had an especially difficult time with craving. Because he practices what he teaches, he continued to work with craving by bringing mindfulness toward the experience. Unfortunately, the desire kept returning. At some point, it occurred to him to focus not on the desire itself but on the very moment of initial contact with the object, before desire even had a chance to arise. Much to his astonishment, desire (or craving) vanished completely. Joseph’s experience is precisely what the Buddha teaches us in the twelve nidanas. When he focused on phassa, the moment of initial contact with the object of his desire, he introduced mindfulness into the chain of nidanas. This broke the current at the sixth link, *contact*. However temporary it may be, mindfulness is like a limb to grab hold of so we can pull ourselves out of the quicksand of the twelve nidanas. Mindfulness is the antidote to avijja.

7) Vedana (“*Phassa - paccaya vedana.*” Contact conditions feeling.)

All the nidanas that precede vedana remind me of an opening act that warms up the house before the big name band or star takes the stage. Vedana is our joy, and it is our curse. It is the payoff for all the agony that consciousness endured in order to incarnate into human form. But vedana is not just our agony, it is our ecstasy as well. It is that transcendent moment when we behold a beautiful sunrise or walk down a busy street and feel completely alive. Vedana is the indescribable joy we feel being caressed or held by someone we love, and it is the anguish we feel when we see the image of distraught parents on television talking about their missing child.

*Vedana* (feeling or sensation) is the seventh nidana, and with its rising we have arrived smack in middle of the thicket. Feelings (positive, negative or neutral) are the banana that leads the monkey toward a deadly trap.

In the West, we refer to body feelings as “sensations,” reserving the word “feelings” for mental states, such as anger or sorrow or happiness. But in Buddhist teachings, vedana is very specific indeed: It is the immediate mental-physical (nama-rupa) reaction to any contact. Vedana is one single “charge” resulting from one moment of contact, and that charge is positive, negative, or neutral. A touch from someone you love will result in a positive feeling. The sensation will be pleasant, because the mental state is positive. More than likely, the touch of someone that you dislike will result in negative vedana. The sight of a beautiful object will result in a positive mental vedana, just as something that we perceive as ugly will result in a negative mental feeling.

In Buddhism, emotions such as anger or joy are considered mind states, not vedana which is the “bare” physical-mental experience. But without vedana, what glorious or horrible mental experience would be possible? Perhaps it is helpful to think of our emotions as more complex states (a mix of different vedanas), while vedana itself refers to a single charge of negative, positive or neutral energy resulting from one moment of contact through one of the six sense doors.

Our thoughts (the sixth sense strand) “touch” or contact the body just as deeply as does physical contact with “outside” objects. I feel angry and the top of my head burns. The vedana is definitely negative. Also, please remember that the vast majority of our feelings remain beneath the surface of consciousness. So I may “indulge” in a cycle of negative thoughts

without the slightest awareness of the consequences that my thoughts are registering in my body and mind. Then a few days later I find myself wondering why I *feel* so miserable! Again, *avijja* is the tune that keeps the dance rocking. A moment of awareness, such as noting, “negative thought, negative thought,” can break the chain of *nidanas* into nothingness.

I don’t know about you, but I do not think of myself as being particularly sensitive to the sights, sounds and smells around me. But in fact, this landing craft is constantly receiving information about the world through contact and the *vedana* reaction to that contact. It feels good, bad, or neutral. Of course, I only notice a *vedana* reaction if it breaks into consciousness, causing me to smile or grit my teeth. And, perhaps more importantly, my feelings may not register simply because they are neutral, even though they are present and available to conscious awareness. So, I just do not pay any attention to them. This is the arrogance of personality. If I am not aware of it, then it does not exist.

We need to explore two aspects of *vedana* more thoroughly before moving on to the eighth *nidana*. Both aspects are subtle and extremely significant. (In fact, this is one of Shinzen Young’s insightful lines: “Subtle is significant.”) The Buddha teaches that there is nothing intrinsically bad about positive *vedana*. The problem comes when we attach to good feelings, but then refuse to let go and flow on with the rhythm of life. Indeed, attachment to positive *vedanas* presents one of the greatest obstacles to the practice of meditation.

Here is how Ta Hui describes the dilemma:

“Unpleasant situations are easy to handle; pleasant situations are hard to handle. For that which goes against one’s will, it boils down to one word: patience. Settle down and reflect a moment and in a little while it’s gone. It’s pleasant situations that give you no way to escape: like pairing magnet and iron, unconsciously this and that come together in one place. Even inanimate objects are thus: how much the more so for those acting in ignorance, with their whole beings making a living within it.”

As Ta Hui and most meditation masters have taught through the ages, unpleasant situations (negative *vedana*) force the mind to focus on the object causing pain. The unpleasant feeling gives us something to work with because we want to be rid of it so badly. So it is the pleasant feelings

that really do trap us. For instance, what happens when we get used to “good sits” and expect them to continue forever?

“Once you have achieved peaceful stillness of body and mind, you must make earnest effort. Do not immediately settle down in peaceful stillness - in the Teachings this is called ‘The Deep Pit of Liberation,’ much to be feared. You must make yourself turn freely, like a gourd floating on the water, independent and free, not subject to restraints, entering purity and impurity without being obstructed or sinking down. Only then do you have a little familiarity with the school of patch robed monks. If you just manage to cradle the uncrying child in your arms, what is the use?”

Ta Hui’s words resonate deeply in me. He warns us that the mind is so conditioned to clinging that it will become attached to the calm state of “just sitting” that we have worked so hard to attain. This “peaceful stillness” is what Ta Hui calls cradling an uncrying child in our arms. We can have a lovely sit with the sangha on Sunday afternoon, but what happens on the drive home when someone cuts us off on the freeway? Or when we get in a fight with our partner after dinner? Now the child is wide awake and screaming inside. If our sitting practice is limited to the little space of a meditation cushion, “what is the use?”

The second “subtle is significant” aspect of vedana is the one least mentioned, and perhaps most difficult to understand: neutral feelings. The Buddha has taught us that, in the absence of the healing light of awareness, we will back away from any object that causes us to feel bad. This is astoundingly important when you consider the fact that something that makes us feel bad (for instance, intimacy) may in fact be healing! Backing away from negative feelings creates aversion.

We also have learned that moving toward objects that make us feel good (in the absence of the healing light of mindfulness) leads to another trap: greed. (Such as, “I want a good sit!”)

But the really subtle and difficult feelings to work with are the neutral ones. They lead us to delusion or avijja. Neutral vedana creates a “zoned out” kind of lukewarm state of mind that is neither hot nor cold. A few years ago, I worked with a client who gave every appearance of equanimity. He was rarely angry nor terribly happy for that matter, and he seemed to take most of life’s challenging circumstances in stride. “What

are you feeling?" I would ask, like a broken record, and his response was usually a version of "I don't know. Okay, I guess." Even when he was really sad, he seemed "okay." Recently, after making truly dramatic changes in his life, he has returned for more psychological work. I am amazed. His neutral cover has been blown to pieces, and he is a veritable drama machine of emotions. Life has finally knocked him out of his comfort zone, and now he is ready to begin deeper psychological work. When we are stuck within a world of neutral feelings, delusion always holds sway.

When we feel "zoned out," we don't know *what* we feel. And we don't have an inclination to investigate a "neutral mind state," because nothing "urges" us toward resolution of our situation. The question, "Who am I?" - perhaps the most important question that you or I can possibly ask in this lifetime - implies some sense of urgency. But when we live in a deluded state of neutrality, and are not driven (away) by aversion or (toward) by attachment, what is really that urgent? "I'll deal with it tomorrow" is our mantra, and mindfulness lives about two counties away.

Buddhist texts refer to three personality types. Greedy types are those who are caught in attachment to positive vedanas. At meditation retreats, no matter how slowly I walk, I seem to magically arrive at the front of the line when it is time to eat! I want extra blankets, and search hungrily for the most perfect cushion.

Aversion types tend to wait until we greedy types have gone through the line. They seek a spot to eat where they won't have to deal with the rest of us. Often, they walk with a very sour look on their faces.

Then there are the deluded types with neutral feelings running the show. They look a little bewildered, as if they have arrived on a strange planet and are not sure about the rules, or if the rules apply to them

No matter which direction we head from this thicket of vedana (toward, away from, or standing in place, confused and dazed), if there is no mindfulness to guide the way, we inevitably fall into the trap of the eighth nidana.

8) Tanha ("Vedana - paccaya tanha." Feeling conditions craving.)

With the eighth nidana, *tanha*, we have come full circle. What is the cause of suffering? In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha said that *tanha* (craving) is the cause of suffering. But I like to think that he probably added, "Well, it is, and it isn't." (Could Ananda have left that part out?) Perhaps the Buddha actually said, "Wait until we get to the twelve nidanas, and you will then understand how *tanha* is only one link in the great chain that causes suffering.

Let's review *tanha's* lineage. From the "I am" sense of *vinnana*, which was already dipped in the dark well of *avijja* and shaped by the karma formation of *sankhara*, came this mind-body combination called *nama-rupa*. The mind-body developed the six sense doors (*salayatana*) and a capacity to make contact with the environment (*phassa*). Contact elicited thousands of feelings (*vedana*), a veritable thicket of feelings. And we got lost in that thicket. Each path we took (greed, hatred, and delusion) led us to where we now stand, at the eighth nidana of craving. In the absence of awareness, this is one hell of a mess!

But even craving does not condemn us to an inevitable rebirth of suffering (in this life or a future one). Craving for revenge (the eighth nidana) did not culminate in Blake's poisonous "apple bright." Something even closer than the itch of *tanha* remains to be discovered.