

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE TWELVE NIDANAS An Overview

Previously, we mentioned the great Tibetan mandala, the Bhavachakra: the wheel of becoming, or the wheel of rebirth. Contained within its three circles is the essence of Right Understanding. The inner circle depicts a rooster biting the tail of a snake biting the tail of a pig: greed, hatred and delusion chasing each other in an endless round of misery. Greed ends with the taste of hatred in its mouth. Hatred always has the taste of delusion in its mouth.

Surrounding the inner circle is a second circle which is divided into six sections (there are only five realms in Theravada mandalas). The six sections represent the six realms of rebirth: from the hell realm to the human middle world to the highest realm of the devas. These six realms cover the spectrum of psychological mind states. In a sense, they are like positions on a game board where the player moves from one point to another. A being trapped in the hell realm, the Woeful State, might long for the less painful realm of the hungry ghost, the Preta Realm. A hungry ghost, trapped in a state of never ending hunger and thirst, might long for the relative comfort of the animal world. In the human realm, one might long for the peace and bliss of the deva world.

In Buddhism, even a being who has achieved a rebirth into the highest of the six realms is still trapped on the game board. Why? According to the Buddha's teaching, all formations eventually decay, all formations experience suffering and all formations are impersonal. Even a being in the deva world of bliss is subject to the law of impermanence. She may last centuries, but she will end up back on the game board – in one of the lower realms. There is only one way to win the game in Buddhism, and that is to find the exit position on the game board. The six realms are a perfect depiction of samsara, the endless cycle of living and dying. For those of us who do not believe in some future existence beyond this lifetime, the six positions still represent a metaphor for the restlessness and craving that keeps us running helter-skelter all the days of our lives, going from the dog-eat-dog world of an animal to bliss and back again.

There is an exit position on the game board. That exit position is this very human realm we inhabit. Buddhism teaches that we have the power to leave the samsaric cycle in this very life. We humans live in an in-between world of pleasure and pain, where, for most of us, there is a balance of not too much pain nor too much pleasure. Our attachment to pleasure is so extreme that most of us are all too willing to pay the price of suffering for its hoped for rewards. This hope keeps us on the game board, and what the Buddha saw is that it is a prescription for disaster. In the midst of the dust stirred by our restless striving, there is a glimmer of truth that can open our eyes to the futility of trying to win on this game board. This hint of hope leads us to the outer circle of the twelve nidanas. If we can penetrate its profound meaning, we have gained the key to leaving the game and ending for all time these rounds of suffering.

A story about Milerapa, the great yogi and saint of Tibet perfectly introduces the twelve nidanas. Many of you have heard his story: Milerapa's family was ruined by unscrupulous relatives and the bitter young man went off to learn dark magic in order to wreak revenge on his enemies. This he did, and as the story goes, he became a renowned sorcerer, practicing his dark magic throughout the country. At some point, he became remorseful for his unskillful acts and sought help and refuge in the great Tibetan teacher Lama Marpa. Milerapa had to go through many trying, and humorous, ordeals before his guru finally relented and agreed to initiate him. In fact, his trials and tribulations were acts of expiation for his evil karmic acts.

Eventually, Lama Marpa relented and agreed to initiate Milerapa into the Buddha dharma, and Milerapa was instructed to live in a cave, its opening completely closed except for a small aperture large enough for someone to pass him food. There he was to meditate. He sat for eleven months with only a butter lamp to give him light. At the end of the eleven months, Marpa came to the cave and told Milerapa that it was time to end his period of solitude. Together, they pulled down the rocks blocking the entrance, and Marpa asked his disciple to come to a feast and share the insights he had experienced in deep meditation. Here is what Milerapa told his Guru:

... this is what I have understood, if you will be kind enough to listen patiently to me:

The system of the twelve nidanas I have grasped, which show the interdependence of everything in the world upon

everything else, and that in this manner my body and presence in life here is due to Ignorance, for Ignorance is the prime cause of rebirth. To those who can realise this, their very bodies may be the means of their deliverance from rebirth; but to the rest --- their bodies are but the fetters that bind them to the Wheel of Life and Death. Hence our life is the dividing life between the higher or the lower, according as to whether we progress upward or fall further downward. Each must decide for himself which way he goes, hence the opportunity he has as the result of having been born a man is one not to be lightly thrown away, for the effects of our choice are far-reaching. In holding to you, my Guru, I hope to pass over from this ceaseless round of existence, the source of all pain and suffering. (*Adapted from the original translation of **The Life of Milerapa**, by W.Y. Evans-Wentz by Lobzang Jivaka.*)

For over two thousand years, great beings such as Milerapa have named the twelve nidanas as the Buddha's most profound teaching, but one can easily understand why the Buddha was plagued with doubt about teaching them. They seem just beyond our reach of understanding. When he did decide to teach them, the Buddha said:

Profound, Ananda, is this Dependent Arising, and it appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this law that the world resembles a tangled skein of thread, a woven nest of birds, a thicket of bamboos and reeds, that man does not escape from (birth in) the lower realms of existence, from the states of woe and perdition, and suffers from the round of rebirth.

One wonders if our diminishing attention span has made the nidanas an antique no longer relevant in contemporary life. Perhaps this explains why they are so rarely mentioned today. We listen to more than one dharma teacher talk about the five skandhas – the five aggregates of clinging. And certainly these are incredibly interesting and significant aspects of the Buddha's teaching. Seldom do we hear a teacher explain to us that the five skandhas are part of the twelve nidanas. They are, in fact, nidana number nine. Teachers give dharma talks about vedana (feelings), and how vedana gives rise to tanha (thirst), but seldom do they locate vedana within the twelve nidanas. In fact, vedana is nidana number seven, and tanha is nidana number eight. I doubt that this has anything at all to

do with the quality of contemporary dharma teachers. Perhaps it is, rather, a sad statement about the limited mentality of our age.

In the dawn of his illumination, the Buddha saw something about our human existence that was utterly shattering but at the same time incredibly hopeful. He saw that we live in a world governed by mechanical, impersonal processes, where everything is dependent on everything else; our thoughts, feelings and actions are not independent actions but predictable dependent reactions. One thing leads to another. It is a deeply disturbing vision of humanity proceeding through life like robots, trapped within the matrix of brain washed minds. The joke, if something so horrible can be called a joke, is that we consider ourselves relatively free and independent. We regard our interesting thoughts, feelings and theories as the original creations of our interesting minds. We dream that we are awake, and are constantly shocked by the inhumanity, war and misery of the world around us.

The matrix in our minds is the twelve nidanas. They are, in every sense of the word, a computer program that constantly functions beneath the surface of our awareness. We go to sleep each night, hopefully to recover some of the enormous energy that we blew throughout the day. Then we wake up and start the same restless cycle again. Shakespeare said that it is, "A tale told by an idiot. Full of sound and fury signifying nothing." Such stunning words! And yet, how precisely they describe the Buddha's dark view of our lives lived unconsciously.

The Buddha says that the twelve nidanas begin with a mystery and urges us not to waste our time trying to solve it. Philosophers or theologians may spend their lives speculating about what lies before the first nidana, and yet of what value is all this wasted energy? Our job is to get off the game board, not speculate about how it came to be over coffee and cigarettes.

The twelve nidanas are similar to a lightning bolt flashing across the dark sky, a chain reaction of energy that goes through twelve separate stages or links. Each nidana is a phase in the chemical process, and each successive phase rises out of the previous one. This is why the Buddha called it *dependent* origination. Each nidana is dependent on the previous one. Even one precious moment of mindfulness can temporarily break that circuit, creating a wedge that interrupts the chain reaction. And this is the best news ever told, as far as I am concerned. But far too often, that moment of mindfulness disappears as we slip back into the subconscious

stream, and the ancient chain reaction begins anew.

Let us begin our study of the twelve nidanas with a short overview, a quick snapshot of the seminal bolt of lightning as it flashes across the dark sky. After this overview, we will continue to examine the twelve nidanas more closely in the following chapters.

1) The twelve nidanas begin with *ignorance* or delusion; it is represented by the pig in the inner circle of the great mandala. In the Pali scriptural language delusion is called *avijja*. We are so tempted to put a label on *avijja*, to call it evil or bad. This is as absurd as a scientist naming one chemical “good” and another “bad.” Poison can kill, and poison can be used to cure. We come not to bury *avijja* but to understand it. Nagarjuna describes it best:

That state of mind that believes phenomena (things that rise and pass away) to be real has been taught by the Master to be *ignorance*.

Think of *avijja* as you would hydrogen. Combined with oxygen it becomes water. The fusion of hydrogen nuclei can produce an explosion powerful enough to reduce a huge city to rubble.

2) There is a manic quality about *avijja*, almost as if it contains the germ of craving from within its dark borders. It is similar to an unstable chemical; its very nature seeks manifestation in form. It finds a ready partner in the second nidana, *sankhara*. *Sankhara* literally means “formations;” it is a kind of predisposition resulting from karmic actions of previous existences. *Avijja* cannot move until it has a direction, and *sankhara* points the way. The manic quality of *avijja* combined with the shaping quality of *sankhara* moves one step closer toward physical manifestation.

3) *Avijja* and *sankhara* need only one more element to complete the initial spark that will create the chain reaction leading to rebirth. That third element is *vinnana*, or consciousness. This is not consciousness as we think of it in the West; it may be more accurate to call it primordial consciousness. In the Hindu systems, the Sanskrit term *ahamkara* closely matches the meaning of the third nidana, *vinnana*. *Ahamkara-vinnana* is the germ or seed that leads to individuation, to the “I” thought. Earlier, we quoted Nisargadatta’s excellent statement that consciousness is a fever that causes us to scratch; I think he was referring to *vinnana*. Combined with

the manic nature of delusion and the shaping nature of sankhara, the “I” thought is like a fever. It itches and it needs something that can scratch.

4) So the three nidanas become four: *nama-rupa*, or the mind-body combination, and the three nidanas have finally manifested, incarnated, into physical form. They become a chick in the egg or a fetus in the mother’s womb. Consciousness has now clothed itself in a mind and body, and thus it can experience the world of nature. Note that we now have two levels of consciousness – the primordial (sub) consciousness called *vinnana*, and the individuated mind that joins with physical form to become *nama-rupa*.

5) The fifth nidana is called *salayatana*, or the six sense strands: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touch and discriminating mind. You might wish to review the gruesome process of *salayatana*’s development as described by Kalu Rinpoche. (See page 4 – The First Noble Truth.)

6) Without the capacity to make contact with objects, our eyes, ears and sense of touch would be of little use. So a new nidana emerges called *phassa* or contact. *Phassa* gives the being its ability to interact with the environment, to make contact. Eyes *see!* Ears *hear!* Discriminating mind thinks, “*Seeing.*” Contact. And now the drama really gets going.

7) From contact comes *vedana*, feeling: nidana number seven. The ear transmits sound vibrations to the hearing center and from that contact comes discernment of the sound – the screech of a car stopping, the lilting sound of a songbird. Something more subtle happens in correspondence with each sound, each sight, each touch. A feeling-sensation arises. It is the pleasant feeling that can make us love a song, or that unpleasant sensation that can make a casual shove in a department store so offensive. Our thoughts create pleasant feelings, and our thoughts can create very unpleasant feelings.

8) From *vedana*, feeling, comes a pivotal moment in the chain reaction. Remember that, up to this moment, the seven nidanas have formed a chain reaction, a bolt of lightning across the sky, but one that has not struck the forest. It has not produced suffering, nor a future rebirth. The forest is not engulfed in flames, but the force generated by the first seven nidanas has gained great momentum now, much like a train hurtling down the track, increasingly out of control. The first seven nidanas have generated enough momentum to create the eighth nidana. In the Pali scriptural language, it is called *tanha*.

Tanha means craving or thirst. Please remember that craving, like each of the nidanas, arises out of ignorance; indeed, as suggested earlier, it seems to have been part of avijja from the beginning. So it isn't as if we have a sentry on duty warning us when feeling has morphed into craving. The entire process is unconscious; unfortunately, we end up *wanting* what feels good. We are convinced that object will make us happy. Wanting inevitably rises out of good feelings; it follows them as night follows day. As an aside, let us remember that craving has two sides. Aversion is a kind of reverse-wanting. We want the object to go away, to disappear, to leave us alone. Sometimes, a childhood bereft of nurturing can leave such a bad taste in our mouths that we feel aversion toward those who are happy, even toward beauty itself. If we cannot have something, we feel envy because we know in our hearts that we can never have what others have. Envy can become hatred in a heart beat. Hatred and aversion are this other side of craving.

9) As we said, the eighth nidana is the pivotal moment, the turn in the road. From here on, the story becomes completely mechanical. The lightning bolt reaches toward the earth. What nidana arises out of craving? The tar baby of *upadana* or clinging. Brer Rabbit meandered down the road: "lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity - just as sassy as a jaybird," until he discovered a tar baby sitting there doing nothing. Eventually, Brer Rabbit decided to teach the uppity tar baby some manners because it wouldn't speak or even remove its hat. So Brer Rabbit hit the tar baby and got his hand stuck. The more he tried to free himself, the more tightly he was caught. The ninth nidana is getting stuck in the tar baby of desire. It is called *clinging*. Try as we may, we cannot let go of that tar baby because we are caught in its embrace. We mentioned that craving is, "I want," but there is still a measure of self control in "I want." Clinging is, "I need." As the Zen teachers of old were fond of saying, it is the difference of one million miles.

10) From clinging arises the tenth nidana, which the Buddha calls *bhava*, or becoming, hence the name of the mandala, the Bhavachakra. The tenth nidana is essentially a *fait accompli*. Nothing remains to be developed. The script is finished. The mind has become entirely trapped in the matrix. It has been taken over by a computer program. It restlessly goes from one activity to another throughout the day, "What's next?"

11-12) The nidanas come to completion with the eleventh nidana, *jati* or birth and *jara-marana*, old age and death. These last two nidanas are the

karmic consequence of action stemming from the first 10 nidanas. In the classical Buddhist teaching, the last two nidanas refer to a future incarnation or existence, just as the first three nidanas refer to a former life. In other words, our volitional actions in this present incarnation create rebirth in a future life.

But later Buddhist teachers see all twelve nidanas as occurring in one life cycle, covering a period of eighty years, or covering a brief series of mind moments. Ajhan Chah compares the twelve nidanas to the branches of a tree. We fall from the top of the tree trying desperately to grab hold of the branch called contact, or the branch called feeling, or aversion, but the fall is way too fast. Before we know it, we have landed with a thud on the ground. That thud can be a momentary awareness of envy, greed, or confusion in any moment of the day, or that thud can be a rebirth in a new life. "Out, out brief candle."

Hopefully this overview of the twelve nidanas allows one to hold the entire chain reaction in mind. That is a good beginning but there is more to say about the nidanas, which we will do in the following two chapters. How do we integrate the knowledge into our practice? Here are very wise words by Bhikkhu Khantipalo about the deeper understanding of the twelve nidanas:

The not-understanding of Dependent Arising is the root of all sorrows experienced by all beings. It is also the most important of the formulations of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment. For a Buddhist it is therefore most necessary to see into the heart of this for oneself. This is done not by reading about it nor by becoming expert in the scriptures, nor by speculations upon one's own and others' concepts but by seeing Dependent Arising in one's own life and by coming to grips with it through calm and insight in one's "own" mind and body.

We now turn now to the drug that has intoxicated all living beings since beginningless time: avijja, or delusion.