

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE LAST THREE NIDANAS

Early Buddhist teaching divides the twelve nidanas into three groups. Avijja and sankhara form the first group and apply to a previous lifetime. According to the classical tradition, nidanas three through ten occur in this present life and belong to the second group. Nidanas eleven and twelve (birth, old age and death) refer to a future life and belong in the third group.

From the Western perspective, at least for many of us, stretching the nidanas over three lifetimes also stretches our credulity. One suspects that this partly explains why the twelve nidanas have never gained a place of importance in the minds of Western students, relative to other aspects of the teaching. The Buddha, however, clearly considered the twelve nidanas to be pivotal to an understanding of his teaching:

Profound, Ananda, is this dependent origination, and profound does it appear. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this law that this world resembles a tangled ball of thread, a bird's nest, a thicket of sedge or reed, and that man does not escape from the lower states of existence, from the course of woe and perdition, suffering from the round of rebirth.

The problem for most Westerners is quite obvious. Dependent origination contains an agenda that is decidedly

alien to our contemporary mentality. While there is clear evidence that a belief in reincarnation was held by some of the early Christians, many “unorthodox” beliefs went underground with the rise of the Roman Catholic Church. Most assuredly a belief in reincarnation vanished with the ascendancy of Science, the new religion in the West since the age of Reason. If you cannot experience it with the senses, it does not exist. In short, the doctrine of reincarnation is not a part of our tradition or culture. There is no doubt, however, that the classical presentation of the twelve nidanas takes rebirth as a given, not as a hypothesis. One might argue that early Buddhist scholars found it necessary to graft the doctrine of reincarnation on to the Buddha’s perfectly logical analysis of the chain of events leading to suffering. This is particularly true since there has always been an uneasy relationship between the teaching of anatta and a belief in reincarnation. Explaining how no self can land in a future existence is quite a feat! One suspects some deft philosophical slight of hand lying at the bottom of the grouping of the twelve nidanas.

Fortunately for us, the reality of the twelve nidanas does not depend on opinion or belief; it is based on seeing how they function in our daily lives. The twelve nidanas *happen*, and they are real. Whether craving and clinging will cause rebirth in some future existence, or whether such an idea is nothing but magical thinking, there can be no doubt that craving and clinging will cause suffering in *this* life. Understanding the truth of dependent origination points the way to inner freedom as clearly today as it did two thousand years ago.

From the perspective of applying the twelve nidanas to this life only, the twelve nidanas are grouped slightly differently, perhaps more intuitively than logically. The first three nidanas of avijja, sankhara and vinnana

(consciousness) are grouped together, particularly because all three seem to be connected to a samsaric DNA that precedes conception. The last three nidanas of becoming, birth, old age and death compose the final group of the chain.

Bhava

Upadana - paccaya bhava: “Clinging conditions becoming.”

The tenth nidana, bhava, is the fait accompli of the entire chain of twelve nidanas. It is the “scratch” that keeps us moving restlessly through our daily lives. In the show *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, a soldier sings a powerful and disturbing song about having sex with a prostitute. The song is entitled “Next.”

Naked as sin,
an army towel
Covering my belly
Some of us blush, somehow
Knees turning to jelly

Next, next

I was still just a kid
There were a hundred like me
I followed a naked body
A naked body followed me

Next, next

I was still just a kid
When my innocence was lost
In a mobile army whorehouse

Gift for the army, free of cost

Next, next.

Bhava ceaselessly whispers “Next, next” from morning to night. It causes us to move from one position to another in an attempt to relieve the body from physical discomfort; it causes us to move from one activity to another to distract the mind from dissatisfaction. It is the end result of “feeling > contact > craving > clinging.”

From the moment we are conceived, we begin a process of becoming. From birth we begin the process of becoming a toddler; the toddler is on its way to becoming a child. The child is on her way to becoming an adolescent, and so on. In this sense, nama-rupa is always in some phase of becoming. Even old age is a form of becoming as one who passes midlife becomes a senior citizen. These are natural processes of maturation, which Krishnamurti calls linear time: “coming to be” and “ceasing to be.” One is always in some phase of the process of becoming.

The tenth nidana is not simply the result of the natural unfolding of linear time, however. It is an unnatural unfolding that begins in ignorance, which is the first nidana. Krishnamurti explains that in addition to linear time, which is integral to the life process, we humans exist in “psychological time:”

There is chronological time and time of the mind.
Time which is mind itself. There is confusion
between the two. Psychological time is the process of
becoming.

Psychological time, which Krishnamurti calls the process of becoming, is bhava. It springs from the ninth nidana,

clinging. It is a creature of the ego, constantly projecting itself into the future as “I will do this or I will do that. I will become this or I will become that.” Through the restless activity of “what’s next?” the “I” perpetuates itself through psychological time. Relentlessly, the psychological entity plans on becoming better, happier, richer or smarter until it finally wears itself out.

Is there more to life than living robotically in psychological time, living out our 15 minutes of fame until the energy is depleted? Wise beings throughout human history have certainly said there is more than that. One who has heard the relentless whisper of “Next, next” has made the first step to walking out of the movie, but certainly we each must acknowledge the distance from here to the mountain top.

The Theravada tradition shows us that distance most clearly. It teaches that a person who has experienced the first stage of awakening, a stream enterer, has dropped three fetters for all time: believing that one’s personality is real, believing that rites and rituals can substitute for inner work, and the elimination of doubt in the Dharma. The amazing thing is that even a being who has experienced this first great awakening still has an undercurrent of restlessness in his consciousness. Beings who have experienced the second level of awakening have profoundly weakened the fetters of greed and hatred. But they are still restless. Beings who have experienced the third level of awakening have completely eradicated the fetters of greed or hatred from their consciousness, but they *still* have a subtle current of restlessness deep in their consciousness. Only a fully awakened being, one who has penetrated through to the core of avijja, is totally at peace and no longer restless. This gives us an idea of how high the mountain peak really is.

Jati

Bhava - paccaya jati: “Becoming conditions birth.”

Jati is the eleventh nidana, and it means “birth.” As we have seen, it actually means “rebirth” and applies to a third incarnation according to the classical Buddhist tradition. But *jati* certainly applies to this present life as well. Every morning as we wake up we experience a kind of rebirth. Every day when mindfulness suddenly breaks through the clouds of conditioned existence is a rebirth. Every time we listen to a dharma talk, or read the enlightened words of old masters, can be a moment of rebirth. When we sit with a sangha or go on retreat there is often rebirth. Waking up applies to every single moment of our lives. There is an opposite kind of rebirth. If we cling to this moment, holding on to its pain or its pleasure, we have already created a rebirth of suffering in the next moment. That is how precise this business of rebirth actually is. Who needs to worry about a future life when rebirth occurs with the next breath?

Let down your tap root
to the centre of your soul.
Suck up the sap from the infinite Source
of your unconscious
and be evergreen.

D.W. Winnicott

Jaranarana

Jati - paccaya jaranarana: “Birth conditions old age and death.”

Old age and death are the logical “end” of the twelve

nidanas. All things composed of the four elements eventually fall apart. Recently, I noticed that when I pull my car into the parking space at night, I come perilously near the post dividing the parking spaces in the garage. My solution is not to slow down, it's to turn my head slightly away from the post and hurl forward into the parking space. It is as if I think I can avoid hitting the post by turning my head and not looking. The Buddha tells us that we are all going to hit that post eventually. Turning our heads away is hardly a solution to the problem of jaranarana.

There seems to be only one solution to the fact that we are all on our way to crashing into the post. We must awaken to the truth of what we are. In a letter to a friend who was experiencing deep grief over the death of a loved one, Krishnamurti said:

There will be always death as long as our understanding is limited by personal, egotistical outlook. I tell you, Akkaji dear, as long as there is consciousness of oneself there is death, loneliness and sorrow.

You must understand, probe into the deepest and you will see Padmabai dear, that there is something more permanent, eternal than all persons.

The teaching that there is something more permanent and eternal than all persons is the teaching of all Buddhas. There is no death when there is no one who is subject to dying.

With the last nidana, jaranarana, we come to the conclusion of the chain of dependent events that lead inevitably to suffering. The First Noble Truth stated that life is intrinsically fused with suffering, and the twelve nidanas are the Buddha's upaya, his skillful means of teaching us

how suffering rises. The reader may be forgiven for temporarily forgetting that there was a second purpose for our walking this winding trail of twelve nidanas. They are crucial to Right Understanding, which is the first step of the Eightfold Path. Indeed, we have followed the Buddha's own words:

Whoso understands the twelve nidanas understands the dharma. And whoso understands the Dharma understands the twelve nidanas.

Ven. Nyanatiloka, one of the greatest Buddhist scholars of the twentieth century, said that there are two doctrines that form "the indispensable condition for the real understanding and realization of the teaching of the Buddha." The first is the Buddha's teaching of impersonality, or anatta. The second is the doctrine of dependent origination, or the twelve nidanas. Together they cover the spectrum of the Buddha dharma. Nyanatiloka says,

Whereas the doctrine of Impersonality, or anatta, proceeds analytically, by splitting existence up into the ultimate constituent parts, into mere empty, unsubstantial phenomena or elements, the doctrine of Dependent Origination, on the other hand, proceeds synthetically, or showing that all these phenomena, are in some way or other, conditionally related with each other.

The Buddha explored reality both analytically and synthetically, and arrived at the same conclusion from either direction. It is utterly brilliant, and for those who are willing to stay the course, the mountain peak appears ever clearer and closer in the distance. From this place of Right Understanding, we can move on to the second step of the

Eightfold Path.