

CHAPTER TEN

NIDANAS EIGHT AND NINE

The first seven nidanas are a mechanical process, pure and simple. One event conditions another, and each event is dependent on the one preceding it. This is the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination: All things are impermanent and depend on something else for their temporary existence. From this insight comes the Buddha's teaching of no self and the end of suffering. The twelve nidanas are his extraordinary upaya, skillful means; his way of teaching us this truth.

When one incarnates into the human realm, there is nothing to do about the reality of avijja, sankhara or vinnana. They were installed at the factory. Ignorance conditions karma formations, and karma formations condition consciousness. Consciousness then links up with nama-rupa, mind-body, and a being is conceived. This is an inexorable process. There is nothing we can do about the fact of development within the egg or womb. A human fetus cannot decide to become a dolphin. It will go through the age-old process of developing four limbs and six information gathering devices in order to see form, to hear sound, to taste and smell and feel. All this happens mechanically. Contact between the six information devices and an object is also a fact, and the feelings that arise from that contact are fact. The feelings are positive, negative or neutral. This all happens mechanically.

Something quite new arises with the emerging of the eighth and ninth nidanas. While craving and clinging finalize the chain that leads to suffering, they also bring to completion the psychological development that makes us human. Paradoxically, the very existence of suffering can be a wakeup call, opening our hearts to the possibility that we are more than mechanical robots. Isn't this precisely what happened to the Buddha? The amazing truth is that the possibility of seeing Dharma is also part of our DNA. So any moment of suffering can also be a moment of seeing truth. Even if for only one moment, the unconscious chain of nidanas can be temporarily disrupted.

Tanha

Vedana – paccaya tanha: “Feeling conditions craving.”

The Buddha’s Second Noble Truth teaches us that craving, tanha, is the cause of all human dissatisfaction or dis-ease. Earlier, we quoted Huston Smith’s definition of craving as:

... a specific kind of desire, the desire to pull apart from the rest of life and seek fulfillment through those bottled-up segments of being we call ourselves. (It is) a desire for self at the expense, if necessary, of all other forms of life.

What an elegant description of our capacity to kill hundreds of millions of our own species, not to mention the destruction, even annihilation, of other forms of life. We have discussed tanha in two previous chapters, and little needs to be added from the standpoint of its contribution to suffering; however, something does need to be added to our statement that any moment of suffering can also be an opportunity to see the truth. In an excellent article on the dharma and neuroscience, Rick Hanson says:

The feeling tone is a good example of where the Dharma maps well to neuropsychology. In the Dharma, there’s this notion of the chain of Dependent Origination. One part of that chain that contains great opportunities to reduce or eliminate suffering is the sequence of contact > feeling tone > craving > clinging > suffering.

Just as Joseph Goldstein recounted the way he focused mindfulness on the moment of contact, phassa – that precise moment of contact between eye consciousness and its object – Hanson suggests precisely the same possibility for a person bringing mindfulness and clear comprehension to the moment of feeling:

Equanimity can break the chain right between feeling tone and craving, like a big, jumbo scissors. You let the feeling tone be. It gets into the “mud room” of your mind --- that outer room where the muddy boots and wet jackets get left --- but it doesn’t enter the central “living room” of your mind. Equanimity increasingly allows us to just be present with the pleasant, the unpleasant and the neutral alike, without getting reactivated

around them.

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Too often, our unnoticed feelings do not stop in the “mud room” of our mind. They slip into the “living room” unannounced and unnoticed by mindfulness, and soon craving and reactivity are too loud for the still, quiet voice of awareness to be heard. In this situation, the door is wide open for obsession to enter, and soon we are caught in the net of the ninth nidana. With the emerging of upadana, the chain of suffering is complete.

Upadana

Tanha - paccaya upadana: “Craving conditions clinging.”

In the absence of mindfulness, craving solidifies into clinging, upadana, like water into ice. Clinging is congealed craving. It is the complete identification with the object of our desire. In fact, clinging and identification are synonymous terms; the former describes the Buddhist perspective, the latter describes the psychological view. Gurdjieff says, “Freedom is, first of all, freedom from identification.” Change his words to “Freedom is, first of all, freedom from clinging,” and you have said precisely the same thing.

Life clings tenaciously to living, but we humans have developed the art of clinging to cover every category imaginable. We can merge with anything, including a political or religious belief. We can identify with a street gang in LA or we can identify ourselves completely with the Zen center we attend in LA. Liberalism can become our religion, and so can conservatism. We look at reality through the convenience of our ideologies, and we become psychologically lazy. We don't have to bother to look into a person's heart; if they espouse an opposing belief, they simply cannot be trusted. We cling to our children. Other animals nurture their offspring then push them into the world. We nurture our children and forget that ours is a temporary job. We can cling to them for a lifetime. We cling to our partners, in spite of the fact that we may not even like them. We can cling with such passion that we will sacrifice anything, including our life or the lives of others, in order to preserve “the good,” or “my country, right or wrong.” Craving puts the object within close reach, but clinging is the grasp, the attachment, the absolute conviction that “this is mine. I am this.” Through the unconscious process of identification, the

ego mirrors and then becomes the object: “I am my body” is clinging. “I am my thoughts” is clinging. The seer has become the seen, and freedom has vanished.

Just as we humans have the immeasurable blessing and potential to escape from the chain of suffering, we also have an immeasurable capacity to cling and suffer. This is due to the ninth nidana – truly a blessing and a curse. Buddhist masters have repeated this truth for over two thousand years: Only our mind got us into the nest of clinging; only our mind can get us out.

The Buddha saw this process of psychological congealing with clarity. He watched each step of cognition in slow motion and saw how our sense of agency is actually a series of five separate or discrete events. He called these five elements the five skandhas (khandas in Pali). They are also known as the five aggregates of clinging. They are exactly like five frames of a movie whirling by so rapidly that they give the appearance of continuity or solidity. From this sense of continuity comes a feeling-sensation of “I am experiencing this.” The Buddha called it a magic show. His famous analogy goes this way: If you take a flaming torch and whirl it around in a circle, it gives the appearance of a flaming circle. But is it real? Certainly, it is real in a phenomenological sense. We *see* a flaming circle even though we know that there isn’t really a circle there. The five skandhas whirl around precisely like that flaming torch, and together they feel like a solid ego – a “me” experiencing “that.” But the moment the whirling motion ends, where did the circle go?

Thus the Buddha has described the functioning ego. His insight is completely brilliant, preceding the insight of Sigmund Freud’s id and ego by a mere twenty five hundred years. Although the ego is not real in the ultimate truth of Dharma, it is certainly real in the relative sense of *feeling real*, precisely as the flaming circle *looks* real. Indeed the sense of ego is real enough to cause unfathomable suffering.

As did the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, we are called upon to sit with and see the process of cognition as an empty magic show:

- 1) Form is empty; emptiness is not different from form.
- 2) Feeling is empty; emptiness is not different from feeling.
- 3) Perception is empty; emptiness is not different from

perception.

- 4) Formations are empty; emptiness is not different from formations.
- 5) Consciousness is empty; emptiness is not different from consciousness.

These are the five skandhas of clinging, chanted in the great Heart Sutra, in most Mahayana temples.

Skandha #1 – rupa

The first skandha is none other than rupa, the physical half of nama-rupa. But here, rupa refers not only to the physical body; it refers to the universe of materiality. Whatever we see, we experience initially as form, and form is rupa. Whatever we hear, touch, smell, taste is experienced initially as form. As did the early Greek philosophers, Buddhism teaches that all matter is made up of the solid element, earth; the fluid element that glues everything together, water; the heating element, fire; and the moving element, air. The four elements create the realm of form, or materiality. Every physical object is a composite of these four elements. Regardless of how we deal the hand, our first experience of the world is *rupa*. We may see a beloved friend called Tom, but the first thing we see is form. By the ninth nidana, the final step of psycho-physical development, clinging to physical reality has become entirely hardwired into the brain.

Chogyam Trungpa offers a fascinating perspective which he skillfully weaves through each of the five skandhas. The common denominator that connects each of the aggregates of clinging is fear. Trungpa sees the skandhas as a protective-defensive reaction to bewilderment, confusion and terror, quite similar to Freud's ego defense mechanisms. The ego is afraid of being overwhelmed by internal unconscious drives and outside pressures, so it sets up defensive walls in order to keep itself safe. Unlike Western psychology, Trungpa suggests that the ego is nothing but a kind of psychic knot formed in reaction to fear, with ignorance as the primary cause.

Imagine that you are walking in the woods one lovely afternoon, and suddenly you see something dark that seems to be slithering across your path. You will have an immediate "bouquet" of reactions, but the first thing that you experience, so quickly it will go unnoticed, is rupa: form.

Skandha #2 - vedana

The Buddha divides the other half of nama-rupa, mentality, into a sequence of four events, beginning with vedana. As we learned earlier, vedana, or feeling, is the seventh nidana; it rises out of contact. Vedana is the second “movie frame” whirling after the first frame of rupa. In terms of the slithering form that we saw as we walked in the woods, upon seeing it, making visual contact, we have what seems to be an immediate visceral reaction. In fact, the instant recognition of form preceded our feeling reaction, but the two frames occur so rapidly, they seem to be simultaneous. Perhaps our heart started to pound, our breath got quicker, and our vision narrowed. Immediately after the complex of physical sensations, there was a mental feeling tone/reaction. Most likely our mental tone was most unpleasant, although it happened so quickly we may not have noticed it at all.

Trungpa says that vedana is the second trick that avijja uses to bolster this magic show of ego. He says that we assure ourselves by constantly returning to the body and feeling its sensations. Try sitting for any length of time without checking in to make sure that your body is still there. We check in relentlessly, but there is another aspect which creates an even stronger sense of verisimilitude. We reinforce our belief that there is a me experiencing this by projecting our feelings and sensations into the world. In other words, I look at form and imagine that it has a self like me inside. According to Trungpa, projection comes from the second skandha.

We project our inner reality onto the canvas of life, and then believe that what we are seeing is “what is” rather than a projection of our beliefs about reality. We need to believe that our personality is real, and we project that need into the space around us; thus we live in an endless feedback loop. You prove me, and I prove you.

Skandha #3 - sanna

The third skandha is perception, sanna. In *satipatthana: The Direct Path To Realization*, Ven. Analayo refers to sanna as “cognition,” which may very well may be a better translation, but “perception” is the standard English translation, and we will use it here. Doesn’t it seem as if perception should precede feeling rather than follow it? Don’t we need to figure out what we are seeing before our feelings arise? This is a trick question of course. The ego tends to resist the idea that feelings arise *before* it can figure out how to

respond.

You're walking in the woods and suddenly you see something slithering across the path. The first thing you experience is rupa: form. The second experience is a complex of sensations, high alert, shortness of breath, and a mental feeling tone that is decidedly unpleasant. Then comes cognition/perception: "It's nothing but a blackened rope lying across the path." In that case, the story probably ends; you continue walking and forget the incident entirely. But perhaps your perception caught sight of something not so benign: "It's a snake!"

Many different possibilities arise at this point. If there is a phobia about snakes, there may be no further cognitive processing or clarifying; one may simply turn around and run in the opposite direction. In the absence of a flight reaction one may look more closely and discover, "Why, it's nothing but an old gopher snake!"

Perception is the recognition of the distinguishing marks of a thing. It accesses the memory bank and comes up with the correct label. It may even be able to recognize what kind of snake it sees. In this case, the specific information is that the snake is harmless, and the anxiety level may diminish dramatically. Perception is the third trick in the magician's bag. There is form; there are feelings rising from experiencing form; and there are the recognition and naming of what we see, hear, taste, smell, feel and think about. The sense of "me" experiencing "that" is getting stronger and stronger.

Joseph Goldstein says that that the meditation technique of noting an object is not mindfulness per se; it is *sanna*, or perception. Sati, mindfulness, is the "frame" that we bring to each note, or perception. I may note "hearing, hearing, hearing," but at a surface level, this is merely perception. However, when I bring mindfulness coupled with the clear comprehension of hearing, I have opened the door to awareness. I am no longer caught in the content of hearing, and have stepped into the observer who is noticing the activity of hearing.

Krishnamurti offers tremendous insight into this third skandha. The known, which is thought, hardens into memory, and he tells us that the known can never carry us into the unknown. Krishnamurti teaches that we live in a world of frozen images which we take for "what is." It's like having a lazy brain. It does not want to have to reinvent the wheel every morning, so it memorizes everything that it possibly can. For example,

“who” exactly is this friend that you are having dinner with tonight? Do you see who she really is, *in this moment*, or are you seeing who she used to be through a screen of images that have solidified? George Bernard Shaw describes it this way: “The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them.”

We share these first three skandhas of form, feeling and perception with our animal brothers and sisters. If your dog had seen that form slithering across his path in the woods, the hair on his neck would have stood straight up, and his ears would have trembled. No doubt, he would have perceived some level of danger. The first three skandhas of form, sensation, and “perception-memory,” so called by Trungpa, are *instinctive* activities. At the fourth skandha, however, the human realm emerges. Choice, or volition, has entered the picture.

Skandha #4 – sankhara

Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we have peeked behind the curtain and glimpsed the truth: The ego’s magic show is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. If we look carefully, we will discover that the magician’s fourth trick may be the cleverest of all. It is called sankhara, exactly the same word that is used for the second nidana, karma formations.

The fourth skandha refers to the mental formations arising immediately after the experience of form, feeling and perception. It is the fourth frame of the movie whirling by. It is at this point in the process that choice may occur. Ajahn Chah refers to the fourth skandha as “thought.” Other teachers refer to it as “volition” and still others call it “discrimination.” Another description of the fourth skandha is “fabrication,” meaning that this is where we create the story about our experience. Buddhaghosa, one of the most authoritative of the early Buddhist scholars, explains that, with the arising of the fourth skandha, we have the option of *choosing* one mental formation over another. Every volitional act will have future consequences because of karma.

I see a thing slithering across my path, rupa, and a cascade of sensations and mental feelings erupt, vedana. I perceive that the form really is moving and recognize it as a snake. Perhaps I remain calm enough to see that it is a harmless gopher snake. All of this is an instinctual process: form, feeling, perception. With the fourth skandha, the world of human possibility emerges. Perhaps I recognize that the snake is harmless,

but the image in my mind is of something evil and ugly. In spite of my awareness that the snake is harmless, I may want to kill it because I *hate* snakes. The Pali word for hatred is *dosa*. So *dosa* is the mental formation presently arising in my mind. What if I recognize the presence of hatred in my mind? What if I am trying to practice non violence? Perhaps I may try to send *metta* to that gopher snake. If so, I have substituted lovingkindness for hatred, and *metta* has become the mental formation arising. Perhaps I am a hunter and want to kill the snake because it is an unusually large gopher snake and I would love a picture of me holding that dead snake. This is a different mental formation arising in the mind; perhaps it is greed, for sure it is delusion.

When we consciously choose lovingkindness over hatred or greed, we have moved from the instinctual level into the human realm. We could kill the snake even knowing that it is an unskillful act. According to the Buddha, it is far better to commit an unskillful act knowing that one is doing harm. This is far preferable to doing the same thing in ignorance, while clinging to the illusion of innocence.

Each time we chant the Heart Sutra we are reminded of the truth: Form is empty of self. Feeling is empty of self. Perception? Empty. When we see behind the magic curtain and realize that there is no need to create a story about our experience, we have brought light to the fourth skandha; we discover that the story is also empty of self. "This is not me. This is not mine. This I am not."

Skandha # 5 - *vinnana*

The fifth skandha, *vinanna*, or consciousness, is also the third *nidana*. It was dipped in the darkness of *avijja* and conditioned by *sankhara*, karma formations. I think of *vinnana* as analogous to Jung's collective unconscious. It helps to remember that the stream of greed, hatred and delusion flowing through our mind is an impersonal function of the first three *nidanas*.

The fifth aggregate of clinging is also called *vinnana*. Perhaps it is helpful to conceptualize it as our *personal* human consciousness, that each "I" is most focused on and through. In a sense, the fifth skandha has our unique stamp, our personal story, stamped on the impersonal functions of the third *nidana*. The fifth skandha is a composite of the three mental skandhas of feeling, perception and the intellectualizing or discriminating fourth skandha. But *vinnana* adds one final element to the mix: It

experiences these feelings, perceptions and mental formations as *personal*. The illusion of an experiencer feels like an irrefutable fact. It adds the element of knowing to feeling, perceiving and thinking. "I know I am doing this," it says, and the game is finished.

Ta Hui says:

If you linger further in thought, calculating before and after, then you're still understanding the empty fist as if it held something real, vainly confining yourself within matter, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness, within the elements of sensory experience - you'll never get it done."

The empty fist was often used as a simile to describe the way to get a child's attention. It wants to see the surprise hidden in the fist, but in truth there is no hidden surprise in the closed fist. It is empty, just as the knot of ego is empty. Unloosen the knot, and what is left? The knot/fist is form, sensation/feeling, perception, story-making and consciousness, and there is no me in any of it. When one sees and knows that there is nothing to cling to, one has truly entered the human realm and broken the chain of nidanas forever. When one has not been able to break the chain, the last three nidanas are writ in stone, and the wheel of samsara continues to turn.