

Inner Landscape 5: Dependent Origination

This is the fifth and final reflection in a series on the inner landscape — what we experience when we look inside. To try to be objective I brought in the ancient commentary of the Buddha and some modern insights of contemporary science. To give this exploration a direction, I shaped it around the Buddha’s primary interest — relieving suffering and cultivating well-being.

I explored the Buddha’s five khandas or five clusters of experience: raw sensation, feeling tone, perception, concepts and stories, and awareness itself. I spent more time on feeling tone (*vedanā*) because it gives rise to drive states (*chanda* and *taṇhā*) like desire, aversion, hunger, confusion, agitation, fight, flight, and so on. They easily turn experience into suffering. As biological organisms shaped by millions of years of evolution, we cannot avoid these drive states. Nor it is desirable — they keep us

alive. However, if we can see them objectively and impersonally, we can view them with the equanimity that allows us to move through life without being thrown off balance so easily.

To gain a more detailed and practical understanding of how these drive states function, I began to explore the Buddha’s map of Dependent Origination. Dependent Origination is like a series of dominos where one falls and knocks over the next and so on. The first dominos are subtle and difficult to see. The final ones are gross and sometimes painful. The art of Dependent Origination is recognizing the tiny experiences before the chain reaction becomes overwhelming.

To this end, I went through one of the earliest records of the Buddha’s description of these causal relationships. They are summarized on the following chart. In the text, the Buddha stated bluntly that our

Phases of Paṭiccasamuppāda			
<i>Dependent Origination as presented in the early and later suttas.</i>			
Early Text: Sutta Nipata 4.11		Late Text: Majjhima Nikaya 115	
<i>Pāli</i>	English	<i>Pāli</i>	English
<i>Kalahā & vivādā</i>	Quarrels & disputes: sorrow, grief, selfishness, pride, arrogance, insults, lies, arrogance, slander	<i>Jarā & maraṇa</i>	Aging & death: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair
<i>Piya</i>	Dear, Endearing	<i>Jāti</i>	Birth of action
<i>Chanda</i>	Desire	<i>Bhava</i>	Habitual tendencies
<i>Sāta / asāta</i>	Pleasing / unpleasing	<i>Upādāna</i>	Clinging
<i>Phassa</i>	Contact, sense impression	<i>Taṇhā</i>	Craving
<i>Nāmarūpa</i>	Mind-body	<i>Vedanā</i>	Feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral
<i>Na visaññasaññi</i>	Neither perceiving nor non-perceiving	<i>Phassa</i>	Contact, sense impression
		<i>Āyatana</i>	Six Sense Bases
		<i>Nāmarūpa</i>	Mind-body
		<i>Viññāṇa</i>	Consciousness
		<i>Saṅkhāra</i>	Formations
		<i>Avijjā</i>	Ignorance

suffering arises from what we hold dear.

This seems to suggest that the road to happiness is to become so detached and indifferent that nothing matters. However, that is a formula for depression. Pushing life away is aversion and a form of suffering. The Buddha did not recommend disinterest or pushing anything away.

But he did recommend cultivating dispassion. Dispassion is interested in life, but it is not attached to any particular outcome. We remain attentive but don't get hooked. Rather than close ourselves off, we open our eyes and hearts wide to see life as it really is and see it without preference. Life becomes alive, vibrant, peaceful, and completely impersonal.

The Laws of Dependent Origination were the Buddha's way of describing in detail how all this works. Like the law of gravity, the laws of causation affect us all and remain impersonal.

I'll now unpack the various aspects of Dependent Origination in more detail so that we might see how they work and be less prone to getting hooked. Then I'll describe how it works in meditation followed by some tips for utilizing Dependent Origination to deepen our practices and enhance our lives.

Unpacking

The first step is to understand the causal links, beginning with sense impressions.

Raw Sense Impressions / Phassa

Perhaps you hear a sound. Before you identify it as the rumbling of distant traffic or peepers in the pond, there is the raw sensation of the sound itself with no interpretation. Or perhaps you feel heat. For a moment you don't know the source or its name. There is just warmth.

Those are raw sensory impressions (*phassa*). They are unadorned, unlabeled, un-conceptualized sensations: light, sound, taste, smell, touch, or mind objects. We have

no control over the impressions. They arise from the contact between a sensory energy (like sound), a sensory organ (like an ear) and a sensory awareness (like hearing).

Signal, Feeling Tone / Sata Asata, Vedanā

Raw sensation can give rise to a signal that says, "pay more attention to this." In the early text the signal is called "pleasing / not pleasing" (*sata asata*). In the later text it's called "feeling tone" (*vedanā*) which can be painful, pleasant, or neither. They are the same idea.

Vedanā is like a light on the dashboard or the movement of the needle on a dial. It's not an alarm bell, flashing light, or an exclamation like "Fire!" It's an unemotional, uncharged indicator of a safety need ("that could be a threat"), satisfaction need ("that could satisfy this hunger"), or a connection need ("that person looks nice").

It is neither verbal nor cognitive. It's a wordless impression. If the signal is about a threat, it feels un-pleasing or painful. If it's about a need satisfaction, it feels pleasing or pleasant. If it's about connection, it feels like a draw to move closer to the person or a push to move away. And if the signal is about something for which we don't have enough information, it feels dull, thick, or unclear and without a valence – neither painful nor pleasing.

Pain, pleasantness, and lack of clarity get a bad press in spiritual circles. But they are just signals. Without them, we couldn't live. Without them, we'd walk in front of busses, forget to eat, get bitten by dogs, walk barefoot in the snow, not bother to get out of bed in the morning, and so forth. To survive without these signals, our minds would be consumed with intellectually puzzling out the relevance of every little sensation.

We depend on vedanā to pre-process information and send signals if something needs attention.

Remember: the vedanā signal has very little charge. It's possible to enjoy a glass of water, know that it's pleasant, but feel no need for more. Similarly, something can be uncomfortable without aversion. Perhaps we stubbed our toe. For a split second we noticed, "Oh, I may have damaged it. I think this is going to hurt." A second later the pain hits: "Ow! I don't like this!" But for a short moment, there was awareness without aversion — a signal that something happened.

Charge / Chanda and Taṇhā

The signal itself can be so laid back and unobtrusive that we ignore it. Theoretically we could back into a hot stove, overlook a rattlesnake by the path, or walk past good food without noticing.

So we have a backup system that grabs our attention by energizing our system. This jacks up our motivation to do something.

If the signal is about a threat, the charge might be aversion, hatred, dislike, anger, or "let's get outta here." If the signal is about need satisfaction, the charge might be attraction, liking, lust, craving, greed, or yearning. If the signal is neither painful nor pleasurable, the charge could be confusion, ignorance, or curiosity.

If the charge is clear, wise, and impersonal, it's called "wholesome desire" (*chanda*). If it's cloudy, distorted, or personalized, it's called "unwholesome desire" (*taṇhā*.) Both are what psychologists call "drive states." The good news is they can push us to act when it's wise. The bad news is they can distort our perception and push us to act unwisely.

Endearing and Clinging / Piya and Upādāna

Up to this point, there are no words or concepts. Chanda and taṇhā are a preverbal, pre-conceptual tightening. A sensation (*phassa*) has produced a signal (*vedanā*) that has produced a tension (*chanda, taṇhā*) to

do something about something. But we don't know what to do.

The next phase of dependent origination sets us up to figure out what to do. If the charge is not relaxed, the mind shrink-wraps around it and cloaks it in a thought. The thought might be a label, word, or image. This is called "endearing" (*piya*) in the early text and "clinging" (*upādāna*) in the later text. Clinging/endearing is always experienced as a thought.

This is where a sense of self sends down roots. The feeling of pushing/pulling, endearing/un-endearing gives rise to a sense of an object we like or don't like and a self who likes or dislikes.

Bhāva, Habitual Tendencies

Now we have a motivation to act and a focus on something to be dealt with. But we don't have a plan. The plan is created by the next phase of dependent origination. It is called *bhāva* or "habitual tendencies."

Bhāva is our collection of beliefs, ideas, emotional tendencies, intellectual dispositions, and leanings. The thought created by endearing or clinging is thrown into all our tendencies. They devise a strategy. This is not always done consciously or wisely. But an action plan is formed.

Jāti and Birth of Action

If executed, our plan gives birth to action (*jāti*). The action might be physical (we do something), verbal (we say something), or mental (we think something or form an opinion). All of these qualify as "birth of action."

In the early text habitual tendencies and birth of action are nested into endearing. In the later text they are separated into different links.

The Buddha said the weak link in dependent origination is the charge of *chanda/taṇhā* – the pre-verbal, pre-conceptual tightening. If we can feel it and

relax, then the clinging/endearing, habitual tendencies, action, and suffering are cut off at the source. There is nothing to fuel them.

Dependent origination was meant to be a practical meditation tool, not a philosophical treatise. The simpler early text gives us what we need to relax the tension and find contentment. This simple freedom is what the Buddha cared about. It's a deep contentment with life as it is.

If we relax the grip of endearing, then the tendency toward suffering ceases. If we don't it may trigger suffering.

Kalahā and Vivādā / Jarāmaṇa / Quarrels and Disputes / Suffering

There are many forms of suffering. Bumpers arise in a wide variety of flavors and intensities. In the early text bumpers are symbolized as quarrels and disputes (*kalahā vivādā*). In later text, they are elevated out of the daily context into the grandiose symbols of aging and death (*jarāmaṇa*).

This is typical of the shift from the early to the later text. The early is more concerned with the practical, everyday stresses while the later text feels like a treatise to be discussed in a graduate philosophy seminar.

However it's clear that the Buddha was referring to a many kinds of gross and subtle angst including but not limited to the ones he mentioned: quarrels, disputes, sorrow, grief, selfishness, pride, arrogance, insults, lies, arrogance, slander, aging, death, lamentation, pain, and despair.

Tendencies, Not Fate

I followed this movement of dependent causation from small dominoes to big ones. It is easier to describe the flow this way.

But the flow is a tendency, not fate. We can enjoy ice cream, crave more, and make ourselves miserable trying to get more. We can also enjoy ice cream, feel satisfied, and enjoy the rest of the day without suffering. Small dominos don't always tip over bigger ones.

However, when a big domino falls, it was always tipped over by a smaller one. Physical, verbal, or mental action always precedes suffering. Habitual tendencies always precede and shape our actions. Clinging or endearing always precede habitual tendencies. And so forth.

There is a little tension that leans each domino into the next. If we can relax that tension, it doesn't have to lose its balance and knock the next one over. We can stop the chain of suffering anywhere in this chain reaction.

Notice that the sutta began with grosser dominos (quarrels and disputes) and ends with the subtlest (neither perception nor non-perception). This is because the Buddha was most interested in relieving suffering. That is where he starts. The meditation he taught works in that order. If we too want to alleviate angst, it helps to follow his lead.

So I'd like to look at Dependent Origination one more time by tracing the flow backwards from dramatic to quiet experiences. I'll use meditation as an example.

Meditation

There are many styles of meditation that can be effective for the right person at the right time. However, the Buddha recommended a style that reveals the workings of the mind-heart in general and Dependent Origination in particular. If we become overly concentrated on a single object, we won't see the interactions of the mind or the movements of Dependent Origination.

So the Buddha recommended cultivating an awareness that is more like a flame glowing in the dark in all directions than like a highly focused laser beam. To help stabilize the mind, it may be helpful to use a primary object like the breath, mettā, or equanimity as a home base to which awareness can return after it wanders off. However, the luminous mind continues to

radiate rather than become so one-pointed that it ignores its surroundings.

If we meditate with a glowing awareness, Dependent Origination slowly emerges. Here's an example of how it might appear:

Perhaps we're meditating peacefully. Then the mind starts thinking, "I blew it. I shouldn't have said that. We were getting along so well. Then I messed it up. I shouldn't have opened my big mouth ... Oh ... I'm supposed to be meditating ... Oops."

These thoughts are examples of big dominos. They may not feel like quarrels and disputes or aging and death. But they are uncomfortable. Even if the thoughts are superficially pleasant like, "I did that so well this time. I love it and want it to continue," they are still coarse compared to the sublime states of which we are capable.

How we respond to these interruptions is crucial. The six Rs are a strategy for stabilizing the mind-heart and cultivating mindfulness by responding wisely.

We **Recognize** the thoughts by simply seeing that we are thinking, criticizing, or daydreaming. We ignore the content and note the process. The Buddha was interested in *how* the mind worked. He was not interested in the particular *content* of the thought. For purposes of meditation, often it's enough to just see that the mind has wandered.

Then we **Release** the content – let it go on its merry way. It may drift off or hang around. Either is fine. We're no longer holding onto the thoughts or pushing them away. We Release them and let them be.

Next we **Relax**. We notice any tightness or sense of threat and let it soften. There is a lot of tension in those thoughts. We relax the mind, the emotions, and the body.

Next we smile or **Re-smile** – we allow the attitude of the mind-heart to lighten. Sometimes it happens spontaneously. If it

doesn't, we can lift the corners of the mouth a little to encourage lightness.

Then we take this more peaceful awareness and **Return** to radiating uplifted qualities.

A few minutes later, the thought pops back up: "I blew it. I can't believe it. ... Oh, I'm off again." So we patiently **Repeat** the six-Rs as needed.

As we continue to six-R and release tension, the mind becomes more sensitive to the actions and habitual tendencies that drive those actions. We aren't analyzing. The mind just notices. It starts to see the first phrase, "I blew it," as it arises and so six-Rs it before it triggers the longer storyline.

That single phrase, "I blew it," is clinging (*upādāna*) or endearing (*piya*) as the mind entangles with it. *Upādāna* and *piya* always appear as the first thought.

There is a lot of tension in the phrase though it may seem subtle compared to the bright lights of the story. This tension is pre-verbal. In the text it's called "craving" or "desire" (*taṇhā* or *chanda*). As it becomes clearer, we six-R before it triggers that first thought.

This leaves the mind-heart a little quieter. The hindrances are smaller and gentler. We're sitting longer before a distraction arises. And we recover more quickly when the mind wanders.

As the mind becomes more familiar with this *taṇhā* or *chanda*, it notices a preceding quiet sense of discomfort or pleasantness. It has very little charge. It doesn't attract attention. This quiet signal is the feeling tone of *vedanā* or *sata asata*. We six-R that shy signal before it triggers *taṇhā* or *chanda*. The mind settles a little more.

By now the mind may Recognize-Release-Relax-Re-smile-Return in one smooth motion. We call this "rolling the Rs" — a single action rather than a series. We're sitting in stillness even longer.

Then the mind wobbles a little. We six-R in one motion before knowing what the wobble is about. The growing dispassion doesn't need a label. It just relaxes. We stay out of the way.

Now the mind-heart is deeply peaceful. A subtle vibration arises and we soften before it starts to wobble.

With growing dispassion, labels and perceptions fade. In the sutta this is called "neither perception nor misperception nor non-perception." The mind is moving toward the cessation of perception, feeling and consciousness and toward nibbāna.

In this sutta, the Buddha ends his description of Dependent Origination with the fading of perception. But before he closes, he returns to the opening question and says, "The wise do not dispute."

Quarrels and disputes are embedded with thoughts, concepts, beliefs, views, etc. They are large and ponderous dominoes compared to sublime neither perceptions nor non-perceptions. So the wise have no interest in disputes. They don't go there.

The Buddha concludes:

A genuine sage knows how everything is conditioned. Understanding conditioning, he is free and content. Knowing better, he does not dispute. The wise do not keep becoming.

That is the end of suffering.

Implications

Dependent Origination has many implications for how we practice and how we live. Here are a few pointers that I have found helpful in seeing Dependent Origination in real, live, shifting meditation practice. They are not listed in any particular order. They are a collection of tips I've found helpful at various times.

The Six Rs

If we use Wise Effort (aka the Six Rs), our practice will gradually reveal root causes. The meditation practice the Buddha

taught was designed to help us see Dependent Origination more clearly.

Verbal Thoughts

It doesn't help to try to stop thoughts. They don't appear until the endearing-clinging phase. Their root cause is the energy of chanda-taṇhā. That charge is always experienced as tension or tightness. If we recognize, release, and relax that tension, verbal thoughts will not arise. Or if they have already arisen, they will fade away because we've removed the root cause.

On the other hand, directly trying to get rid of verbal thoughts just puts more charge, tension, and tightness into our system. That will give rise to more endearing / clinging.

Causes Not Effects

In general it is best to work with the causes of phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves. In Buddhism, "wisdom" means seeing Dependent Origination. And seeing Dependent Origination means seeing these causal relationships. So if we want peace and compassion in our lives and we try to force those qualities, we'll be acting out of desire or aversion. Those are not wholesome qualities. We'll be reinforcing unwholesomeness.

On the other hand, relaxing into our experience is part of the root cause of peace and compassion. And growing awareness has a calming effect on the mind.

Stability Without Concentration

Notice in the example that the mind-heart became very serene, stable, and mindful. But we didn't actually create the state. All we did was release the tension pointed out by the distractions. As we released that tightness, the mind-heart found its natural collectedness. Mindfulness became bright and clear by itself. And it is wide open rather than focused in on a single object. Yet it is remarkably stable.

Subtle

There may be many causes and conditions that contribute to one event. But we relax and notice the subtler causes underneath or within. They are key. If we relax the originating causes, the usual results disappear.

No Wheel

There is no wheel or circle in dependent origination despite all the iconography. The Buddha never used those metaphors. They are a conflation of dependent origination with the wheel of saṃsāra.

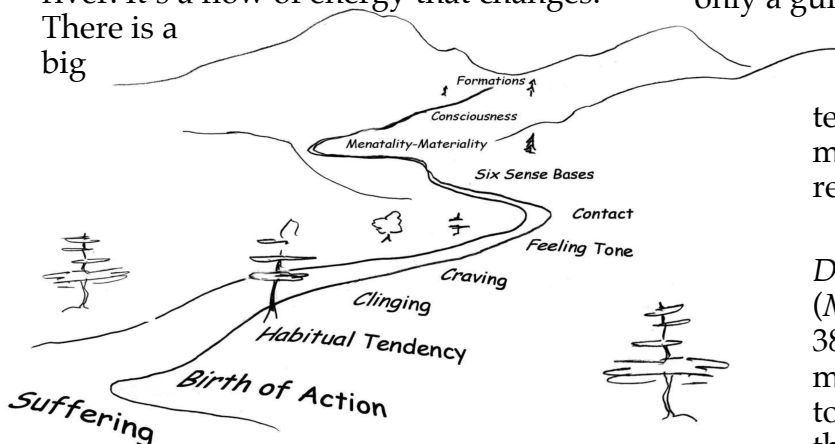
Dependent origination is a one-directional flow. Suffering does not flow back into the ignorance that started the whole thing. In fact, with wise practice, suffering can start a flow toward enlightenment. But that's another story.

No Links

The word "link" as in "links of Dependent Origination" doesn't actually appear in the text. It is not in any of the suttas. The link metaphor was created long after the Buddha died. It makes Dependent Origination sound like a bunch of discreet events that are chained together; or billiard balls bumping into each other; or twelve stooges in a line, each punching the shoulder of the next when he gets punched.

River

Our actual experience is more like a river. It's a flow of energy that changes. There is a big

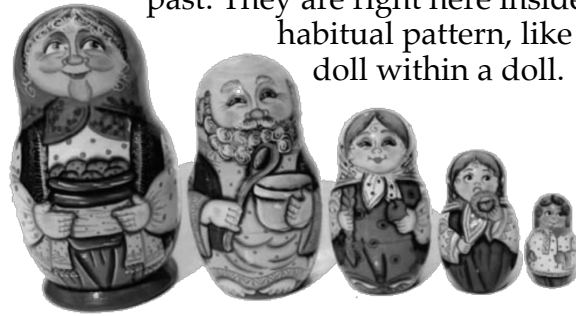


difference between the rapids, waterfalls, deep gorges, and quiet meandering sections of the river. The phases are somewhat arbitrary markers of a continuous process. In some teachings the Buddha talked about four phases, in some seven, in some eleven, twelve, thirteen, and even twenty-three depending on how general or detailed he wanted to be.

The energy in our lives flows from one thing to another rather than making quantum leaps.

Russian Dolls

Another metaphor I've used for Dependent Origination is nesting Russian dolls where each phase contains within it the subtler energies that gave rise to it. When we're caught in a habitual pattern, we can look for the subtler clinging/endeared and tension within it. They aren't just in the past. They are right here inside the habitual pattern, like a doll within a doll.



Beyond Maps

Dependent origination is a map, not the territory. A map can be a powerful help in guiding our inward exploration. But it is only a guide: it can't tell us precisely what we'll find.

In fact, once we know the territory we don't need the map any more because we can see the causal relationships directly.

In the *Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving* (*Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta*, MN 38.14) the Buddha uses his famous metaphor of the raft. We don't want to hop off the raft in the middle of the river. However:

Monks, purified and bright as this [dependent origination] is, if you adhere to it, cherish it, treasure it, and treat it as a possession, you would not truly understand the Dhamma. It is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

Bhāvanā

To close, I'd like to return to a term introduced at the beginning of this series on the inner landscape: the term is *bhāvanā*.

As I mentioned, at the time of the Buddha, there was no word for “meditation.” So he used a metaphor to describe his teachings. *Bhāvanā* refers to what farmers do: clearing land, fertilizing the soil, planting seeds, watering, weeding, harvesting, etc. It implies something caring, earthy, common, and natural. A better translation is “cultivation.”

A farmer doesn't make a plant grow by pulling on the shoots. That would just kill them. Instead he cultivates the conditions that allow the seeds to realize their natural potential.

Similarly, we cannot force the mind into enlightenment or wellbeing. But we can approach the mind-heart with the earthy caring of a wise farmer. We can cultivate the conditions that allow it to blossom naturally.

Dealing wisely with causes and conditions is the essence of Dependent Origination. Dependent Origination may have a slightly negative tone because it can remove the root cause of suffering — negate a negative. But more importantly it's positive — creating the conditions that support a realization of the potential that's here already.

The Buddha encouraged his followers to think of themselves as spiritual farmers nurturing and cultivating their system wisely and then getting out of the way to let it bloom naturally.

We take care of awareness. Then awareness will take care of us. We take care of meditation by cultivating love and wisdom. Then love, wisdom, and meditation will take care of us.