

THE HEART OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

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The Twelve Links Nirvana and suffering

We study the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising in order to diminish the element of ignorance in us and to increase the element of clarity. When our ignorance is diminished, craving, hatred, pride, doubt, and views are also diminished; and love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are increased. This happens in all twelve nidanas. After clarity, there is bodhichitta, the Great Aspiration. The key is the guarding of the six senses and mindfulness of feelings and contact. This is the place we can enter into the cycle and begin to transform it.

In his first Dharma talk, the Buddha cautioned his disciples not to be attached to either *bhava* or *abhava*, being or nonbeing, because *bhava* and *abhava* are just constructs of the mind. Reality is somewhere in between. When we present the Twelve Links in the usual way, if we say there is no attachment, it means there will be no being, that we are aspiring to *abhava*. But this is exactly what the Buddha did not want. If you say that the purpose of the practice is to destroy being in order to arrive at nonbeing, this is entirely incorrect. With nonattachment, we see both being and nonbeing as creations of our mind, and we ride the wave of birth and death. We don't mind birth. We don't mind death. If we have to be born again to continue the work of helping, that is okay. We know that nothing is born and nothing can die. We have the wisdom of no-birth and no-death. We know that there is birth, old age, and death, but we also know that these are only waves on which bodhisattvas ride. Birth is okay and death is okay, if we know that they are only concepts in our mind. Reality transcends both birth and death.

In the eleventh century in Vietnam, a monk asked his meditation master, "Where is the place beyond birth and death?" The master replied, "In the midst of birth and death." If you abandon birth and death in order to find nirvana, you will not find nirvana. Nirvana is in birth and death. Nirvana is birth and death. It depends on how you look at it. From one point of view, it is birth and death. From another, it is nirvana.

Let us not present the teaching of the Buddha as an attempt to escape from life and go to nothingness or nonbeing. Bodhisattvas vow to come back again and again to serve, not because of craving but because of their concern and willingness to help. The practice of mindful living develops the same kind of wisdom, concern, and loving kindness in us, so we can serve. It is time for us to present the teaching of Interdependent Co-Arising in a way that is easy and approachable for the people of our time. Those who teach the Twelve Links need to understand their positive side, also. When we are motivated by our mind of love, all Twelve Links become brighter.

There is co-arising conditioned by deluded mind and co-arising conditioned by true mind. The world, society, and the individual have been formed by a cycle of conditions based on deluded mind. Naturally, in a world based on deluded mind, there is suffering and affliction. But when conditions are based on true mind, they reflect the wondrous nature of reality. Everything depends on our mind. Imagine one thousand people whose minds are full of misperceptions, wrong views, envy, jealousy, and anger. If they come together, they will create a hell on Earth. The surroundings they live in, their daily lives, and their relationships will all be hellish. If two people full of misunderstanding live together, they create a hell realm for each other. How much greater the hell of one thousand people!

To make hell into paradise, we only need to change the mind on which it is based. To change the minds of one thousand people, it may be necessary to bring in some element from the outside, like a Dharma teacher or a group of people practicing the Dharma. Imagine one thousand people who do not have wrong perceptions, anger, or jealousy, but who have love, understanding, and happiness. If these people come together and form a community, it will be paradise. The mind of the people is the basis of paradise. With your deluded mind, you make hell for yourself. With your true mind, you make paradise. If two people come together with true mind, they make a small paradise for themselves. If a third person wants to join them, they should be careful. "Should we let him join us or not?" If their paradise is solid, they can allow him to join. With two true minds, there is hope that one deluded mind can be gradually transformed.