



2012 • 2556

Association for Insight Meditation

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January

December 2011

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February

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Ignorance

The cycle of Dependent Origination begins with ignorance (*avijjā*), which refers not merely to lack of knowledge, but to spiritual blindness. It is not that we do not see suffering (*dukkha*), but that we are in denial about it.

Every day, we hear news about aging, disease, and death, about grief, distress, pain, sorrow, and despair. However, we are eternally optimistic and count our blessings that misfortunes do not happen to us. If misfortunes do befall us, we hope that things will improve, and we continually strive to attain happiness. The fundamental problem is that we do not see the root cause of suffering within us, but project it to other external causes. "If only I can get this or do that I will be happy. If so-and-so didn't behave like that I wouldn't be unhappy. If everyone in the world would see things my way, there wouldn't be any problem."

Ignorance is the root cause of all evil deeds. Due to not understanding the right path to happiness, people act, speak, and think in ways that are harmful to themselves as well as to others, and society in general. The best remedy for the world's ills, therefore, is spiritual growth and education (not indoctrination).

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

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"Blind is this world.
Few are those who see clearly.
As birds escape from a net,
few go to a blissful state."

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[\(Dhammapada v 174\)](#)

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February

January

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Mental Formations

Due to ignorance regarding the real nature of existence and the cause of suffering, we perform volitional actions by body, speech, and thought, which is kamma. In the case of good people, many of those volitions will be wholesome, leading to happiness and well-being in the cycle of existence. In the case of wicked individuals, many volitions will be unwholesome, leading to misery in this life and the next.

Even in the case of good people, many volitions will be unwholesome kamma rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. Though not immoral, such unwholesome kamma also leads to suffering in this life and the next.

When good people do wholesome deeds, firmly believing in the beneficial results of kamma, that is still dependent on ignorance, though clearly that ignorance is not as deep as that motivating unwholesome deeds. If a wholesome deed such as giving or observing morality is motivated by the rather low aim of wishing to be respected by others, it is still a wholesome deed with a beneficial result.

The noblest wholesome kamma is insight meditation, aiming to remove ignorance.

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“Just as a tree with roots unharmed and firm, though hewn down, sprouts again,

Even so while latent craving is not rooted out, this sorrow springs up again and again.”

March

February

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Consciousness

Being reborn into the human realm during an era when the Buddha's teachings are still available is a result of wholesome kamma. It is a very rare occurrence. There are 7 billion human beings on the planet, but it is a tiny number compared to the numbers of other living beings on this planet, just the animal realm.

Among those 7 billion human beings, many have no idea what the Buddha taught, even if they might be interested to know. Of those who do have some knowledge, many do not understand the teachings well. Of those few who do understand fairly well, few strive to put an end to ignorance. The deceptive nature of ignorance is so beguiling that deluded beings grasp one sense object after another as a monkey grasps one branch after another. People find it hard to remain still.

The mind is exceedingly quick, fickle, and difficult to restrain. Driven by greed, aversion, and delusion, beings spin around in the cycle of existence without any hope of putting an end to suffering. Very rarely, a Buddha appears in this world, and some are wise enough to take heed of his teachings. By carefully investigating what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched, and known, one can gain insight.

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"The flickering, fickle mind, difficult to guard, difficult to control, the wise person straightens it as a fletcher straightens an arrow.

[\(Dhammapada v 33\)](#)

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April

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Mind and Matter

There are just these two basic realities. What is mind? No matter! What is matter? Never mind! Because the constant flow of mind and matter is so rapid, it is hard to discern as it really is. Ignorance conceals its true nature, and craving drives living beings to pursue sense objects due to perceptions of pleasure.

While a fan is spinning fast it is impossible to see the individual blades, but if it slows down or stops entirely, the blades are clearly seen. One who wishes to see things as they truly are must slow down the relentless pursuit of sensual pleasures, and turn the mind inwards to observe itself.

Because the mind is difficult to observe, we should begin by observing the material phenomena in the body. Just observe the simple processes of breathing, touching, sitting, bending, stretching, chewing, tasting, seeing, hearing, etc. Mindfulness meditation (*satipaṭṭhāna*) should be practised diligently for prolonged periods to steady the restless mind. When the mind is calm and inwardly focused, it will become possible to discern the true nature of mind and matter. The illusions of permanence, pleasure, and self will gradually be dispelled.

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"The mind is very hard to perceive, extremely subtle, it flies wherever it likes.

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Let the wise person guard it; a guarded mind is conducive to happiness."

[\(Dhammapada v 36\)](#)

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Six Sense Spheres

If we wish to reach the end of suffering in the shortest possible time, we should follow the most direct route. The disciple who gained Enlightenment in the shortest possible time was named "[Bāhiya Dāruṭṭiya](#)." The Buddha instructed him, "Bāhiya, when you see something, just know that you see it; when you hear something, just know that you hear it; when you cognise something, just know that you know it." He gave the same teaching to "[Māluyaputta](#)," a bhikkhu who went forth in old age, only at the age of eighty years, and who asked for instructions in brief.

Whenever we are unmindful at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking, the sense objects will stimulate mental defilements. If we like what we see, hear, and so forth, then greed will arise. If we don't like it, aversion, ill-will or anger will arise. If we are inattentive, then delusion will be dominant, and we will not know the object clearly.

The special quality of all Arahants like the Buddha is that they are always mindful and never heedless. A meditator in training is sometimes mindful and sometimes not. Whenever one is truly mindful, the mind is undefiled.

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28	29	30	31	"Better than a thousand verses, comprising useless words, is a single beneficial line, by hearing which one is pacified." (Dhammapada v 101)		

June

May

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Contact

Unless one is blind, seeing pleasant and unpleasant objects is unavoidable. Unless one is deaf, hearing pleasant and unpleasant sounds is inevitable. As long as one is conscious and awake, sense objects will contact the sense faculties. To practise meditation it is strongly recommended to reduce the amount of sensory input. Abstain from all sexual activity, do not watch entertainments, eat only once or twice a day, do not speak unless it is essential, and avoid unmindful individuals.

Even in a quiet forest meditation centre, contacts occur constantly. Due to the lack of active sensory stimulation, the mind will become even more sensitive. With fewer external objects, the mind will create mental objects, remembering the past, planning the future, or perhaps one may see mental images in the present.

Whatever happens, the meditator must remain diligently, mindful, and alert, taking careful note of whatever occurs in the body or mind, observing it as it arises and passes away with the aim to understand its true nature. Gradually, the mental restlessness will subside, and the meditator will gain concentration. When the mind is concentrated and attentive to the present, insight will arise.

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

"Surely the path that leads to worldly gain is one, and the path that leads to nibbāna is another;

Understanding this, the monk, the disciple of the Buddha, should not rejoice in worldly favours, but cultivate detachment."

([Dhammapada v 75](#))

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July

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Feeling

There are five kinds of feeling: pleasure, pain, happiness, sorrow, and neutral feeling. Feeling is the primary motivator for living beings. They pursue pleasure and recoil from pain. They long for happiness and dread sorrow. No one is interested in neutral feelings — the absence of any sensation is boring.

Nibbāna, which is the cessation of feeling and perception, sounds unattractive to most people because they delight in feelings. Some may regard coarse sensual pleasures like the enjoyment of food and sex as base and ignoble, but they remain addicted to refined pleasures of the intellect, delighting in art, music, literature, or the beauty of nature. All such pleasures, whether coarse or refined, are dependent on contact between the sense objects and the sense bases. They excite craving, and lead to suffering.

If they strive to overcome base attachments, and dispel the mental restlessness, meditators will enjoy spiritual pleasant feelings that are superior to any aesthetic sensual pleasures, but they are still reliant on mental objects. They must continue to strive to develop deeper insight, until they attain the stage of equanimity.

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“Poor people seek pleasure to the best of their ability. However, due to their poverty, they can seldom fulfil their desires. The craving of the rich is even greater due to the nature of craving. The more it is fed, the more voracious it becomes, so it is more oppressive in wealthy countries than in poor ones.”

(Venerable Mahāsi Saṅghāda)

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Craving

The Buddha stated that craving is the cause of suffering. It is the proximate cause, whereas ignorance is the root cause. Due to ignorance of the truth of suffering, we crave for sensual pleasures, and cling to existence. People desire diverse pleasures, depending on their likes and dislikes, and cannot easily abandon craving.

Craving leads to fresh kamma, and suffering follows in its wake. The desire to get or attain something that we lack shows that there is discontent, which is suffering. Having obtained the desired goal, there may be anxiety about losing it, or one loses interest in it, and disenchantment is soon followed by the desire for something else.

A meditator must be mindful of feelings, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and observe them objectively until they disappear. If painful sensations arise during sitting meditation, change your attitude instead of changing your position, then you can gain insight into the true nature of feeling. Pain is said to be the key that opens the door to nibbāna. There is no need to go looking for pain, but if it arises one should welcome it as an opportunity to develop insight.

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

The craving of one who lives heedlessly grows like a creeper. He jumps from life to life like a monkey seeking fruits in the forest.

[\(Dhammapada v 334\)](#)

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Attachment

We crave for things that we lack, and develop attachment for things that we have. Anxiety springs from attachment, and this leads to a whole new cycle of kamma to protect and preserve our cherished possessions and loved ones. When we see any change or decay in these objects of desire, sorrow, grief, and despair arise.

At last, when the truth of suffering becomes too obvious to deny, people fall into despair. Some commit suicide, being unable to bear the pain of separation, but that is the wrong path. Attachment is the cause of grief and despair, so the right path is to practise meditation leading to the renunciation of attachment.

The story of [Kisāgotamī](#) exemplifies how skilfully the Buddha taught her to relinquish her grief. When asked for medicine for her dead baby, he asked her to fetch some mustard seed, but added that it must come from a house where no one had died. After visiting every house in the village asking for mustard seed, she finally accepted that death was universal and inevitable. Whatever is born must also die, so it serves no purpose to lament and grieve over what cannot be avoided. She buried her child, became a nun, and later became an Arahant.

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

“Though one should live a hundred years not seeing the deathless,

Better is a single day’s life if one sees the deathless”

[\(Dhammapada v 114\)\)](#)

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October

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Becoming

As long as craving and attachment remain, there is no end to suffering. Not getting what we want is suffering, and so too is losing what we possess. To satisfy just our basic physical needs requires constant effort. Even in a prosperous country, many people struggle to make ends meet, whilst in some countries the poor must work like slaves just to stay alive.

If everyone was satisfied with the bare essentials of existence they might subsist without too much hardship, but craving and ignorance do not allow people to rest when they have fulfilled their basic needs. In a materialistic society, everyone is surrounded by attractive objects that excite desire and competition.

Billions of people buy lottery tickets, hoping to win the top prize, but the only ones sure to get rich are those who run the lottery. A much safer path to prosperity is to invest in your education, work hard, spend frugally, and to avoid fools, but even a millionaire is not free from suffering. An easier route to happiness is to relinquish desire and live like a monk or nun, spending all of one's free time studying the Dhamma or practising meditation.

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"Furthermore, craving and attachment produce new kamma, thus providing the basis for more rebirth. It is like a man committing a crime while on parole for a previous conviction, or incurring a new debt before the old one has been settled." ([Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw](#))

November

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Birth

Whether you believe in rebirth or not, it is undeniable that you have been born into this existence. A human life is a very rare and precious opportunity to gain wisdom and freedom from suffering. To waste it in the pursuit of sensual pleasures is tragic — even animals can do that. The Buddha said: "There are these two quests: The noble quest and the ignoble quest."

The ignoble question refers to the pursuit of happiness through sensual pleasures. All unenlightened human beings expend most of their efforts in that pursuit. Many good people, of course, also try hard to gain knowledge, a good reputation, and other noble things, but by and large such efforts are only as a means to obtain sensual pleasures, which they value very highly.

Renunciation is unpopular. Most Buddhists will strive hard to give their children a good education so that they can become doctors, scientists, engineers, etc. Very few urge their children to become monks or nuns, and many will not ensure that their children receive a sound religious education. It seems to be a lower priority than gaining a secular education for the sake of worldly aims.

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

Rare is birth as a human being.
 Hard is the life of mortals.
 Hard is the hearing of the Sublime Truth.
 Rare is the appearance of the Buddhas.

[Dhammapada v 182](#)

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December

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January 2013

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Aging and Death

If the only reward of working hard for the entire life is aging and death, surely it is a very sad outcome. Seeing that aging and death were inevitable, the Bodhisatta renounce his luxurious and happy family life to seek an escape from this terrifying universal destiny.

He reasoned thus, "Since there is that which is born, originated, created, and conditioned, there must be that which is unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, and unconditioned."

This was a remarkable insight. Most people can see the inevitability of aging and death if they reflect for a moment, yet they are not alarmed by this fact. They are not motivated to seek for something transcending it. They meekly accept their fate, like cattle led to slaughter, not realising that death is followed by rebirth, and that rebirth is again followed by death in an eternal cycle of suffering. The Bodhisatta was determined to find the deathless state, or to die in the attempt. He sought out meditation teachers, but none knew the right path, so he left them and strove alone until he attained his goal — the complete cessation of suffering.

Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

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Through many births I wandered in saṃsāra,
seeking, but not finding, the builder of this house.
Painful is repeated birth.

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[\(Dhammapada v 153\)](#)

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