

## DEPENDENT LIBERATION



DEPENDENT  
LIBERATION

BHIKKHU BRAHMALI

Published in 2013.

This work is released under CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication. No rights reserved.

Typeset in Gentium Plus using L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X.

Transcribed from a talk by Ajahn Brahmali, Dhammaloka, 23 March 2012.

# Foreword

*Ajahn Brahm*

If there is no self, then who does the meditation and who gets enlightened?

The answer can be found in such teachings as the Upanisā Sutta, taught by the Buddha and explained here by Ven. Brahmāli.

The Upanisā Sutta describes the practice of Buddhism, centred on meditation, as a natural process of one mind state causing a second phenomenon that leads to another experience ... and so on to the ultimate end point of all processes, Nibbāna.

No one 'does' the meditation. Meditation is what happens when the 'doer' gets out of the way, thereby releasing a natural cause-and-effect process that cascades all the way to enlightenment.

Many parts of this chain of mental events are enjoyable states: gladness (*pāmojja*), joy (*pīti*) and happiness (*sukha*). This emphasises that meditation – according to the instructions of the Buddha, rather than those of some other Buddhist teachers – is a delightful process,

full of ecstasy. What better way to end suffering once and forever than through a method that includes bliss upon bliss upon bliss!

No one gets enlightened, no more than a mango tree becomes a sweet and delicious mango fruit. Enlightenment is the end of a selfless process, well described by the Buddha in this Sutta.

Start the avalanche of profound and blissful meditative states now! End your delusion by reading this book. Get out of the way and witness the cause-and-effect process finish you off!

With mega mettā,

Ajahn Brahm

Perth, December 2012

# Dependent Liberation

DEPENDENT LIBERATION describes the psychology of meditation, that is, how the process of meditation is experienced, from beginning to end.

Dependent liberation is closely related to the well-known Buddhist idea of dependent origination. For those who do not have much familiarity with the teachings of the Buddha, dependent origination is a sequence of twelve factors that are causally connected. The last factor of this chain of causality is suffering. Because it is a chain of causality, it shows you how suffering comes to be. The first of the twelve factors is ignorance or delusion – the inability to see the world as it actually is, how it truly functions. So starting with ignorance, one factor leads to the next all the way to suffering. What dependent origination shows you, then, is that suffering is the consequence of ignorance.

This is how the Buddha explains why there is suffering. But the Buddha also teaches a causal sequence that describes the liberation from suffering. It is this sequence that is called dependent liberation (SN12:23).

Dependent liberation starts with suffering – in other words, it starts where dependent origination ends – and, through another sequence of twelve causally connected factors, it shows how you eventually reach liberation.

The promise of an end to all suffering is an extraordinarily positive message. Sometimes people say that Buddhists are pessimists – that they always talk about suffering – and yet here is the exact opposite. The Buddha says that dependent upon suffering we can go all the way to the freedom from that very same suffering.

Let us now go through the twelve factors of dependent liberation. The first factor is suffering (*dukkha*). This refers not just to the fact that there is suffering, but to one's awareness of the problem. Only when you understand that there is a problem will you actually do something about it. Part of this is being clear about the ordinary suffering in daily life. More important, however, is seeing the scope of suffering. That understanding starts to emerge as your meditation deepens and you begin to see yourself and the world in a new way. But it is particularly the idea of rebirth – especially seeing it directly for yourself – that makes you understand the real scale of the problem.

Buddhism tells you that there is a solution to this problem. Once you understand that there is a problem and you recognise that there is a teaching that guides you to a solution, you get confidence or faith (*saddhā*)

in that teaching. This is the second factor of the series.

The remarkable thing about the Buddha's teaching is that it shows you that the solution is in a very, very different place from where you would expect. Normally, when we run around in the world, we think that the solution to suffering is going to be in relationships, friendships, material things, status, social position, in being well-regarded, in being praised, etc. – the sorts of things known in Buddhism as “the worldly conditions” (*lokadhammā*; AN8:6). This is where people usually think the answer to suffering lies. Then the Buddha comes along and says that you are looking in the wrong place, that the answer is to be found elsewhere.

That's very powerful. It gives you a sense of, yes, of course the solution must be somewhere else, because you have been trying for ever to find happiness through the worldly dhammas and you are still suffering. In a sense that is the tragedy of humanity: we all want happiness, but we normally look for it in the wrong place. We reap suffering instead. When you understand that there is a problem and then come across a teaching that promises you a solution in a realistic way, confidence arises. You recognize that there is something very special about this teaching.

Confidence is a beautiful thing. You feel safe because you have a teaching that shows you the solution to the predicament you're in. It is said in the suttas that a person without confidence, without a refuge, is like

someone who is crossing a desert. Unless he finds a way across the desert, he will eventually succumb to the forces of nature – the heat, the lack of water, all the problems of desert life. But the person who has confidence is like someone who has crossed the desert (MN39).

So confidence in the Buddha's teachings is very important. Sometimes people think faith isn't really important, and that all they need to do is investigate for themselves whether something is true or not. Of course, investigation is a central part of the Buddhist teaching. Nevertheless, when confidence is strong it is a power; it is something that propels you forward on the path and makes you go in the right direction. It is an essential quality to take along on the spiritual journey. Furthermore, when confidence is in place, all the other factors that come afterwards follow along as a natural consequence. It becomes a path that completes itself because each factor gives rise to the next factor, stage by stage, until you reach full awakening.

The immediate consequence of confidence is gladness (*pāmojja*), the third factor of dependent liberation. This is the gladness that comes from having found something truly valuable. You have found a guide to true meaning in life and you sense that these teachings are extraordinary. This connection between confidence and gladness is described in many places in the suttas. For instance, some of the important contemplations

in the suttas are the reflections on the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Because these reflections are based on the recognition of the profound value of the Buddhist teachings, gladness arises inside you. This is called *atthaveda* and *dhammaveda*, inspiration in the meaning and inspiration in the Dhamma. The delightful inspiration that arises is the same as the *pāmojja* we are talking about here. So gladness comes with the inspiration, and this in turn is a result of confidence (AN6:10).

Once *pāmojja* arises, the path continues to unfold by itself. This is so because gladness brings with it mindfulness and energy. When you have mindfulness and energy and you sit down to meditate, you are able to stay with the object and you make steady progress. The meditation works. It can seem hard to pin down why meditation sometimes works and sometimes doesn't, but here is the reason why. It works when you have the gladness and inspiration that comes with mindfulness and energy. So the rest of the path after gladness is largely an automatic process. It's a process of meditation that takes you, stage by stage, all the way to awakening. This is the heart of the causal process of dependent liberation.

So how does that process work? You sit down, watch the breath, and it's so easy. As the meditation develops, rapture or joy (*pīti*) starts to arise in you. This is the fourth factor of the series. As the meditation pro-

gresses, the *pīti* starts to calm down and you get a sense of tranquillity (*passaddhi*), factor five. That tranquillity, when it develops, turns into a profound sense of contentment and happiness (*sukha*), factor six. This in turn leads to the unification of mind (*samādhi*), factor seven, which is where the meditation becomes really powerful. When the mind emerges after deep *samādhi*, you have knowledge and vision according to reality (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*). This is factor eight of the series. Because *samādhi* overcomes the hindrances – the mental pollutions that stop you from seeing things properly – you now see things clearly for the first time.

When you see things properly, you see how suffering is inextricably linked to existence. You want to reject the whole world (*nibbidā*). This is factor nine. You realize you have to get off the wheel of *samsāra*. *Nibbidā* leads to dispassion (*virāga*), factor ten. *Virāga* is the ending of craving, the opposite of passion for the world. And when that passion disappears, you are liberated (*vimutti*), factor eleven. When you are liberated, you also have the knowledge that you are liberated (*khaye ñāṇam*). This is the twelfth and last factor in the series of dependent liberation. This, then, is how suffering leads to liberation.

To get a deeper perspective on dependent liberation, I now wish to look at the beginning of the series from a slightly different angle. I want to focus on the first few steps of the sequence, because it is these that

are really important to get right. If you get the first couple of steps right, the rest of the series follows as a natural consequence.

This deeper perspective can be acquired by considering a common variation on dependent liberation found in a number of suttas (e.g. AN11:3). This variation, instead of beginning with suffering and confidence, starts off with virtue. Virtue then gives rise to non-remorse (*avippatisāra*), and non-remorse to gladness, *pāmojja*. The rest of the sequence is essentially the same as explained above.

So how does this work? The gladness that derives from virtue is spiritual in nature and not connected with sensory pleasure. It's the gladness of having a good heart. Such gladness is always conjoined with mindfulness and energy. When you are glad, your mind has a natural energy, an energy that comes from feeling good and positive. And you are mindful because spiritual gladness makes the present moment delightful.

In the suttas you see again and again that meditation starts with mindfulness. When you read what the Buddha says about watching the breath in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN118), when you read what he says in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* about the four focuses of mindfulness (MN10), you realise that mindfulness is a precondition for meditation. If you don't have mindfulness, you can't meditate properly. It is so important to understand that. Insufficient mindfulness is the main reason

most people don't achieve deep states of meditation.

Because of the importance of mindfulness, you need to learn to evaluate its strength and to know whether you have enough clarity to meditate. Ask yourself: "Am I really mindful? Am I present? Is my mind going all over the place? Am I confused? Am I clear about what is happening?" If your mind is quite peaceful and you have a sense of clarity inside of you – there can still be a little bit of thinking but not that much – that is the time when meditation is likely to be truly effective.

Because there is no proper meditation without mindfulness, because it is a foundation that you need to get firmly established, you need to be clear about how you get that mindfulness. Mindfulness has been a fashionable topic in Western psychology for a number of years. Typically the discussion centres on how mindfulness can help you overcome your problems, what its qualities are, how it can be measured scientifically, etc. All of this is certainly important and useful. But the one thing usually missing is a meaningful discussion on the causes of mindfulness. To understand the causes of mindfulness is to understand how one becomes mindful.

People often think that if you just apply enough willpower, if you just try hard enough, you will be mindful. But if your mind is affected by defilements, you can try as hard as you like, but that mindfulness is not going

to arise. Mindfulness is not just about being quiet or trying hard – that’s not enough. You need to prepare the mind for mindfulness to become possible.

So what is the cause of mindfulness? In the present variation on dependent liberation, the factor before *pāmojja* – which, as I mentioned, comes with mindfulness – is non-remorse. Non-remorse in turn comes from virtue – from morality, from kindness, from having a good heart. In this context, remorse doesn’t just mean feeling bad about having done something immoral. It includes any kind of detrimental impact on the mind resulting from one’s conduct. When the mind is tired, dull, restless, negative, or whatever, it is often the result of conduct that has not been pure enough. So remorse here includes any obstacle that blocks you from feeling the gladness, the natural joy, that otherwise is present in the mind. What this means is that the cause of mindfulness is virtue and that without virtue the mindfulness will be too weak for meditation. So if your meditation is not coming together or not progressing properly, you need to investigate what you can do to improve your virtue.

In Buddhism the idea of virtue is very broad. It obviously includes the virtue of right action – being kind, avoiding bad deeds. It also includes the virtue of good speech – saying kind things, not saying what is bad. For most people there’s a lot of work to be done just in these areas. One of the important things to keep in

mind is that virtue is not just about avoiding the bad, it is also about doing good. So do good in your life, say kind things, do little acts of kindness. When you do that, you are building up a beautiful mind. This will be a powerful support for your meditation.

But for mindfulness to become well established, virtue of body and speech is not enough. You also need the virtue of the mind. Initially, when you practice virtue of action and speech through restraint, your mind is still impure. To deal with this impurity, you need to work with your mind in such a way that you change the way you think. People sometimes think this is difficult, but with enough dedication and perseverance it is something anyone can do. And it is necessary if your meditation is to develop.

The most important mental defilement to overcome is anger in its various manifestations, including irritation and negativity (AN3:68). Anger is a mental quality that causes a great deal of suffering for ourselves and also for the people around us. If we are going to be serious about the spiritual path, this is one area that we really need to focus on. To overcome anger we need to ask ourselves how we can look at the world around us in a different way. Is there a way of looking at it so that these negative states don't arise? You will find that if you put effort into such reflection then over time you will gradually change – you will start to see things in a new way; you will start to see the world with

more compassion and kindness. As your anger, negativity and irritation decrease, you feel inside yourself that you are becoming a better person, a more pure person. What a wonderful thing it is to observe that happening in yourself. Gradually, you are changing; you are transforming yourself into a new kind of person.

Often people think that will-power is the way to deal with harmful mental qualities. They think they can force themselves to be kind, that they can crush the anger, crush the negativity. And sometimes when you read the suttas it can seem that way. You read that you are supposed to 'obliterate' the negative states of mind, 'do away' with them, 'annihilate' them. The vocabulary that it used can be very strong and it is easy to think that the text refers to will-power. But what the Buddha is really saying is that the best way to overcome negative states is to use wisdom (MN19).

To use wisdom is to ask yourself where anger leads. If you reflect on that, you will find it always leads to suffering, your own and that of others (MN19). It leads to your own suffering because anger is painful compared to a peaceful state of mind. It leads to others' suffering because we tend to act on that anger in ways that hurt others. Furthermore, you are making bad kamma when you are angry, particularly when you act it out. You are creating unhappiness for yourself both here and now and for future lives. So this whole chain reaction of unpleasant and painful results comes from

this negative quality. Remind yourself of that. Think about it regularly. Anger, negativity, harming – this is dangerous territory; it really does lead to suffering for yourself and for the people around you. The more powerful you can make the perception that this is a real problem, the greater your ability to turn away from it.

When the perception of the danger of anger becomes strong and clear, it becomes a powerful tool to use in the development of your mind. When an angry thought starts to arise, all you need to do is bring up the perception of the danger and the thought just vanishes. Wisdom does the work for you. But remember that to build up this wisdom takes a lot of work, as do most things on the spiritual path. It is not difficult as such, but it takes determination and perseverance. Gradually, you will see the danger of anger with greater and greater clarity. The more you understand it, the more powerful is your ability to overcome anger whenever it arises. That is why the Buddha uses words like ‘obliterate’, ‘do away with’, and ‘annihilate’ to describe the overcoming of these thoughts. These words do not refer to using will-power, but to a tool that is much more powerful, the tool of wisdom. Wisdom, when it is well developed, cuts through these things – it is as if it obliterates the negative states of mind. They simply disappear straight away. So keep on reflecting on the danger of anger in all its manifestations. Eventually you have a very useful tool for your spiritual practice.

Another negative consequence of anger is that it destroys wisdom (MN19). Wisdom is the most important of the spiritual qualities. It is wisdom that allows you to understand the difference between happiness and suffering and, more importantly, to understand the difference between what causes suffering and what causes happiness. Wisdom is what solves the problems of our lives.

The Buddha says that wisdom ceases (*paññānirodhika*; MN19) as a consequence of unwholesome mental states. Given the importance of wisdom, isn't that good enough reason to put them away, to do away with them? Compare your mind when you are angry to when you are not. Look at the difference. You will observe that when you are angry you cannot see the world clearly. You don't understand what is right and what is wrong – everything gets turned upside down, distorted by the anger. See how it destroys wisdom. This is a powerful reflection.

Another reflection recommended by the Buddha is to see how anger harms the mind (MN19). Reflect on how your mind feels when you are angry and compare that to when you are truly peaceful. The difference is enormous! You are burning inside when you're angry. Why would you want to be angry if there is the option of not being angry?

Such reflections are one of the most powerful aspects of the Dhamma and they are the most effective

way of overcoming the unwholesome states of mind. If you want to change your thinking patterns, wisdom is the path, not will-power.

Over time, as you develop a new outlook, you find that your defilements decrease, that your problems in life diminish, and that the *pāmojja* – the gladness – gradually increases in your mind. The gladness comes from purity, from the reality that you are becoming a better person. And as the *pāmojja* becomes stronger, so does the mindfulness. It is the defilements of the mind that block mindfulness from being a true spiritual power. As the defilements decrease, mindfulness strengthens. If you are able to reduce the hindrances through your daily practice, you will find that each time you go on a retreat you are able to watch things you weren't able to watch before.

When you watch the breath without sufficient mindfulness, the mind tends to go all over the place. You are not really in charge of your mind – you are being run around by the defilements instead. But once mindfulness is there, you actually feel in charge of yourself. And because you have a sense of being in charge, you are able to direct your attention towards the breath or towards whatever it is that you wish to focus on. Mindfulness that is properly developed is a power, and this is how it is described in the suttas (SN50:1). This is why mindfulness is so important.

Because mindfulness arises from virtue, especially

mental virtue, it is important to put in the effort to overcome the negative tendencies of the mind. Sometimes it is hard work, because our tendencies and habits are usually deeply ingrained. It takes determination and perseverance to change the way you look at things, the way you do things. But gradually, over the months, over the years, you see change happening inside of you. As you change, your meditation becomes calmer and deeper. How wonderful it is when the meditation starts to work, when you are able to stay with the object and see real progress. When you have that power of mindfulness, including the gladness in the mind, you just sit down, watch the breath, and meditation happens all by itself.

When meditation happens by itself, no force is required. All you have to do is sit back, be aware, and watch the breath. Because you have mindfulness, the watching is natural and easy, without will-power. As the minutes tick by, the meditation becomes more and more powerful, more and more profound. All you have to do is be there.

At a certain point in this process, *pīti*, rapture, starts to arise. *Pīti* is a feeling of pleasure, often with a strong physical component. It can be experienced as waves of pleasure coursing through the body. It is really just an intensification of the gladness one had previously. What one is experiencing here is the beginning of the pure pleasure of the mind, the spiritual

happiness. After meditation it is worth reflecting on the qualities of that feeling and how they differ from sensual pleasures. You will notice that *pīti* is a result of purity of mind, in particular the absence of anger and strong craving. This purity is a result of one's previous practice of virtue. You know intuitively that this is a wholesome feeling. At the same time it feels very good. You know you are on the right track and that you need to develop this further.

So you continue watching the breath. Gradually the 'exciting' aspect of the *pīti* starts to settle down and you experience a deeper sense of tranquillity, *passaddhi*. As the tranquillity deepens, you experience a profound and peaceful sense of happiness, *sukha*. With every step, the meditation is becoming more beautiful and powerful. At this point you are feeling so content that the mind doesn't want to go anywhere else. This is the beginning of *samādhi*. Again, this is all happening by itself. You are just sitting back watching the whole process unfold.

*Samādhi* is the one-pointedness of mind, the ability to focus effortlessly on an object, whether it is the breath, the light in the mind or whatever. At this point the mind is very steady; it just stays with the object without wavering. You allow the *samādhi* to develop until the five hindrances are completely abandoned and the mind is bright and fully focused. This process culminates in the attainment of the *jhānas*.

After you come out of *samādhi*, your mind is pure and powerful. Because of that purity, you know and see in accordance with reality, *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*. Seeing things as they actually are is only possible after *samādhi*, because it is only with *samādhi* that the hindrances – the defilements that distort our mental processes – are fully overcome. Moreover, it is only with the *jhānas* that the abandoning of the hindrances is stable (MN68). This is one of the main reasons why the *jhānas* are so conducive to seeing things as they really are.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the root cause of suffering is our misunderstanding of how the world actually works. We see happiness where there is suffering. We see a self where there is no such thing. We think things will last when they can disappear at any time. By seeing things as they actually are, we are rectifying this distorted outlook, the delusion or ignorance, the root cause of the problem.

So by overcoming the hindrances through deep *samādhi*, ignorance is weakened and undermined. Because ignorance is the first factor of dependent origination, each subsequent factor, including suffering, is affected by the strength of our delusion. This means that the weaker the ignorance, the less the suffering, both now and in the future.

Seeing the world as it actually is and understanding the full scope of suffering in the world, how deep it

actually goes, is an incredible eye-opener. The Buddha says it is as if you've been enclosed in a shell and suddenly the shell cracks open and you see the world for the first time (MN53). It is like you have been enveloped by darkness and suddenly somebody turns on the light (MN36).

Seeing the Dhamma fully gives you an entirely new perspective on life. Because you see the full range of the problem, you realise there is no escape from suffering in worldly existence, and you reject the whole lot. That is *nibbidā*, the being repelled, the rejection of everything, because you see how deep the suffering goes.

When you are repelled by everything, there is nothing to grasp onto and craving becomes impossible. This is dispassion, *virāga*. Because it is all suffering, you let go and you can never ever crave for anything again. When you realize that the search for happiness is futile, craving comes to a final end. That is liberation, *vimutti*. You are free at last, free from all the problems of existence. And the knowledge arises in you that you are free. You have reached the greatest happiness possible. That is what the Buddha's path promises you.

It is very profound. Although these teachings may be hard to relate to, I believe it is important to know the whole map, to know where everything is leading, to get a glimpse of the more profound aspects of the Buddha's teaching. In my experience, such a glimpse is nourishing and a spur to practice.

But from a practical point of view, perhaps the most important aspect of dependent liberation is that it shows that success on the Buddha's path, success in meditation, depends on the purity of one's conduct, especially one's mental purity. It is only if you are able to reduce the defilements of the mind, particularly anger and negativity and the coarser aspects of desire, that your meditation will eventually take off. It is a gradual process and every step on the path brings its rewards. If you want real happiness and contentment, this is the only way.