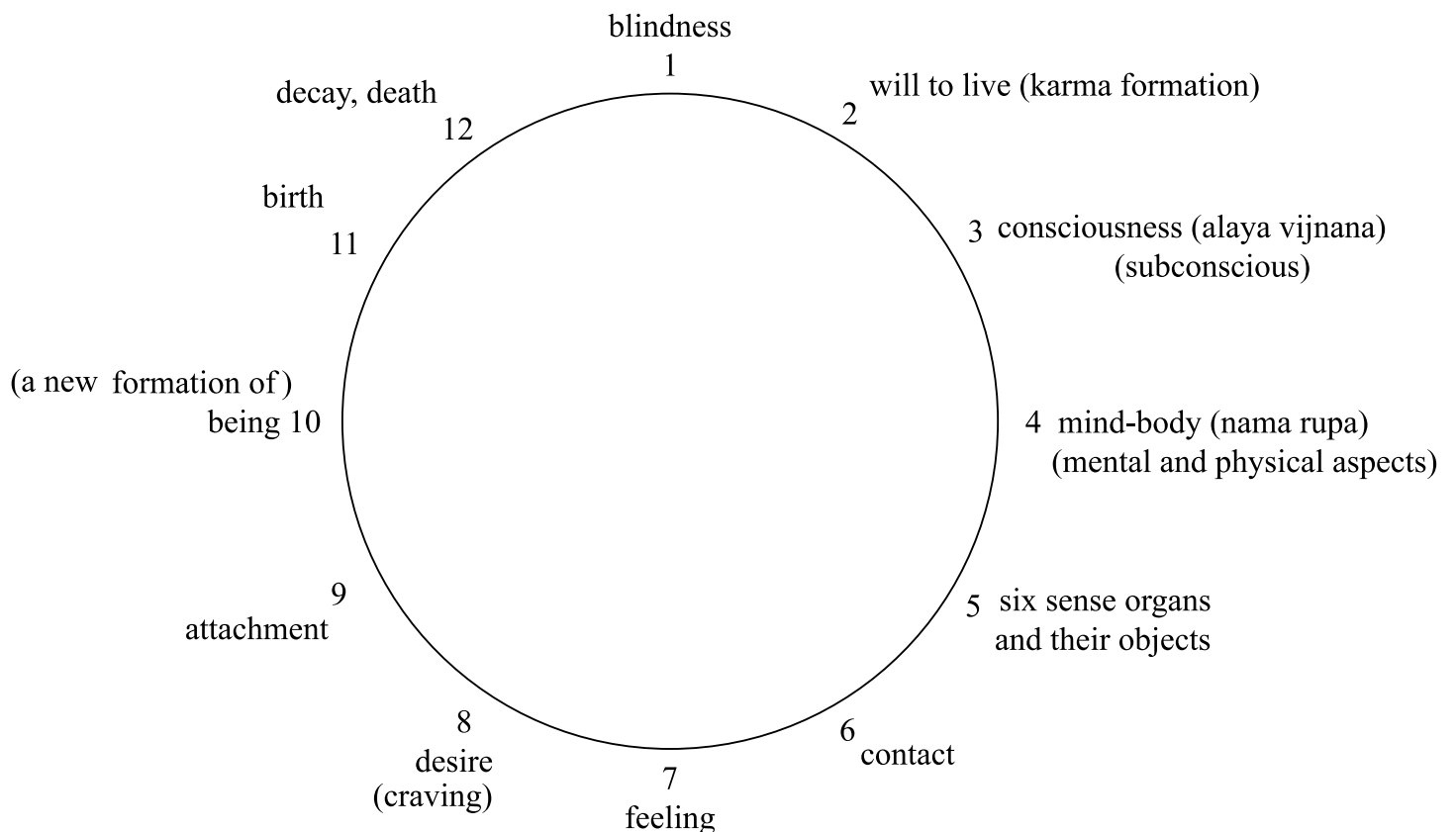


Thich Nhat Hahn

The Twelve Links of Dependant Origination

Well, I promised that I would speak about the twelve nidanas, the other side of the moon. And first I think that we must write down the twelve words:



So the usual way to describe is that because of blindness, that's why there is a will to live. And because of that kind of karma formation within it, and then consciousness is there. Consciousness here means alaya vijnana, the subconscious consciousness. And because there is consciousness there is manifestation into nama-rupa, it means the physical and mental aspects of being. And because of that there is the six senses. And then because there are six sense, that's why there is contact between six sense and object. It gives rise to feeling, and because there is feeling we crave for it. Because we crave for it we are attached to it. We are attached

to it, so a new formation of being. And because there is being then there must be birth, because there is birth there must be decay and death.

So these two, (1 and 2) are usually considered to be the past. And these, (3-7) are the present as effect. And these, (8-10) are still present, but it is the cause for the future (11,12).

So blindness and the will to live, of the past karma, will be resulted in (3-7) consciousness, mind-body, six sense objects, contact and feeling. It's the effect of the past, in the present. But in the present, because of our desire, attachment and being, (8-10), there will be (11,12) a future live comprising birth and death, and a lot of things in between, all these things. So this means the existence of all this, again and again.

(1) So, when artists try to illustrate that they draw: a blind woman to represent (I don't know why a woman. Why not a blind man?) to illustrate avidya, ignorance.

(2) And in order to illustrate the will to live, the karma formation, they draw a man gathering fruit in the jungle, or a potter at work. A potter at work, or a man gathering the fruit, that's the way they represent it.

(3) And as far as consciousness, they draw a restless monkey- a monkey that is grasping this and that, all the time. A restless monkey. I think a monkey is enough. A monkey's nature is restlessness.

(4) And mind-body is represented by a boat.

(5) And six sense and their object is represented by a house with many windows.

(6) And contact, a man and woman sitting close to each other.

(7) And feeling, a man pierced by an arrow.

(8) Desire, or thirst, represented by a man drinking wine (a man drinking wine, always a man).

(9) And attachment, represented by a man and a woman in union, sexual union.

(10) And being, represented by childbirth, a lady giving birth to a child.

(11) This, (birth), is presented by a man carrying a corpse on his shoulder.

(12) And lastly, decay and death, presented by an old woman leaning on a stick, like this.

So then, we may have an idea of how people used to portray, to understand these twelve words.

There is another way of visualizing. Vijnana, consciousness, is seen as the embryo of the child, in the mother's womb. And nama-rupa is the child before, just before birth, before being born. Six sense, a child from 1 to 2 years old. His or her life is predominated by touch, not more than touch, touching the outside world.

And contact, a child from 3 to 5 years old. He has the status of a person, as a whole person. And he is conscious completely of the outside world. And from desire-attachment, he is portrayed as a person responsible for building; building his own life, and building the causes for his future life.

First of all, I would like to invite you to contemplate a little bit on the Buddhist notion of cause and effect. We know that for something to be there, we call an effect, like a table, we need more than one cause. The wood, yes, but we need other things, like the carpenter, like time, like the skill, like the sunlight. And each of these would need other things in order to be. Like the wood would need the forrest, would need the sunshine, would need the rain and so on. And in turn, each thing would have to be brought about by several conditions.

So if we continue to look like that we will see that nothing is left out. Everything comes together in order to bring about the presence of the table. The one is made of the many, the all. And the one can be seen in the all. The table can be seen in the sunshine. The table can be seen in the leaf of the tree. The table can be seen in the water. So that is why we say one is all and all is one.

The one can be seen in the all, and the all can be seen in the one. And that is the full development of the Buddhist idea of causes and effect.

So the first principle is that one cause can never bring about an effect. So, 'the only cause', or 'the first cause', these ideas cannot be applied to the principle of causes and effect as taught in Buddhism. The idea of 'the only cause', or 'the first cause' sounds not logical in all this.

The second principle we draw is that a cause must be, at the same time, an effect. An effect must be at the same time a cause for something else. So there is nothing that can be described as 'the only cause'. And the concept of 'the only cause' is very linked to the concept of 'the first cause'.

'The first cause' means something that does not need causes. Effect must be cause. Cause must be effect. So these two things are important. And

with that kind of key, we go into the teaching of the twelve links.

So we will eliminate the idea that consciousness alone can bring about this, mind-body alone can bring about this, and so on... So we abandon the idea of a chain of causation. ('This brings this, this brings this, this brings this...') Although in the sutra it is described like that, but in the Buddhist teaching that should be considered to be a way of speaking, and we have to understand it in a broader, a more open way.

Consider, for instance, desire, described as the fruit of feeling: we see in it something absurd, because sometimes the feeling does not give rise to desire but the opposite; 'I hate it', 'I don't want it', Right? And then desire cannot be the outcome. If the feeling is accompanied not by blindness, but by something else, like understanding, lucidity, loving kindness, and then the outcome will not be desire. So, to say that feeling brings about desire is not correct. Feeling with attachment, with blindness, will bring about desire. So, the better thing is to draw like this- in order to have feeling we must have all of this. And this is true when we draw any point of the twelve links, we have to draw the same kind of link.

And this is exactly what the Heart Sutra tells us- 'no interdependent origins'. The twelve things described as the nidanas, they are empty- they are empty because each of them cannot be alone, without the others. 'Empty' means without the others, it cannot be. And that is the meaning of emptiness. Therefore it is said that there is no interdependent origins.

So feeling cannot be without desire, attachment, being, birth, death, blindness, will to live, and so on. So that sentence in the Heart Sutra means all twelve links depend on each other in order to be. One link has to depend on the other eleven links in order to be. So it's helpful to draw eleven lines, like that, in order to see its connection with the other eleven. So therefore in one of the twelve links, we see the presence of the other eleven links. That is the meaning of the emptiness of the twelve links. We see that feeling can give rise to desire, or non-desire, or neutral- upeksa. That is one instance.

The presence of blindness, avidya means the absence of something- like the presence of light means the absence of darkness, the presence of day means the absence of night.

So the presence of blindness means the absence of- understanding. A-vidya is blindness, vidya is light, understanding. Understanding, or wisdom. In Samuta 4, 49, and Samuta 4, 50, the Buddha said, "When ignorance, when blindness is ended, understanding arises." It's very plain, very clear.

Blindness leads to the will to live. But understanding leads to what?- the will to die? No. The will to live also. Because in understanding there is loving kindness, there is

compassion- and you know that when you are irritated, you are angry you want to do something. But when you are compassionate, you are concerned, you have love and understanding, you want to do something too. Because anger, hatred, ignorance is a form of energy, and understanding, compassion is also another kind of energy. So energies would be transformed into something.

One side there is the will to live in order to grasp at things and to satisfy the desires, and the other is the will to be there in order to help and to alleviate the suffering.

And that is the intention of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and all people with good will. They have understanding, they have love, and therefore there is a willingness to be there amidst the suffering in order to bring about comfort and relief and joy.

So the expression 'will to live' has to be understood in two ways: to live in order to be indulged in sensual pleasure, to live in order to oppress other people, in order to take pleasure for one's self alone. Well, that kind of intention, karma formation is in many people. But in other people there is a will to be there in order to help.

There are social workers that go to slum areas, to third world countries, not because they want power, and riches, the oil, the uranium in these countries, but because they want to realize, to fulfill their need of loving and of caring. So that is a will to be, will to live also. We have to understand this in two ways.

And of course the Buddha, when he looks at a flower, he has the capacity to realize that it is a flower, not us. He has consciousness. So having consciousness, being consciousness, is not something wrong- only when consciousness is heavy laden with unwholesome bijas, heavy loaded with ignorance and hatred, and jealousy, and anxiety that will cause suffering to one and to other people.

But consciousness as a base for distinguishing things, planning things, for helping and for doing good work, that kind of consciousness is there with the buddhas and with the bodhisattvas.

The Buddha said, "How lovely is the city of Vajali."

The Buddha said, "Ananda, don't you think that the rice fields down there are lovely?"

"Ananda, do you think that it is already early morning? We should go to town in order to share the Dharma." All these things are made, are realized based on consciousness, the kind of lucid consciousness. So consciousness has to be understood in that way too. It means a consciousness full of understanding, full of care, full of love, and so on, which the Buddha has, which Bodhisattvas have, and we have also, we have it to some extent. We have the bijas of that kind of pure consciousness. Alaya vijana, after emancipation becomes a kind of wisdom called the Wisdom of the Great Clear Mirror, reflecting the whole cosmos. So that is the kind of consciousness that is the outcome of the will to live, the vow to save beings.

And when we invoke the name of Avalokiteshvara, 'we know that you are the capacity of listening and of responding to suffering, and helping beings', so that is a will to be there. And when you invoke the name of Samantabhadra, you say that 'the Bodhisattva who has the capacity to act mindfully and joyfully in order to serve all beings', so that is the will to live. And when we talk about Manjushi, well, 'O Bodhisattva, you have the capacity of looking deeply and understanding, and we need you to be the eyes of the world', so the will to be there is present. And guided by that kind of will, guided by understanding, and then consciousness is an instrument of engaged being, in the world. And the presence of the Buddha is an illustration of that kind of will to live and of consciousness; consciousness of what is going on, and what to do in order to alleviate the suffering in the world.

And of course that kind of consciousness is manifested in mind and body-like everyone. The Buddha has nama-rupa, like every other being, but the quality of his mind-body is different from the quality of ours. And we can see that.

And the Buddha also has his six sense, in order to enter into contact with sense objects. He knows how to guard his six sense organs so that he will not create internal knots.

And he uses these six senses in a skillful way in order to realize wonderful things. Mind- vijnana, mind consciousness upon emancipation becomes the wisdom that can observe in a wonderful way, and see things as they are. And the first five consciousnesses; eyes consciousness, and nose consciousness, and so on, the kind of wisdom is called 'The Wisdom of Wonderful Realization'. You use these five consciousnesses in order to achieve the work of serving and helping.

And, of course, when there are six sense and their objects there must be contact between the two, and it will raise to feeling, but not only pleasant feeling, also unpleasant feeling and neutral feeling. When the Bodhisattva sees a child suffering she also has an unpleasant feeling in herself. She knows what it feels like when you suffer like that. And because of that suffering, concern and compassion arises in her so that she will act. So the feeling of the Bodhisattva may be pleasant, may be unpleasant.

The Bodhisattva can suffer the suffering of other people, but that kind of feeling does not give rise to craving, to thirst, to desire. It gives rise to concern, to something that is very much like the will to live- the desire to act, the willingness to act amidst the suffering and confusion.

So, craving does not exist here, but a Bodhisattva, a Buddha, when coming in touch with hot water, knows that the water is hot, like all of us. And when it is cold they know it is cold. So they have feelings, just like us- but guided by understanding, by the wisdom, their feelings will never cause internal knots within them.

Like, they see a beautiful flower; they also recognize the flower as beautiful, but they can see also, at the same time the nature of impermanence in the flower. That is why there is no attachment. So, they have a nice feeling, a pleasant feeling, but that pleas-

ant feeling does not create a formation, an internal knot in them.

So feeling is o.k.. Emancipation does not mean that you suppress all feeling. And these feelings are normal. These feelings help the Bodhisattva to dwell in happiness, the kind of happiness that is not subject to sorrow and anxiety, the kind of happiness that nourishes us.

When we practice breathing, smiling, being in touch with the air, the water, all these things, well, that kind of happiness does not create suffering in us, but helps us to be sane, to be strong, and to be able to go further on our way of realization. So Buddhas, Bodhisattvas have the capacity of entering pleasant feelings, the kind of feeling that is healing and regenerating. So that kind of feeling will nourish, will give us concern, a willingness to act.

The feeling we have when we see people oppressed, when we see the people starving, we will rise to compassion. And compassion with the willingness to act, not with attachment, but with upeksa, detachment.

We know that the Cambridge Center is a center for practice. We are making good use of the center, so that many people can come and practice, but we are not attached to it. It is not our cow. So that's the way a Bodhisattva acts. Plum Village is a practice center, and we should be concerned with keeping the center clean and healthy, but that does not mean that we have to be attached to it and make it into our cow. So instead of having attachment we have upeksa. There is a word in Pali that means 'in the middle way'. You have it, you see it, you are using it,

You are making use of it, but you are between the craving and the rejecting. You have the attitude of non-attachment. You are practically using it. But if it happens that it is destroyed, you will not die because of it. You can still smile, and you think that, well, if this is no longer there then we will create another center for the practice of other people. So you continue smiling.

If the Buddha came back and saw that Jetavana is no longer like before- if you visit Jetavana it's only foundations, a lot of bushes, and the Buddha would not be sorrow, when he saw that he would say, 'Well, o.k., we'll make another center, maybe in Bangladesh, maybe in Phillipines. It's o.k.' So, India, if he cannot make it in India, he can make it in China, or Italy. So there's no attachment here.

And because there's no attachment- is it necessary that we arrive at non-being? No... no. The Buddha, in the very first Dharma talk, he cautioned his disciples not to be attached to bhava, to neither bhava nor abhava, or vibhava.

Bhava and vibhava are constructions of our mind. Reality is something in between. So he cautioned us not to be caught in either bhava nor vibhava, vibhava or abhava. Therefore, when you present the Twelve Links like that, and you say, 'If there is no

attachment there will be no being', it means we are aspiring to vibhava, which is what the Buddha didn't want. See? So if you present the purpose of the practice like destroying being in order to arrive at non-being- this is a catastrophe. So with that kind of non-attachment you look on being and non-being as a creation of your mind, you ride on the waves of birth and death. You don't mind birth, you don't mind death. And so on.

If you are to be born again in order to continue the work, 'o.k.', 'I want', 'I'm ready to be reborn.' And you know very well that nothing is born, nothing can die, because you already have the wisdom of no birth, no death. So although we see there is birth, there is decay and death, but they're only waves on which the Bodhisattva rides. So birth is o.k., death is o.k., if we know the nature of birth and death. Birth and death are concepts in our mind.

And reality transcends birth and death.

So, if we present the Twelve Links in a positive way, many people will be ready to understand. And we have so many elements to help us present it, like being, bhava-abhava- the Buddha made it very clear that he doesn't want abhava- so let us not present the teaching of the Buddha like an attempt to escape life, to go to nothingness, non-being.

It's time for us to present the teaching of Interdependant Origins in a more appropriate way for the people of our time.

And it is easy now to understand that the Bodhisattva makes a vow to go back again, and again, and again, in this life in order to serve, to help. It's like a number of us who suffer so much from the war in Vietnam, but we still want to go back, not because of craving, but because we want to help. So there is that kind of element of concern, of willingness to serve in us, only compared with Bodhisattvas, well, we are a very far way behind. And therefore the practice will develop more and more that kind of wisdom, understanding and concern and loving kindness in order to serve.

Now, shall we call the names together aloud?

Instead of Blindness- Understanding

The will to live and serve

Consciousness

Mind-body

Six sense objects

Contact

Feeling

Concern

Non-attachment

Neither being nor non-being

Birth without birth

Death without death

And if you can find better words to translate these terms, please do so. And Daji Chan Duc, please find Sanskrit words that are relevant to this. And if you can, please write articles and give talks on this so that to correct the wrong view, the wrong impression given, received while we listen to the teaching of the Twelve Links.