



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week six: Seeing and understanding

How can we apply the teaching of dependent arising to meditation practice? Dependent arising maps the nature of reality as it is experienced by the practitioner of insight meditation (*vipassanā bhāvanā*). Indeed, we could say that insight meditation *is* applied dependent arising. We can examine this question in terms of the two basic movements of *vipassanā* practice, understanding (*ñāṇa*) and seeing (*dassana*), and the culmination of the practice, the entry into emptiness (*suññatā avakkam*).

Dependent arising *describes* the nature of reality – what we see when we do the practice – and *prescribes* what we must do about it – the practice itself. This is structured in the four noble truths.

This is the noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*): Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Association with the unloved is suffering; separation from the loved is suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates bound up with clinging are suffering.

This is the noble truth of the arising of suffering: It is craving (*taṇhā*) which leads to further becoming, is bound up with passion (*rāga*) and delight (*nandi*), and finds its delight now here, now there. That is, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the complete cessation of that very craving; abandoning it, renouncing it, releasing it, letting it go.

This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: The noble eightfold path of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (Vin. 1:10)

Dukkha is the gap between what is happening now and what we want to be happening now. When we watch our experience we see it is changing and out of our control. Every time we are distracted by unwelcome thoughts, emotions or physical sensations, we come face to face with the fact of change and of our relationship to change. Our experience is continually transforming, and we are continually resisting these transformations so we can hold on to what we want and avoid what we don't want. This relationship to change is *dukkha*.

The second and third noble truths take us into the dynamics of change, how change happens. *Dukkha* arises because of *taṇhā*, or craving, the restless desire for something else to happen. These two truths are fundamentally about the

relationship between craving and suffering. When there is craving, there is suffering; when there is no craving, there is no suffering. They are a specific application of the general principle of dependent arising:

When this is, that is; from the arising of this, that arises.

When this not, that is not; from the cessation of this, that ceases. (S 2.28)

In this case, the arising of craving conditions the arising of suffering; the cessation of craving conditions the cessation of suffering. The first noble truth is about the fact of change; the second and third are about how change occurs, the conditional relationships between changing events. The fourth noble truth is about the path, what we must do to allow our suffering to come to its natural end.

So these four noble truths contain the entirety of dependent arising and of the practice. We *see* (*dassana*) the fact of change; seeing the fact of change, we then *understand* (*nāṇa*) how change occurs, how we create patterns of suffering or of happiness. Seeing and understanding lead to the entry into emptiness (*suññatā avakkam*), which itself is the cessation of *dukkha*.

Seeing

The first movement of the practice, seeing, involves being awake and present to whatever is happening. The mind is still, and in this stillness we watch whatever presents itself to us, making no judgement, not holding on to anything, not pushing anything away. We are like a clear mirror which reflects whatever is placed before it in perfect clarity, regardless of what comes. How do we do this? In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (*Domains of mindfulness*) the Buddha says:

Here a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating feeling as feeling, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful. (M 1.56)

Our practice is simply to see this experience right now as just this experience right now, without adding anything extra. Seeing the flow of our life as a series of present events: just this, right now; followed by just this, right now; followed by just this, right now. In the Mahāsī tradition we talk about primary and secondary objects of meditation. The primary object is what sustains our attention over time. Secondary objects are what grab our attention from time to time. We watch the primary object closely over time and get to know it intimately. By staying with one central reference point, such as breathing, we become more sensitive to it. We know it as it is, now; and we know it as it changes over time. We also know the workings of the mind as it gains and loses awareness of the primary object, as awareness itself changes over time. We discover *aniccatā*, impermanence, change, the discontinuity of experience.

Our practice is to see what is immediately present, now, as just what is immediately present, now; to see body as body, mind as mind. This is *not* our usual relationship to experience. Usually we add something to what is immediately present, weaving a narrative around it. If we feel painful physical sensations we relate to them as “I am in pain, and this is my pain.” We create a narrative around these physical sensations in which “I” features as the central character. By continually creating and believing in these narratives we create and maintain a sense of an independent, personal identity, and gradually cultivate a relentless self-obsession about the fortunes and ultimate fate of this identity.

Vipassanā practice cuts through our self-obsession by training the mind to examine just this immediately present event without adding the extra commentary. Instead of “Once more I suffer,” we simply experience: hardness; sharpness; pressure; aversion; thinking. In other words, *vipassanā*, which literally means seeing (*passanā*) separately (*vi*), allows us to become intimate with the flow of experience, dividing it into this immediately present event followed by the next immediately present event. In seeing, the mind simply reflects whatever is immediately before it.

So the first movement of *vipassanā* is seeing, dissolving the flow of experience into its individual parts. When we are watching our breathing, we begin with one thing: breathing. The experience of breathing then divides into distinct and separate movements of just this inhalation, just this exhalation. Then this inhalation, when closely examined, divides into movement, expansion, pressure, and so on. Then this experience of pressure divides into a discrete beginning, middle and end. The more closely we look at any given experience, the more it divides into its immediately present aspects, like seeing each separate frame of a movie. Closely investigating physical experience, we see how all physical experience dissolves into the four great things (*mahābhūta*) of earth, water, fire and air. We then extend this contemplation to all aspects of non-physical experience. Whatever arises in experience, we see it just as it is. We contemplate body as body, feeling as feeling, mind as mind and phenomena as phenomena. We are simply awake to what is happening now, regardless of what it is.

Understanding

Why are we doing this? We are seeking the way things are, the universal relationships that underlie experience, which are indicated by the teaching of dependent arising. Dependent arising sees every aspect of our experience as part of a dynamic process in which all events arise and cease in dependence upon other events. Normally we don’t experience the self and the world in this way. Our universe is divided into the two entirely separate entities of subjective “me-in-here” and objective “world-out-there,” and we assume that “I” am the one who experiences “the world.” We assume identity, along with possession – “This is me and mine.” Identity also contains the assumption of difference – “That is not me and not mine.” On the basis of these assumptions we interpret various processes occurring within the self and the world in terms of their importance to “me” and “mine.” We may, for example, experience the process of pain in the body or the mind, and feel that this process is happening *to me*: “I have a problem; my life is difficult.”

Our sense of identity becomes the stable point from which we experience change, the arising and ceasing of experienced events, and so we assume this identity – “me” – is outside of and untouched by change. As we practise, we are always in

some kind of condition – restless or peaceful, happy or sad, anxious or secure, and so on – and we identify with that condition. It's like we look *through* whatever condition we are experiencing to the meditation object. Feeling depressed, my relationship to the practice is coloured by depression. Feeling happy, my relationship to the practice is coloured by happiness. I assume the reality of the one who is depressed, the one who is happy, the one who is doing the practice and seeing the changes within the meditation object. But dependent arising asserts that there are no exceptions to change; there is no place outside change from which “I” can experience it. Change does not occur *to* anyone, because there is no one outside change to whom it can occur.

As the practice deepens, as we monitor change ever more deeply and continually fail to find the one who is changing, or the one who is monitoring change, our relationship to the practice naturally matures. As the Buddha says further in Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, instead of the meditator contemplating body as body:

[S]he lives ... contemplating the nature of arising as body (*samudayadhammānupassī kāyasmim*); or she lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body (*vayadhammānupassī kāyasmim*); or she lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. (M 1.59)

Our contemplation changes. We begin by seeing this present event, and then mindfulness develops so we understand *the context of* this present event. Seeing this specific event, followed by this next specific event, and so on, reveals the discontinuity of experience: each event arises and ceases; *this* event is arising and ceasing. Seeing arising and ceasing as it unfolds over time, we begin to understand the relationships *between* discontinuous events, the context within which arising and ceasing occurs. In brief, first we see *that* events arise and cease (seeing), and then we understand *how* events arise and cease (understanding). We understand the workings of cause and effect, of conditionality.

This is what is meant by contemplating “the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing.” All phenomena (*dhammas*) are dependently arisen (*paṭiccasamuppāna dhammas*), so seeing the dependently arisen opens into an understanding of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). This contemplation includes both those events that arise and cease, and what conditions those events to arise and cease. We see the same pattern in the second and third noble truths, where the Buddha does not present us only with the arising of *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*, but the wider context of the conditional relationship that links craving with *dukkha*. Not just *dukkha* alone, but the interdependency of craving and *dukkha*. Where there is craving, there is *dukkha*; where there is no craving, there is no *dukkha*. We are not just interested in seeing event after event after event; we are interested in understanding *how* one event leads to another, how one event conditions another.

Distraction

How does this work? In *vipassanā* practice we are training ourselves to see impermanence, change, and so we are interested chiefly in the points of discontinuity of experience, the intersections of experience, those places where one event turns into another. These points of discontinuity first become evident in the experience of distraction. What happens when we are distracted? At first we are

intimate with the meditation object, and then suddenly we realise we are somewhere else – lost in physical pain or thought, for example. How does this happen? Our job is to see experience – in this case our experience of distraction and non-distraction – as instances of conditional relationships, and these relationships are revealed in the patterns of arising and cessation. By seeing arising and cessation, the beginnings and ends of distraction, we understand *how* distraction arises and ceases.

Consider the distraction of physical pain. Why is pain a distraction? Because we identify with it. We think, “I am in pain; this is my pain,” create a narrative out of our experience, and become lost in our role of me-in-pain. But in doing this we lose contact with the simplicity of our practice, of being simply present to whatever arises. Distraction, in other words, is not the pain; distraction is a relationship *to* pain. When we maintain our sense of presence, we first *see* (*dassana*) the fact of pain and of our response to pain, and we then *understand* (*ñāṇa*) the conditional relationships that give rise to our pain and our response to pain. How does pain arise and cease? How does my reaction to pain arise and cease? Seeing and understanding in this way, there is no room for distraction to manifest.

For example, I am watching breathing or the body. In the background I can feel some strong, even painful sensations, and suddenly I have to move, to shake off the pain. What happened here? This whole process is a manifestation of dependent arising, but lost in my distraction I don't see this. If I investigate the cusps between changing experience, using the opportunity to investigate the arising of conditioned phenomena, then I look and see: What conditions change?

The process begins when the centre of my attention shifts from the primary object to a particular sensation and its painful quality. What happened? At that point, physical sensation conditions the mental reaction of aversion. *Sensation conditions aversion* – “I don't want this!” Then I identify with the aversion, and so confirm and strengthen it – “This always happens to me!” – and the pain suddenly gets worse. *Aversion conditions aversion conditions sensation*. With the sudden upsurge of painful sensation I move – *sensation conditions aversion conditions movement*. Then I may find the body is tensing up in some way, as I attempt to escape from the pain – *sensation conditions aversion conditions tension*. I may then find myself restlessly thinking of the pain, or projecting my thoughts into a safe haven far away from the pain: *tension conditions aversion conditions thinking*. The apparently simple experience of pain, when examined, opens into a complex and mutually conditioning network of relationships between mind and body, and this network of relationships is exactly what the practice is meant to uncover.

When we *don't* see each experienced event, and fail to understand the conditional relationships between them, we are stuck in our relentless self-obsession, endlessly judging our practice and our circumstances, restlessly evading the reality of *this*. We postpone our engagement with the practice, with our life, and invent reasons to wait for better times. But better times aren't coming, because all we are ever presented with is *this*. When we are genuinely present to each experienced event then we can investigate how this event turns into that event; how, in a moment, sensation turns into aversion turns into movement turns into restlessness. And all of this is just the deepening of our practice.

Let's look at another distraction, that of thought. I am intimate with the meditation object, and suddenly I realise I am lost in thought. What happened? How was the meditation object lost in the first place? How did it come back? Again, it is the points of change, where one experience intersects with another, that are most interesting in this practice. Things change; this is fundamental. Our project is first to see *that* things change, and then to understand *how* things change. To do this, we must catch the moment of change itself. So when the mind moves toward thought away from the meditation object we ask, what is happening?

Possibly the movement of attention is dominated by *attraction*, by fascination with a particular thought stream. Our attention is on the meditation object, a mental image arises, and along with it, fascination. The image then turns into an obsessive thought stream. Thought is fascinating because we habitually think either about ourselves or about others in relation to ourselves, and so identify with our thoughts – “I am” my thoughts, and “my” life is what I am thinking about now. Hence the common experience of the meditator realising he is thinking, wanting to get back to the meditation object, but choosing (*cetanā*) to wait until this particular thought has ended. “Once this thought is finished, *then* I'll return to the object.” Why wait? Because of the quality of fascination with thought, a fascination based on identification. There is a basic reassurance in our own solidity and reality generated by habitual thought, even when the thoughts by which we define our reality are painful. So here we can make attraction itself the object, which may appear as the sticky quality that thought often has. We can note “attraction,” or “fascination.” Attraction is always accompanied by pleasant feeling, so if that seems predominant we might note “pleasant.” Or the thought may be accompanied by strong desire, so we can note “wanting.”

Possibly the movement of attention is dominated by *aversion*, by a desire to escape from the meditation object. The object itself might be overtly painful, as when we are contemplating painful sensations. Or our experience of watching the object might be more subtly painful. Perhaps the energy required to watch the object is stressful, so we relax – and get caught up in the habit of thinking. Perhaps the particular thought we are thinking is an escape from the boredom or pain of this present moment. In any event, we can make aversion itself the object, noting “aversion” or “dislike.” Aversion is always accompanied by painful feeling, so we might note “pain,” or “unpleasant.” Perhaps the movement to thought is conditioned by long-standing habit; or by the insecurity generated by the absence of thought to identify with, the absence of a solid and reassuring sense of “I am this.” Thought is always accompanied by and conditioned by some other aspect of experience. As we become more and more sensitive to the subtle nuances of the flow of experience we can begin to discern these conditioning factors, and so instead of fighting our distraction, distraction becomes the open door through which we can deepen our investigation.

In brief, we are addicted to thinking, and addiction is a conditioned and conditioning process, an instance of dependent arising. A phenomenon arises that conditions the wandering of the mind. This wandering is habitual; it is an addictive relationship. So whatever this phenomenon is, it must be arising again and again. Is it in the body or the mind? How is it found? It must be found in the moment of wandering. So it is necessary to catch wandering as soon as possible, and return to the condition. Not necessarily what we think we were doing before the distraction;

but the actual condition at the moment of distraction. We may investigate this process through either body or mind. Where in the body was attention placed when the mind began to wander? What characterised the quality of attention? What changes in this quality of attention that leads to the arising of thought, or of being lost in the thought that arises? Again, whatever this is, it is habitual, so there are no shortage of occasions when it is available to awareness.

Understanding conditionality is central to *vipassanā*. As we have seen, conditionality is embedded in the four noble truths: when craving arises, suffering arises; when craving ceases, suffering ceases. And we have seen the Buddha apply this teaching to practice in Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta (Large Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), where he examines his students on their meditation practice.

“Bhikkhus, do you see, ‘This has come to be?’”

“Yes, bhante.”

“Do you see, ‘Its arising occurs with that feeding it (*ābhāra*)?’”

“Yes, bhante.”

“Do you see, ‘With the cessation of what feeds it, what has come to be is subject to cessation?’”

“Yes, bhante.” (M 1.260)

What is this dialogue getting at? Let’s return to the four noble truths, seeing them as a model of dependent arising. The four noble truths concern the arising and cessation of *dukkha*. *Dukkha* arises because it has a cause, *taṇhā*, “thirst” or “craving.” Craving, as we have seen, means more than simple want; it refers to wanting that fuels or feeds a conditioned process of development and formation. The Buddha is concerned with how we become who we are; how we feed or form ourselves. He does not see the person as a fixed identity, but as a dynamic, flowing process. What feeds this process is what we cling to; and what we cling to defines us. Our desires shape us. We *are*, in a sense, our desires.

Process is dynamic, it flows, and it must be fuelled or fed by something, just as fire is fuelled by wood or grass. Coming from this dynamic view of the universe, when the Buddha examines his students about their meditation he naturally begins by asking: “Do you see, ‘this has come to be?’” He is not asking what *is*, implying some kind of static state or entity, but what “has come to be.” He assumes dynamic process, the discontinuity of experience. First, identify what has come to be; identify this experience right here and right now.

Next he asks, “Do you see, ‘Its arising occurs with that feeding it?’” Process must be fed; if there is process, there must be something feeding process, for otherwise it would cease. So the Buddha is not just asking, “What is there?” He is asking, “What’s happening to make this be there?” And of course, if there is arising there is ceasing; if there is beginning, there is ending. So he next asks, “Do you see, ‘With the cessation of what feeds it, what has come to be is subject to cessation?’”

In terms of the four noble truths, the Buddha is not just asking “Do you see *dukkha*?” He is also asking “Do you see what gives rise to *dukkha*?” and “Do you see what causes *dukkha* to cease?” The investigation is broadened. Not just seeing what is happening now, but understanding the context within which it happens.

Satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā is a wisdom practice. It is designed to generate understanding. But to generate understanding, we must apply understanding. Think of how the noble eightfold path is structured. In the standard presentation of the path, the first two factors are right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) and right aspiration (*sammā sankappa*). But right view and right aspiration are the wisdom (*paññā*) aspect of the path, and when the path is presented as a system of training, they come last. They are the result of training in first ethics (*sīla*) and then meditation (*samādhi*). So right view occurs at both the beginning and the end of the path – and all the way through. In order to gain understanding, we must practice with understanding. Understanding arises dependent upon understanding, and understanding must be practised. Or we could look at the noun *vipassanā*, “insight,” and how this noun is derived from the verb *vipassati*, “to insight.” In the dialogue above, the Buddha is essentially asking his students, “How do you insight this?” In *vipassanā* practice, we don’t just watch a meditation object; we actively investigate, “insight,” our experience as it unfolds.

So the first movement in the practice is seeing (*dassana*), learning to divide experience up into its component parts, to see body as just body, mind as just mind. The second movement is understanding (*ñāṇa*), learning to discern the conditional relationships between the component parts of experience, understanding how body conditions body, mind conditions mind, body conditions mind, and mind conditions body. This second movement reveals the universe to be a limitless network of relationships.

The entry into emptiness

Let us return to Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Describing the mature practitioner, the Buddha says:

[S]he lives ... contemplating the nature of arising as body; or she lives contemplating the nature of ceasing as body; or she lives contemplating both the nature of arising and the nature of ceasing as body. Or her mindfulness is established that “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding (*ñāṇa*), and to the extent necessary for reflective mindfulness (*paṭisati*).

And she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. (M 1.56)

The meditator’s attention is established on the body – or feeling, mind, and phenomena – to the point where understanding (*ñāṇa*) arises. She *sees* that the body is a phenomenon that arises and ceases dependent upon conditions, and that apart from these conditions it has no independent or separate reality. She intuits the universality of this network of conditions, and so *understands* that what is true for the body is true for all experience. In classical Buddhist terms, she understands that all experience is impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*). But still there is a sense of someone who is there doing this, the one who has attained understanding of universal conditionality, the one who, because she possesses understanding, is different to those who don’t, those who are deluded. She

still has the deep habit of assuming someone who knows. She still has the scent of “I am.” This “I am” now knows that all experience is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, but as long as there remains a sense of “I am” there is one more step to take.

The fully matured meditator knows universal process; and then she knows that the consciousness that knows universal insight itself is just part of universal process. She knows that all experience is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self; then she knows that the consciousness that knows impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self is itself impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. Looking back at “I am,” she sees there is no “I” which is; there is seeing and understanding (*ñāṇa-dassana*), but no-one who sees and understands. This is reflective mindfulness (*paṭisati*) or reflective insight (*paṭivipassanā*), where mindfulness and understanding are turned about 180 degrees to the meditator herself. This generates what the Buddha calls the “entry into emptiness.” In another discourse, he says:

In this way she regards this field of perception as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, she understands as present: “there is this.” This is the genuine, undistorted, pure, entry into emptiness. (M 3.104-05)

The entry into emptiness is the throwing away of any notion of attainment or non-attainment, awakening or delusion, *saṃsāra* or *nibbāna*. It is the state of non-fashioning or non-identification (*atammayatā*), where the practitioner is entirely free of the patterns of cause and effect, no longer bound to any aspect of experience. Another way the Buddhist tradition speaks of this insight is with the term *tathatā*.

One of the oldest titles of the Buddha is *tathāgata*, one who is in a state (*gata*) of just this (*tathā*). *Tathā* refers to our experience when we are fully intimate with just-this-right-now; and when we are fully intimate with just-this-now we do not yearn for anything else. A similar term is *tathatā*, “just-this-ness,” turning “just-this” into an abstract noun. *Tathatā* is the way things are just as they are. We experience *tathatā* when we cease adding any concepts to our experience, when just-this really is just-this. When nothing extra is added to experience there is no duality of subject and object, so there is no-one who suffers, no-one to whom suffering occurs. There is just the purity of experience itself.

Once when I was doing a retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh, Ajahn Buddhādāsa’s forest monastery in southern Thailand, the Ajahn was teaching us about *tathatā*. It was the wet season, and we had to tramp through rain and slush from dormitory to meditation hall to dining room to dharma hall, where we assembled each day to hear a *dharmā* talk from Ajahn Buddhādāsa. We were a sodden bunch, sitting there in wet clothes on damp hessian bags laid out on a concrete floor. Ajahn Buddhādāsa spoke about the rain. It’s raining, he said, and you think this is bad, because you are always wet, always wading through mush. Meanwhile, there are rice farmers over the hill who are dancing with joy because of this rain, because they now know they can feed their families through the next year. You think the rain is bad; the farmers think the rain is good; but you’re both wrong. The rain is just wet.

This is the radical simplicity of *tathatā*, of the entry into emptiness. The rain is just wet. When I am fully intimate with this fact, there is no room for creating a narrative around my experience: “If only the sun would shine for a change! When

will I be dry again!” Being fully intimate with just this, right now, there is no *dukkha* because there is no room to wish that anything be different from what it is. There is no room for the arising of *taṇhā* (craving), and without *taṇhā* there can be no *dukkha*.

The Buddha describes *dukkha* in this way: “separation from what one loves is *dukkha*; being united with what one hates is *dukkha*.” Because we cannot control all the experiences we undergo, we are bound, whatever our circumstances, to find ourselves in situations we don’t want to be. This is inherent in *saṃsāra*. But according to the teaching of *tathatā*, the problem of suffering is resolved once we stop wanting our situation to be other than it is. When we are so intimate with just this situation as it is right now, to the point that we have no grasping after anything else, then we have no *dukkha*.

The entry into emptiness, or just-this-ness, is the culmination of our practice. Until then, the practice is done in order to get a result, some kind of awakening. At the stage of the entry into emptiness, of being fully intimate with “just-this,” the duality between practice and awakening, between doing and seeing, breaks down. At this level of the practice, the doing *is* the seeing, the seeing *is* the doing. Awakening is awakened action.