

The ABCs of Buddhism

(14 October 2525/1982)

by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

Friends! I know that you are interested in studying and seeking the Buddhist way of giving up all the problems of life, which may be summed up as the problems of birth, illness, disease, and death.

I would like to help you to understand this topic, as well as I can, however, I must tell you in advance that my knowledge of English is not complete. It is childish English that is self-taught and self-learned. Thus, you must think carefully; try to understand and know what I mean to say. Since we cannot have a classroom lecture, my talk today must be more like a private conversation.

You have heard that the Lord Buddha, in his Enlightenment, discovered the Dharma. I would like to talk about that Dharma, that which the Buddha discovered at his Enlightenment. That Dharma may be called the Law of *Idappaccayatā*. It is the Law of Nature or the Natural Law of Cause and Effect.

The term “law” in English is roughly equivalent to the Thai term *gote*. Thus, in Thai we say *gote Idappaccayatā*. However, the Thai term *gote* means more than just “law.” Nevertheless, we must use the term “law,” as it is the commonly accepted translation.

This Law of *Idappaccayatā* is the Supreme Thing. It can be called “God.” The Lord Buddha was enlightened about this Law. Immediately after that, he worshipped this Law. He declared that all Buddhas — those in the past as well as those in the future — worship this Law in the name of the Dharma.

This Natural Law is comprised of six qualifications that all people regard as the qualifications of God, namely, the qualifications of being the Creator, the Controller and the Destroyer; of being Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient. Anyone having these six qualifications is called “God.” We Buddhists have this Natural Law as God; we look at this Law as the God that has, in reality, these six qualifications.

This is the only God acceptable by modern scientists. It is a Natural Law that cannot be established by anyone. If there is anyone or anything who establishes something, that thing is not a Law, not a *gote* in the Thai sense and especially not the *gote Idappaccayatā*. While this is only one Law, it includes all other laws — all other natural laws, not man-made laws. This Law inheres in all the atoms that together compose our universe, or universes, both physical and mental.

We ought to know this Law well, for it is the thing that controls us and all of our problems. Human beings will be happy or not happy through doing right or wrong with regard to this Law; and not through the power of a personal God, not even as the result of past Karma. We will discuss this last point later.

Whether peacefulness of the world will exist or not exist depends on doing right or doing wrong according to this Law.

I want you to think about the following suppositions in order to estimate the power of this Law. Suppose that all the personal gods intend to punish us. We can overcome all of that power and be free from their punishment by doing right according to the Law. Or suppose that all the personal gods intend to bless us. Yet, if we do wrong in accordance with the Law of *Idappaccayatā*, in order to be happy for instance, there is no way that we will receive the blessings of those gods. We can see that this Law controls all things, both animate and inanimate. However, problems arise and appear only in animate things.

The Law of *Idappaccayatā* can be seen as God. This God is indescribable and unclassifiable. We cannot know “him” as a person, because “he” is not like anyone among all of those who we know in this world. *Idappaccayatā* — the God — is the first cause and the sustaining cause, in every time and every case in our universe. It creates both the positive and the negative. There are both positive and negative results because it is only the Natural Law. If “he” were a personal God, “he” would choose to create only the positive. If we don't want any of the negative, we must know the law of the positive. We can then have positive results by practicing in accordance with that Law.

The way to practice to solve such problems is called the Dharma. The actual problem of human beings is the problem of suffering, both in individuals and in societies. Sentient beings must suffer when doing wrong against the Law of *Idappaccayatā* in the moment of contact (*phassa*). I would like you to know this especially well, since it is the essence of the Dharma. Thus, I will repeat it. All sentient beings must suffer when doing wrong against the Law of *Idappaccayatā* in the moment of contact (*phassa*). Sentient beings will not suffer when doing right - that is, not doing wrong - according to this Law. This is especially true in the moment of *phassa*.

Now we will discuss this Natural Law in detail. It is the A, B, C of the Buddha - Dharma. Sometimes we call it *paticca-samuppāda*. Altogether, *Idappaccayatā-paticca-samuppāda* means the law of cause and effect, that the origination of all things is dependent on their conditions. In short we say: the dependent origination of all things. But in this case, we intend to discuss only the problems of human beings - human suffering and dissatisfactoriness of all kinds.

To understand the process of *Idappaccayatā*, we must start from the point of the *āyatana*, which are the six sense bases and their six objects. The internal *āyatana* are the sense organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind itself. These are inside us. The outer *āyatana* are form, sound, odor, taste, touch and idea or thought in the mind.

You can see that eye comes in contact with form, ear comes in contact with sound, nose comes in contact with odor, tongue comes in contact with taste, body comes in contact with touch and mind comes in contact with idea. Then we have six pairs of *āyatana*.

Let us study these in the process of *Idappaccayatā*. We will begin with the first pair, eye and form, as an example. Eye dependent on form gives rise to eye-consciousness. Now, we have three things: eye, form and consciousness. When these three come together in function, we call it contact (*phassa*). This is a very important moment to know and study. Contact is the moment at which ignorance either arises or does not arise. If it is the occasion of the arising of ignorance, it will go in a bad way and give rise to the problem of suffering.

If in the moment of contact we have adequate mindfulness and wisdom to govern the contact correctly, then there is no way, no room and no chance for ignorance to arise. Then it is contact that cannot be the starting point of suffering. We must study, practice and train in order to have mindfulness and wisdom to use exactly at the moment of contact. We will discuss this later.

Now, I will tell you more about the process of *Idappaccayatā-paticca-samuppāda*. If the *phassa* is an ignorant one -we will call it blind contact or ignorant contact - such contact will give birth to blind feeling, feeling with ignorance. It may be either pleasant or unpleasant feeling, but it has ignorance in it. We call it blind feeling or ignorant feeling. Such feeling (*vedana*) will give birth to ignorant want or blind want. Usually, we call blind want “desire” (*tanha*). We mean blind want, ignorant want and wrong want - not simple want. You must know this. When we use the term “desire,” it means blind want - the want of ignorance, the want by means of ignorance.

Such blind want (*tanha*) will give birth to attachment (*upadana*). Attachment arising from blind or ignorant want, then, is ignorant in itself. There is attachment to anything that

comes into contact with it, including attachment to this meaning or that meaning of words and attachment to that thing as “mine” and this thing as “I.”

You need to know about the five aggregates (*khandha* in Pali or *skhandha* in Sanskrit). They are important because attachment is attachment to these five *khandha*. The first *khandha* is this body. When the body is in its function, the ignorant mind attaches to it as “I” in some cases and “mine” in other cases. Then we can see someone get angry with his body. He can regard it as “He” - “himself.” Or, in another case, he will regard it as “his” - “his body.” This is the first *khandha*, the aggregate of corporeality (*rupa - khandha*).

The second *khandha* is feeling (*vedana-khandha*). When there is any kind of feeling in the mind, the ignorant mind regards it, or becomes attached to and regards it, as “my” feeling. It is regarded as “I” or “mine,” which are the same attachment.

The third *khandha* is called perception (*sanna -khandha*). This is to perceive something as this, as that, as these or as those; as “my happiness” or “my suffering,” as “good” or “bad.” In some cases, the perception by the mind is attached to as the “I” who perceives. In other cases, perception is attached to as “my” - “my perception.” You can understand that the same thing can be attached to in two ways as the doer and as the done.

Next, the fourth *khandha*, or aggregate of clinging, is called *sankhara-khandha*. *Sankhara* in this case has a special meaning. Literally it means to form, but here it specifically means “to form” in a mental way, that is, to think. As a verb, *sankhara* means to condition, to give rise to or to cause. As a noun, it means “formation,” either the act of forming or the state of having been formed or both. Here, we use the meaning “to think,” because to think is to give rise to or to cause the conception that is taking place now in the mind of the ignorant one. One attaches to it as “I think” or as “my thought.” You should try to notice this and consider it for yourself. See attachment working in these two ways.

Now to the fifth or last *khandha*. The consciousness aggregate (*vinnana-khandha*) is to know all things that come to be in contact with eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The ignorant one will attach to consciousness, or the body of consciousness, as “I” - “I” who is conscious. And at another time he will attach to it as “my consciousness.” These are two ways.

Altogether, we have five groups of attachment. You can see that we become attached to many things, both outside and inside; attaching to them and grasping at them. All this is done mentally, as “I” or “my.” These are ignorant concepts, not the real thing. In all cases, it is only through ignorance that the conception of “I” or “my” arises towards things.

Now, let's return to attachment taking place in the process of *Idappaccayatā*. Such attachment gives rise to existence (*bhava*). This is the becoming of something - the illusive “self.” The becoming of the “self” arises from attachment. There is attachment to an illusive thing by illusive thought and so we come to have illusive becoming (*bhava*). At this point there exists the “self,” even in the stage of infancy. We call it *bhava*, or becoming.

Becoming gives rise to birth (*jati*). Here the “self” is full bloomed as a “self” that is proper and suitable to its case: to be one “I,” one “man,” one “self.” At this moment here is a self - the thing which is imagined to be the “self” or the “I.” Now the illusive “I” takes place in the process of *Idappaccayatā*.

The “I” thinks, acts and speaks in the way of attachment. Then the “I” begins to act and speak in ignorant ways, such as “this is I” or “this is my possession”; and even “this is my birth, this is my decay, this is my disease and this is my death.” All things come to be problems for such a self. This brings problems to the mind, so that the mind suffers and has suffering and dissatisfactoriness of all kinds in whatever case. This is *Idappaccayatā* in the way or process of giving rise to the problem of mental suffering. In reality the suffering happens to the mind, but as we said, it is imagined as happening to the man.

However, if we have adequate mindfulness and wisdom, we can bring sufficient mindfulness and wisdom into the process just at that moment of contact. To show this, we will repeat the process from the very beginning.

The eye, dependent on the form, gives birth to eye-consciousness. These three things coming together in function are called contact (*phassa*). Now, in this case of a man who has adequate mindfulness and wisdom just in the time of contact, he can use that mindfulness and wisdom to govern the contact. Then, it will be wise contact.

Such wise contact will not give birth to blind feeling, but to wise feeling. As the cause is wise, contact gives birth to wise feeling. Wise feeling cannot give birth to blind want, but gives rise to wise want or want with wisdom. We must differentiate this from the first case of ignorant contact. Then, wise contact or awakened contact, gives birth to wise feeling, whether the feeling is pleasant or unpleasant. This is feeling with wisdom through mindfulness. Such a feeling cannot give rise to blind want or desire, but will only give birth to wise want, which cannot be called desire.

Then, we have wise want. The wise want cannot give birth to attachment. Thus, there is no attachment to the illusive concept of “I” or “my” and there is no existence for the “self” and no birth of the “self.” There is no “self,” that is no “I” or “my,” which will be. Then nothing can come into contact with the “I,” because without “I” there is no problem of the mind at all. So we have seen *Idappaccayatā* in the process of not giving rise to problems in human life.

You can see that there are two ways or two kinds of *Idappaccayatā*. The first runs by ignorance and ends in the problem of suffering. The second runs by means of mindfulness and wisdom and is the ending of all problems.

This is the Law, the Natural Law. It is not a law established by anyone. The Law is a thing in itself. We must know this. This is what the Lord Buddha discovered in his

enlightenment. He was enlightened concerning this thing, knew it as the Supreme Dharma, and worshipped it at the time of his enlightenment. We have this Dharma - the Law of *Idappaccayatā* - as the Supreme Thing. It can be called the Buddhist God. It is an immortal or non-personal god. I would like you to know this. This is the Buddhist way to be emancipated from all problems.

Now, I would like for you to recall what I have said. This is the A, B, C of Buddhist Dharma. Everyone must start studying or practicing the Buddha-Dharma upon this A, B, C of the Dharma. Learn in your daily life from the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind when they are in their functions of seeing, listening, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. Don't learn about this from a book, but from the actual thing. There is the body, and organs of the body which have contact with the things around the body. In daily life you have your eyes, your nose and your tongue. The way to know their functions is something that you must study from such actual things. If you want to study Buddha-Dharma and know Buddha-Dharma, you must begin your study upon these things - the so-called A, B, C of Buddhism. Don't begin your study with the big, immense system of pre-Buddhist Indian philosophy or in some such way. It's useless to do such things. I would like you to study Buddha-Dharma by starting your study with these six pairs of *āyatana*: the six sense organs and their six objects when they are functioning in your daily life. Don't start from a book or a sermon or a preaching. That's useless if you want to get at the heart of the Dharma.