

Arising & Passing Away

August 25, 2008

The Pali word for clinging, *upadana*, has been taken into the Thai language and given an interesting meaning. The Thai word is *upataan*. And the meaning that they give is best illustrated by an example. You're sitting alone in a hut in the forest and you hear sounds outside—maybe the sound of a person walking around your hut, a little sound here, a little sound there—and the mind stitches it together to the point where you're convinced that there's a ghost outside. That's *upataan*. You create a whole narrative, you create a whole other being out there, simply out of little bits and pieces of sounds. You can stitch it into something that's really scary, overwhelming.

For a long time I didn't understand how that was related to the Pali word *upadana*, clinging. But if you stop and consider how we cling to our addictions, you begin to see the relationship. If you're addicted to a certain type of behavior, you create a whole narrative around your need for that behavior. You're a person who has that kind of need. But what do you create that sense of need out of? Little tiny sensations in the body, little thoughts that flit through the mind.

Say that you've been addicted to cigarettes. There are certain symptoms in the body that you tend to try to treat with a cigarette. After awhile, you begin to interpret those symptoms when they come as a sign of a need. You've created the need out of whole cloth. Not quite whole cloth, there are little sensations in the body, sensations in the back of your hands, and sensations in your chest, whatever. But you take these little impulses and you make them more than they are. You also create a sense of yourself around that: you are the person with that addiction, you are the person with that need.

This is a very direct way of illustrating the Buddhist principle that our sense of self can lead to suffering because we create a sense of self that actually wants something unhealthy, even though it knows it's unhealthy. The way to work around that is through the discernment that cuts through your clinging. One of the Buddha's definitions for the strength or faculty of discernment—"faculty" here being a bad translation for the Pali word *indriya*. It means more like a dominant factor in your mind, something that's powerful and strong in your mind. One of the definitions for the strength or faculty of discernment is knowledge of things arising and passing away, or simply knowledge of arising and passing away without even the "things"—just the process of arising and passing away. It's usually interpreted as a very advanced stage of vipassana or insight.

But you don't have to wait until you're in an advanced stage. You can simply look at what's going on. What are the sensations that trigger the whole storyline that says, oops, there's that need showing itself again. Can you look just at the sensations arising and passing away? Because part of that storyline is that when they arise and pass away, they're going to come back, and they're going to keep coming back until you finally give in to them, which is a very unskillful storyline. Yes, they will come back, but they'll go away. And they'll come again and they'll go away again. If you resist giving in to them, it's not the case that they're going

to grow bigger and bigger each time they return. They'll simply go away again.

Of course it's helpful to have an alternative way of dealing with those sensations. That's why we practice concentration, to give the mind a ready access to a sense of well-being that it can tap into whenever it needs. And around that sense of well-being you will create a different sense of self. You're the competent person who can access this well-being.

So you provide yourself with a different storyline, a different standing point for the mind. It's not a precarious place that's pushed around by the slightest little impulse. It can stand firm and begin to question those interpretations that you used to build around the little impulses, the storyline that says, since those impulses are going to come again, you might as well give in to them now so they don't come back stronger. But even when you give into them, they'll still come back again, and then you give in to them again—although it's hard to say that you give in to the sensation. The sensation just comes and goes. You give in to the storyline. You give your credence to the storyline that says, "I need this."

The sex drive is a great example of this. Certain symptoms arise in the body and the mind. You say, "Oops, there it goes. Got to give in." But those symptoms come and then they go. It's not that the body needs sex. It can survive perfectly well without it. The mind creates a story, a sense of self, a sense of what's out there in the world, a sense of what's inside in here that would induce you to give in to the desire for sex. But the actual impulse—if you sit through it and learn how to breathe through it, and learn how to relax the body around it—is not that overwhelming.

We talk often about this in terms of physical needs, but the body doesn't really have that many needs. It's perfectly content to die. *We're* the ones who want it to survive. *We're* the ones who want it to feed and do all the other functions we like.

So you have to look into the mind to see how the mind stitches things together in this process of *upataan*, stitching little sensations together and making a bigger deal out of them than they have to be.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us focus on just arising and passing away; what's immediately apparent, immediately present to the mind without going into the stories of whether there's something behind it out there, or something experiencing it, or some agent in here that's experiencing it and reacting to it. Just look at the sensations coming and going in and of themselves, and you begin to realize that they don't have the force you attributed to them. The only reason you attributed that force to them is because you wanted to use them as an excuse, but when you can begin to see that they lead you in to unskillful behavior, you don't have to play along with those attributions anymore.

So the Buddha gives you a two-pronged approach here. One is to get the mind into concentration. This is why strong concentration is so essential to the path. As the Buddha said, even though you may see the drawbacks of sensual desires, if you don't have the sense of pleasure that comes from *jhana*, you can't withstand them. You've got to have an alternative source of happiness, an alternative source of pleasure and ease. And at the same time, you need the right way of looking at things.

When the Buddha set out dependent co-arising, he wasn't trying to impress people with what a complex idea he could cook up. Some of the most important features of dependent co-arising are right on the surface. And one of those

features is just that: you look at things on the surface without trying to guess at what lies in the depths. You reduce these things to simply, “There is passing away, arising again, passing away on the surface.” You see that they are not nearly as powerful as you thought they were. They are not nearly as compelling as you thought they were. That puts you in a position of greater strength.

When you learn to look at these things simply as stress arising and stress passing away, realizing that you have better ways of dealing with those simple sensations, it goes a long way toward overcoming whatever addictions you may have. The deep-seated drives you attribute to the mind are powerful because you think that they’re deep-seated. When you learn to see them simply as constructs that you’ve placed on top of very superficial and ephemeral sensations, things that come and go very quickly, it may seem disorienting because your sense of who you are is often based around the so-called needs you’ve created. But when you’ve got an alternative way of functioning, an alternative way of seeing yourself, you’re not so threatened by the idea of letting go of those old ways.

So the combination of right concentration and right view can help you pass these issues. I remember talking to a scholar who was very concerned that Buddhism not be treated as a psychology. It was more serious than that, he said, it was a philosophy, it’s a metaphysics. He didn’t like the idea that it was just a therapy. And I countered it by saying that I don’t like the idea that it’s just a philosophy. Therapy is more important. Right view, right concentration: These are meant to be therapy for the ways the mind creates suffering for itself. Because addiction is a way it creates suffering, you want to be able to use these tools to get past your addictions: your old ways of clinging, the stories you create about the being inside and the situations outside that you stitch together out of sensations that—when you really look at them—are really not that powerful at all. When you learn how to let go of that habit of stitching things together, you find that your problems are not nearly as overwhelming as you thought they were. You can gain the upper hand.

So keep this point in mind. The Thai way of interpreting *upataan* may not quite correspond with what’s in the Pali Canon, but it does give a good insight into the process of how clinging works, and how to take the clinging apart so you don’t have to keep suffering from it.