



Dependent Origination & Emptiness 2 of 4 March 19, 2022

SPEAKER

Leigh Brasington

We want to take a look at a sutta again. This is in the Middle Length Discourses. This is sutta number 18, the Honey-Ball Sutta, and the page number in the PDF is page 43. If you still haven't found page numbers in the PDF, you could scroll back to the table of contents, and hopefully your table of contents is live, and you can just click on, I believe it's chapter 10, the Honey-Ball Sutta.

Most people don't think of this as a dependent origination sutta, but it's very definitely a dependent origination sutta. It doesn't have the twelve links. It's got a subset with some other stuff thrown in. But it made my list of Top 10 Suttas, just like the Quarrels and Disputes Sutta did. Of course, my list of Top 10 Suttas has eleven in it. Oh, well. I enjoyed Spinal Tap too much.

Okay. The sutta opens with a lay person rudely interrupting the Buddha's solitary meditation to ask what he teaches. What's his doctrine? The Buddha's answer is a bit cryptic. "I teach in a way such that one does not quarrel with anyone, in a way that concepts no more underlie one who lives detached from sensual pleasures, without bewilderment, free from worry and craving." The questioner is not pleased. He sticks out his tongue, waggles his head, and leaves.

Later that evening, the Buddha tells his monks what has transpired. A monk asked, "how does the Buddha teach in that way? And how is it that concepts no longer underlie the Buddha?"

Again, the Buddha's reply is cryptic. "As for the source through which concepts and mental proliferation beset one, if nothing is found to desire or cling to, this is the end of the underlying tendencies to unwholesome states, the end of quarrels and disputes. Here, evil states cease without remainder."

Rather than trying to unpack that statement, let's look at the dependent arisings. I'll stick that in the chat. Evil unwholesome states, such as quarrels and disputes, arise dependent upon desire and clinging, which arise dependent upon concepts and mental proliferation. This is somewhat like what we found in the sutta on quarrels and disputes that we discussed earlier. But here desire and clinging are not said to be dependent on pleasant and unpleasant, and then contact and name-and-form. Here, desire and clinging arise dependent upon concepts and mental proliferation. What exactly does this mean?

Well, after saying this the Buddha retired to his dwelling. The monks were puzzled. "Who can explain this to us?" They decided to go to the Venerable Mahākaccāna and asked him to explain it.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Mahākaccāna was recognized as 'the one who could explain in detail what the Buddha had said in brief.' Mahākaccāna says, "you should have asked the Buddha himself," but he says he'll do what he can. He says he understands the detail meaning as follows. "For each of the six senses," he says, "dependent on the sense organ and sense objects, sense consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there are vedanā. What one feels – in Pāli that's vedeti; it's the verb form of vedanā – one conceptualises – sañjānāti is the verb form of saññā. What one conceptualises, one thinks – vitakketi, which is the verb form of vitakka. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates – papañca. I'll put that in the chat.

So, dependent on sense organ and sense object, sense consciousness arises. Sense consciousness is that aspect of your mind that knows the sensory input. Like, right now, you are not aware, until I say so, of the pressure on your left foot. Oh, and then suddenly you became conscious of the pressure on your left foot. Right? The pressure was there all along. The sense organ (your sense of touch) and the object (the floor, or whatever) – that was there, but there was no sense consciousness until I mentioned it.

Or, like, look back here over my shoulder. You see the thangka? See, this is White Tārā. Put your attention really carefully on this white circle in the middle of that thangka. Look really carefully at it. Look really carefully. Now become aware of what's in your peripheral vision. What is in your peripheral vision was there all along, you just weren't conscious of it. You had your eyeball; it was working. The objects in your peripheral vision were there but, because you were focused on the thangka, you weren't conscious of them. It takes the three of these. And when they come together, that's sense contact.

Dependent on contact, vedanā arise. As I said, Neuroscience tells us that within a tenth of a second, you're going to judge the sensory input as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Most of it's neutral. You can see where this would be a useful sorting of the input. The pleasant – yeah, you maybe want to get some more of that or keep it around. The unpleasant – well, maybe you've got to deal with this and get rid of it. The neutral – you can probably ignore that. And so vedanā is a very simple thing.

Amoebas seem to have, well, maybe not vedanā, maybe they don't find it pleasant and unpleasant, but they do respond to their environment. If you put some salt into solution where there are amoebas, they run away; you put some food in, they run towards it. So it's very basic. We could say that being alive means the capacity to respond to the environment, and the most basic form of response is either towards or away. Plants bend towards the sunlight. Now, I'm not going to say they find sunlight pleasant. I'm going to say that, yeah, science says that cells growing in the dark grow faster than cells growing in the light. That's why they bend towards the light. But you can see why that's a very helpful evolutionary thing. And so vedanā is a very helpful evolutionary thing.

But our world is more complex than running away from unpleasant and running towards the pleasant. I mean, it does seem to be that's what we do a lot. One of my fellow teachers once said, "it's like, we got an instruction manual when we arrived. We open it up and it says, 'seek pleasure, avoid pain: live forever.'" Yeah, you know, they tried that during the hippie era. You



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

know, "if it feels good, do it." We wound up with a lot of drug problems. So we need to get a little more sophisticated than that.

Dependent on *vedanā*, conceptualization arises. Conceptualization is my translation of the word *saññā*. *Saññā* is usually translated as perception, but I don't think that fully captures it, so I want to translate it as conceptualization. For example, I'm holding up a card and on it – can you people see the bird and the flowers? Nod your head if you can see the bird and the flowers. You all see the bird and the flowers. There's no bird or flowers. There's just colored shapes. That's all there is is colored shapes. You make up the bird and the flowers in your mind. You take the colored shape and you make it up into bird and flowers.

Or this – can you see this? Can you tell what it is? Right? No, because I'm not still. You can see this colored shape, but if I hold it still, you go, "oh, it's a bodhisattva." Right? The colored shapes were there, but you couldn't quite conceptualize what the colored shapes represented till I held it still. This is conceptualization.

You hear a sound and you conceptualize it as bird. You didn't hear the bird. You heard a sound and you conceptualized it as bird. You smell a smell, and you smell roses. Well, no, you smell the smell and you conceptualize it as roses. We do this with all of our senses. We get the input, we sort it into pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, and then we identify what it is by conceptualizing. We give it a name. This is usually perception, but I think conceptualization is a more accurate word to use in this case. And we do it all the time.

I mean, you're looking at me on the screen, I assume, and you can see that I'm wearing glasses, right? No, you see pixels; you don't see glasses, you see pixels, and you interpret those pixels as, "the guy is wearing glasses." Right? It's easier to see it, you know, with a painting like this, where it's just colored shapes, and I'm making up the bird and the flowers. But it's that way for everything. Anything you see, all your eyeball sees is colored shapes, and then you interpret it to be what you think it is. Your interpretation hopefully is correct, but sometimes it's not. We do have the word 'misperception.' Yeah, that's 'mis-*saññā*-ing.'

Once we've conceptualized, then thinking arises. So I hold this up, you see the bird and the flowers, you conceptualize the bird and the flowers, and you think, "oh, I gotta get a card for my niece. Her birthday is tomorrow." So you've taken what this is, and then you've run off into something else – you start thinking. Or you think, "that's a really nice painting. I wonder who painted that painting." Or you think, "he just really likes that – he's holding it up for the third time. Some weird thing going on." I mean, whatever comes to your mind.

So there was the sensory input, and then there's the downstream processing of the sensory input. That's the thinking. And if the thinking gets out of hand, that's mental proliferation, which, in Pāli, is *papañca*. *Papañca* is one of the best words in Pāli. I mean, we do *papañca* all the time. You hear something, you see something, and you start thinking about it, and then you run off into who knows what.

There's a story about a man whose wife asked him to go to the market and get some potatoes. "Yes, dear." So he gets his self together, and just as he goes out the door, she says, "and be



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

sure and get a good price." "Yes, dear." So he's walking to the market, and he's thinking, "yeah, she wants me to get a good price, but she also wants me to get good potatoes. You know, you can get bad potatoes for a good price, and you can get good potatoes for a bad price, but it's really hard to get good potatoes for a good price. You've got to watch those potato sellers. They'll put bad potatoes on the bottom and good potatoes on the top. Sometimes they put in a rotten potato. I hate the smell of rotten potatoes." At that moment he walks up to the potato seller and screams in his face, "you can keep your rotten potatoes," and walks away. This is papañca.

We do this sort of silliness all the time. We get some idea and we just spin out on it. And because we're thinking it, we think it must be true. I mean, when I say it like that: "just because I think it, it must be true," you can see how absurd it is, but this is how we operate. We have a whole political party that operates that way. You know. Sorry. Anyhow. The mental proliferation is what gets us into trouble.

We now have the basics of sensory input. There's an object and a sense organ. These two come together with sense consciousness to generate contact. Contact is invariably followed by vedanā. And then we conceptualize that input, saññā.

The conceptualization step doesn't always occur if you are well concentrated – in meditation or on a task. There might be a sound, but you don't bother to conceptualize what it is. I mean, you're working on your computer writing this really important email and a truck goes by outside. You hear the sound, but you don't bother to even think, "truck." Somebody interrupts you and says, "did you hear that truck?" And you're like, "oh, I guess so." Right? Or if you're deep in meditation, there's a sound, and you just don't bother to decide what the sound was; it just went in one ear and out the other. But for the most part, we do conceptualize our sensory input. And then we start stringing concepts together. That's thinking.

The usual way it's explained is in terms of the five khandhas, the five aggregates. So there's form aggregate – that's the external whatever – sight, sound – and your sense organ. And then the fifth aggregate is consciousness. The two, form and consciousness, come together. That's followed by vedanā, saññā, and saṅkhārā – your categorization of the sensory input as pleasant/unpleasant, your conceptualization of the sensory input, and then your thinking and emoting and remembering based on the sensory input. Now, remember, saṅkhārā literally is 'making together'. So when we're thinking, we're 'making together' concepts.

Right now, I have a thought in my mind, and I bust it up into concepts called words, and I make the words come out of my mouth and hit the microphone and my computer, which digitizes it through the Internet, gets to your computer, un-digitizes it, makes a sound, and it comes out to you. You hear the sound, you conceptualize it as a word, and you string those words together – 'make together' those concepts – to have a thought that hopefully is pretty close to the thought I had that I was trying to communicate. When we communicate, basically we're taking thoughts, busting them into concepts, throwing those concepts, one at another, in the form of words at someone else, and hoping they reassemble the concepts into the same sort of thought as what we had.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

This understanding of the mechanism of sensory processing is very useful information. We can make a chart of it, which I will put in the chat. Organ and object and consciousness equals contact, which leads to vedanā, which leads to saññā, conceptualization, which leads to saṅkhārā as thinking, emoting. So the first two, organ and object, that's rūpa, and then consciousness is consciousness. And then the other three are the other three aggregates: vedanā, saññā, and saṅkhārā. This insight into understanding how we interface with the world of our sensory input is very helpful in exploring many aspects of the Buddha's teaching, as well as our own direct experience.

It's very important to realize this is not a one-shot deal. The thinking that arises is input to the sixth sense. And so it also generates a vedanā. It may also generate a new concept. And the new concept and the old concept may be put together to generate more thinking, which is going to generate some more vedanā because it's another input to the sixth sense. In fact, I read a long time ago an article that said that 80% of our mental activity is generated by other mental activity; only 20% comes through our senses. Unfortunately, I didn't save the article. I saw it on the New Scientist website more than a decade ago. But most of what's going on is stuff we're making up in our head. We get an external sensory input, and guarding of the senses say, "yeah, let it go as far as conceptualization and drop it." Unless, of course, you really need to deal with that concept – it's something that maybe you need or you've got to get rid of. But mostly, we just get stuff in and then we run all over the place with it.

It's very important to realize that when there's a sensory input and we experience vedanā, we're often experiencing the vedanā of the downstream processing, not the vedanā of the sound or the sight. I can give you an example of this. I'm going to say some phrases, and you are to notice the vedanā of the sound of my voice and the vedanā of the mental picture that I'm painting for you. All right, so close your eyes.

"Tall trees."

"Green Grass."

"Big bushes."

"President Bushes."

Maybe some different vedanā on that second, "Bushes." That's downstream vedanā. I tried to say the sound exactly the same both times. But you process it differently, and you experience the vedanā of your processing.

There's a sutta about this that's really important. This is the sutta on the dart. It's Saṃyutta Nikāya 36.6. And in that sutta, the Buddha says, "Dad, a worldling," – Santikaro's translation is, "a thinker," so an unenlightened person – "a worldling experiences a painful bodily sensation, and then gets upset about it, beats their breasts cries out in pain, etc. It's like someone who's struck by a dart, who then picks up another dart and strikes themselves. But a noble disciple, a well taught noble disciple experiences the same bodily pain, but does not get struck by the second dart, does not beat their breast and cry out in lamentation."



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

We know the Buddha had a bad back. There are multiple occasions where he would give an introduction to a dhamma talk, and then turn to Sāriputta or Moggallāna, and ask them to elaborate, and he would go lie down. He would say, "I need to rest my back," and he would go lie down. He would listen to the dhamma talk, and when it was over, he would come back and say, "if I'd given the talk, that's exactly what I would have said."

We also know that in the Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 16, he said that the only time he got relief from his back pain was when he entered into the state of nirodha, the cessation of feeling and perception – the cessation of vedanā and saññā – and then he wasn't experiencing unpleasant vedanā, unpleasant dukkha vedanā. But he didn't get upset about it. He didn't hit himself with that second dart. He still experienced physical pain. If an enlightened one stubs their toe, they will still experience physical pain, but they won't get upset. "Who put this here? Rar!" That doesn't occur. It's just physical pain.

When the Buddha says he teaches dukkha and the end of dukkha, I assume what he's saying is he's teaching us the end of the mental dukkha that we generate for ourselves by our reactions to our sensory input. An awakened one would get the same sensory input, but wouldn't get upset. They would just know, "oh, this is unpleasant." They hear about the war in Ukraine, and it's very unpleasant to hear that, but they don't experience it as dukkha. And if they can do something about it, they do. They stub their toe, it's unpleasant. That's it. It's just unpleasant.

This understanding of how we process our sensory input, and about the fact that so much more of what we're experiencing is our mental processing of the external input – it's our sixth sense input. And we have some control over that. Be mindful of what's going on. Don't get caught in the craving and clinging. That's where the dukkha arises.

The second important takeaway from understanding that sensory input chain continues on in the middle realm is this delineation of the mechanism for the origination of papañca, mental proliferation. Any sensory input is going to generate vedanā, and probably conceptualization, and most often thinking. And the thinking is going to generate vedanā, and more conceptualization and more thinking, and the subsequent thinking is colored by that vedanā and those conceptualizations. And if there's no mindfulness here, it spirals out of control. This is the key teaching from Mahākaccāna in his explanation of the Honey-Ball Sutta. Unless we're careful, the thinking gets out of hand and spirals into papañca.

It can be truly amazing what comes up. Think about the last time you meditated. Your intention was to sit there and just notice the tactile sensations of your breath. And the next thing you knew you were in Hawaii, or you were – whatever. It's just all stuff we're making up.

Now we can understand what the Buddha originally said to the monks. "Don't let your sensory input trigger papañca. Papañca can lead to delight, welcoming, and holding. If you don't get entangled in this way, the underlying tendencies to unwholesome states are not there. This is the end of quarrels and disputes and other unwholesome actions."



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

We can actually make another chart and stick it in the chat. Dependent upon sense organ and sense object, sense consciousness arises. Dependent on sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness, contact arises. Dependent on contact, vedanā. Dependent on vedanā, saññā. Dependent on saññā, thinking. Dependent on thinking, mental proliferation. Dependent upon mental proliferation, delight, welcoming, and holding. Dependent on those three, underlying unwholesome tendencies are strengthened. Dependent upon underlying unwholesome tendencies, quarrels, disputes, and other unwholesome states arise. Mahākaccāna says it's possible to stop the evil unwholesome states from arising at any point in this chain.

And yes, sometimes it is necessary not to look. I mean, I'm hopeful that all of you are discriminating in what movies you watch, what TV programs you watch, where you go on the Internet, what books you read, etc. There's a lot of really, well, papañca-producing stuff out there. For example, mainstream news in America is all about capturing your eyeballs. They're not really interested in giving you information. They're really interested in capturing your eyeballs. So they're going to present the information that they use to try and capture eyeballs in a way that's mostly tailored to capturing your eyeballs, so that you'll spin out into fear and so forth so you'll keep watching because you need the information so that – well, anyhow, that's what they're trying to do. So you want to be really careful about where you get your news. And you want to get your news in small doses. I mean, 24-hour news? I don't think anybody needs to watch the news 24 hours. Right? It's all available on the Internet. There are places like the BBC that aren't quite so hysterical. And this applies for everything else. I mean, on the Internet, you can find anything. But on the Internet, you don't want to find just anything. You want to be discriminating where you go. And then once you find something pleasant, enjoy it, let it go. Don't get lost in it. You find something unpleasant, deal with it, but don't get lost in it.

We can't shut off our senses completely. We need them to navigate our environment. Ayya Khema used to say that they're not an amusement park. There are going to be contacts, and that's invariably going to generate vedanā. So you're not going to be able to shut off the vedanā if you're getting sense contacts. If you're well concentrated, then maybe that's the end of it, but most of the time, we're just not that well concentrated, so there is going to be conceptualizing, and we're going to deal with the concepts through thinking. It's really important that you get your mindfulness in there so your thinking doesn't spiral out of control.

Remember in dependent origination we had sense contact, vedanā, craving. Well, that's a big gap in there. Craving is a type of thinking – we could even say it's papañca. So there's going to be sense contact vedanā. And there's going to be conceptualization, which isn't mentioned in the twelve links of dependent origination. And there's going to be some thinking that's happening in response to that sensory input.

The second establishment of mindfulness, second foundation of mindfulness: mindfulness of vedanā. If you're mindful of your vedanā, now you're getting your mind in there between the vedanā and the craving, at the conceptual level, early thinking level, but you don't let it go all the way to the craving. This is what the second establishment of mindfulness is about. If I had to say the most important of the four establishes the mindfulness, it's the second one on vedanā. Of course, you've got to do the first one, body, first to learn how to be mindful. That's where you



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

begin to pick up the skills on mindfulness. Mindfulness is really important. After all, this is the Sati Center, the 'mindfulness center,' sponsoring today's talk.

After Mahākaccāna explains all this, the monks go back to the Buddha and ask him, "this Mahākaccāna said it was this. Is that right?" And the Buddha says, "yes, if I had explained it, I'd have explained it exactly this way." And then Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, says to the Buddha, "Venerable Sir, just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness came upon a honey ball, wherever he would taste it, he would find a sweet, delectable flavor. So, too, Venerable Sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, wherever he might scrutinize with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind. Venerable Sir, what is the name of this discourse?" "Ānanda, you may call it the Honey-Ball Sutta."

So – questions, comments.

Questioner:

Thank you, Leigh. Wonderful talk. I enjoyed it. So everything based on your saying is that then everything is my projection, and then it's also everybody else's projection. Because I see things and create, and I just think, "what they said." No wonder there's so much misunderstanding because I am saying something, but it doesn't go through. And also the second part of that, is that I've heard that the easiest place to cut through the chain is the feeling tone. I think that's what you kind of referring to at the end.

Right, exactly. The feeling tone, I think 'feeling' is a terrible translation of *vedanā* because too many people think it's emotions, and it's not. So cut it between the *vedanā* and the craving. So yeah, get your second order of mindfulness right in there.

Questioner:

If I miss it, it's easier, it's possible to cut it in the thinking level, though, and going back to *vedanā*, right?

Yeah. You want to get your mindfulness between the *vedanā* and the craving, but there's a bunch of thinking in there, too. So you've got a little bit of time – not much. You've got a little bit of time. Get it in there, and, yeah.

Questioner:

Then everything is a projection, right? I mean, everything is basically projection of my mind and everybody else's, there is not a lot there.

Yeah. You've never actually seen anything except neurological activity in your visual cortex. And then you interpret that visual cortex activity into person, thangka, computer, ceiling, floor. Now, hopefully your projections are somewhat accurate. I read a very interesting book a few years ago on some of the neuroscience that's going on, and there's bottom-up input and top-down input, and the two come together and that's what we see. The bottom-up is what's actually coming through our senses, and the top-down is what's coming from our anticipation of what's coming next. This is how music works. Music is not one note after another. Music has a lot of anticipation of what's going to be coming based on what's come in the past. This is one thing



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

where you can begin to get a sense of what's going on. If you pay attention to how you're processing music, there's a sense of, "yeah, the music is taking me away," but that's also your remembering what has happened in the past and your anticipation of what's coming next. It's that way with everything. We expect to see something. So many times you're reading along and you expect this word and there's a word that looks sort of like it, and you read it as the one you expected, not the one that's there. That's the top-down processing, and you didn't quite see what was actually there.

Questioner:

Good morning, and thank you very much for this talk. I'm trying to apply all of this to my reactions when I open my email at work. It's not so much the news – it's, you know, somebody sends an email, and it's like, "are they kidding? Are we supposed to do this now?" You know? That kind of reaction. So where do I enter? I mean, I'm already in the papañca, and I'm already mad at this person. I'm just, I mean, at the point where I don't want to even open my email sometimes. So I'm trying to think where can I interrupt this process and just read my email more without these second and third darts? If you have any thoughts about that, I would appreciate it.

Yeah, this is really hard. So when you sit down to open your email, sit down and say, "okay, they're going to be throwing darts. They're not being malicious, but they're going to be throwing darts. I'm going to read this first email, and I'm going to read it to see what the dart is they're throwing, not what I'm going to do. I'm just trying to see what they're saying." And try and keep it at that level. In other words, "I'm not going to be completely caught in the email as soon as I look at it. I'm going to be looking at it almost as a disinterested person to see what sort of dart they're going to be throwing." And then, "now that I've seen what dart they're throwing, what of this is reasonable, and what can be done, and what just has to be set aside?" So instead of trying to process the whole thing all the way to, "how am I going to do this?" Alright? "What is it that's coming? What is this that just arrived?" As opposed to just being lost in there. In other words, get your mindfulness in at some of the earlier steps. And the way to do that is to prepare yourself that, "alright, I know this is probably going to be full of darts. I'm going to look and see what the dart is before I even think about how I'm going to process it." Hopefully, that's helpful.

Questioner:

Very helpful. Thank you so much.

Yeah. I know what you're talking about. I used to work in a corporate environment, and yeah, it was like, I didn't get a lot of those, but when I got one, it was really easy to spin out.

Questioner:

Hi, Leigh. Thank you so much for the talk today and for your book. It is a really beautiful and useful explanation. I'm still a little – I have questions about the best, most useful, and most possible places to interrupt the chain. My experience, or the way I experience it, is there is not very much time gap between the vedanā and clinging – maybe a little more between clinging and craving. Once becoming sets in, it's pretty tough to turn that around – although it may be possible, but pretty tough. But for me, I seem to find it most useful to work at the clinging – not



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

to go to clinging once craving comes in. Because the clinging – once there's vedanā, I seem to go to clinging pretty darn fast. Am I off track here? Or does that seem reasonable?

That's very much what we do. "It's pleasant. I want it. I've got it. I'm gonna keep it. I'm going to be the one who owns it." Yeah, I mean, just almost instantaneously, but not quite. So what the Buddha is saying in the second establishment of mindfulness is, "be mindful of your vedanā all the time." So you're trying to get your mindfulness in there right at the vedanā – for everything, even if it's very minor, just any sensory input. Can you actually become conscious of the vedanā that that's producing before it's spirals out of control? And it's tricky. Yeah.

Questioner:

But yet, would you say it is still possible, if we go into clinging, there's still the option to, "okay, I see the clinging. I can let this go. I don't need to do the craving." Is that...?

Yeah, it's possible. It's just, the further it goes, the harder it is. But, yeah, it is possible to let it go at any point along there. So, we've got vedanā here, and we've got dukkha over here. Anyplace before it hits the dukkha, if you can let it go, then it's fine. Right? The easiest light switch to manipulate is, "don't do the craving," you know, keep the craving switch off. But if the craving gets on, can you turn off the clinging switch? Okay, if the clinging switch got on, you start becoming. Now it's really – you're wrapped up in identifying with it. Now it's going to be really hard to turn it off. But if you can, turn it off. Your car – you identify with your wonderful car. Right? "It's my car." Right? You know, something terrible happens to your car, you're really, really upset. It's almost like it's an attack on your person because it's your car. Right? You've gone so far there. Could you, when your car wears out, you know, it's like, "you know, it's going to cost more to fix this than the car is worth." Can you let it go at that point? Well, depends on how wrapped up in identifying with 'me' as 'my car.' If you could just say, "yeah, I guess so. Let it go," you know, and collect the insurance and whatever, then yeah, no, dukkha. But that's really hard to do, especially if you've got a nice car and it's been on all these great trips with you. I mean, yeah, you wrap yourself up and it gets really hard. So the idea is to get as close to the vedanā as possible to let go, because that's the easiest place. It's also hard because we just go right so fast, all the way up to, "it's me. I own it." It's either, "me," or, "I own it," or whatever, just almost instantly. It takes practice.

Questioner:

I had a similar question. Maybe you can help me with it. The suffering that I've been going through the most lately is related to my family. My sister and her alcoholic husband have a very dysfunctional relationship, and he recently had a stroke and heart attack and he's been in rehab and almost died, and it's been really a huge family crisis to support my brother-in-law and my sister. And the part that makes me suffer the most is experiencing their dysfunction between the two of them and seeing how emotionally unhealthy my sister is. To help her through this, she calls me and tells me what's going on. And it disturbs me to hear what she has to say because she's so dysfunctional, and so attached to him being the way he used to be, which he will never have again, because his brain's damaged. So I've been working this whole time trying to figure out, "what is my wrong view about this? Where do I keep getting caught that it's upsetting me so much to have to listen to her?" So what I think I'm hearing you say is – to catch it – perhaps just to think of them as just two people, because there's nothing I can do about their relationship. If I



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

were to hang up the phone and not talk to her, that would damage my relationship with her. What's your advice to me? Where do I catch my suffering?

It sounds to me like your dukkha is that your sister is not how you would like her to be. I mean, this is most of our dukkha. Reality is not like we would like it to be. So your sister is unable to be like you would like her to be. You would like her to be more highly functioning in this critical environment here that she's facing. So can you help her to deal with what she's facing better? Sometimes, maybe you can. Sometimes...

Questioner:

She, boy, she, "argh!" No matter what I've tried – I've tried everything. Nothing works. She just, "argh!" at me.

Yeah. And when she's doing that, maybe what you can say is, "but that's not helping the problem," – which she probably won't like at all.

Questioner:

Yeah, I've done that. And it's more of...

Yeah. I mean, this is really, really difficult. And I really don't have good solutions for this. I mean, before I became a dharma teacher, I was a computer programmer, and when my computer didn't do what I told it to do, I rebooted it. People don't work that way. It's really difficult. And when somebody is fixated in their wrong understanding of what's going on, and they don't want anything other than for their understanding to be correct, it's really hard to fix anything. And so you, one, have to take care of yourself, because you're not going to be any use to your sister at all, if you're not taking care of yourself. And you have to say things to her like, "you know, I hear what you're saying. I hear how painful it is. I wish it wasn't like this," and then offer what advice you can with no attachment to her doing it, and realize she's probably going to reject it. And then the next time, again, maybe you can offer some new advice that she's not going to do. One of the things I learned fairly early on – there was a movie called, "Do the Right Thing," back, probably late eighties I think. Good movie. At about the same time I saw the movie, there was an article in the Inquiring Mind – remember the Inquiring Mind? – by Joanna Macy, and basically it was, "don't be attached to the results." And so that's been my mantra. "Do the right thing. Don't be attached to the results." So, say to your sister what you think is going to be the most helpful thing, and don't be attached to the results, because it sounds like you're not going to get the results that you want, that she's got so much going on that she's unable to actually hear what you're saying. But just keep putting out what you think is the best advice you can give her because she wants some help. So you give her what help you can, but don't be attached to the results. That's about the best I can offer. I wish I had more. Good luck.

Questioner:

Thank you. It's been very painful.

Yes, it sounds like it. Yeah.



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

All right. Okay, I don't see any hands up. It's, well, where I am, it's noon – it's ten past the hour. I assume probably a number of you are on the West Coast. So we're going to take a lunch break. For those of you in eastern time, I guess maybe it's a meditation break for you. So at the top of the hour, which is five-oh, fifty minutes from now – one o'clock on the West Coast, and I guess it's four o'clock on the East Coast – we'll talk about the general principle of dependent origination, which actually is far more important than the links – though, the Honey-Ball Sutta links are really, really important. So, enjoy your lunch. When you're done with your lunch, come back and meditate. At the top of the hour – one o'clock on the West Coast, four o'clock on the East Coast – we'll talk about the general principle of dependent origination.