



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week One: Ṭhānissaro's interpretative framework

Introduction

In this course we will examine the Buddha's teaching through the interpretative framework provided by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), a contemporary Theravāda *bhikkhu* (fully ordained monk) trained in the Thammayut tradition of Thai Buddhism. Ṭhānissaro's most important books are *The wings to awakening*, which provides the basic text for our course, and *Mind like fire unbound*, a study of *nibbāna* through the Buddha's use of the fire metaphor. Both have been published by Dhamma Dana publications, and are available on the internet at Access to Insight, www.accesstoinsight.org.

Ṭhānissaro is interesting because he has his own particular interpretation of the Buddha's teaching, which integrates theory (his broad sense of what the Buddha was saying) with practice (what one must *do* to understand and finally embody this teaching). He also provides his own translations of the texts, using new terms to convey what he feels is the core meaning of key terms. The result is an integrated vision of the Buddha's teaching which provides a consistent and compelling view of Buddhist theory and practice. We may or may not agree with his interpretation, but any attempt to understand a particular aspect of the Buddha's teaching will be enriched by an understanding of Ṭhānissaro's reading of the matter.

This week we will look at the broad framework of Ṭhānissaro's interpretation as contained in his writings. Before we begin this, however, we will look briefly at the wings of awakening themselves.

The list of lists

The Buddha's teaching includes a swag of numerical lists, among which the four noble truths and the eightfold noble path are among the best known. The *bodhi-pakkhiyā dhammā* are the "qualities on the side of awakening," or "qualities that contribute to awakening," or simply "wings of awakening." The translation "wings of awakening" comes from the literal meaning of *pakkha* (from which *pakkhiyā* is derived) as "wing." The 37 wings of awakening constitute a list of lists, the tradition's summary of the complete path, contained in a set of seven lists:

- Four "foundations of mindfulness" or "frames of reference" (*satipaṭṭhānas*).
- Four "right endeavours" or "right exertions" (*sammāpādhānas*).
- Four "bases of success" or "bases of power" (*iddhipādas*).

- Five “faculties” (*indriyas*).
- Five “powers” or “strengths” (*balas*).
- Seven “factors of awakening” (*bojjhaṅgas*).
- Eight factors of the “noble eightfold path” (*ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*).

The Buddha used this set of *dhammas* (“phenomena,” “qualities”) as a summary of his teaching. Later in the Buddhist tradition this list of lists was considered so important that it became equivalent to the entirety of the path, for teachers as widely separated as Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the definer of Theravāda orthodoxy, and Vasubandhu, a founding teacher of the Mahāyāna.¹

Ṭhānissaro asks, why seven sets and 37 factors? He points out that in both music and astronomy, two of the important sciences of the Buddha’s time, the number 37 had a strong symbolic connotation with completeness. The number seven also symbolised treasure. The sea had seven treasures [§18],² as did the universal monarch [M.129],³ and the Buddha links the set of seven to this symbolism when he states that the seven sets are the treasures of his teaching. Further, musicians in India recognized seven systems for tuning the musical scale, and the Buddha may have been suggesting here that there are seven possible ways in which a *samaṇa*, someone “in tune” (*sama*), could be tuned to the truth.⁴

Ṭhānissaro’s approach

Ṭhānissaro seeks to understand the Buddha’s teaching through what he calls “the principle of skilful *kamma*.” This principle entails both the “how” and the “what” of the teaching. By “how” I mean the practice taught by the Buddha, what we are meant to *do*, and by “what” I mean what both guides the practice (the *dhamma* as the underlying system of dependent arising) and is ultimately realised by the practice (*nibbāna* as the goal).

For Ṭhānissaro the key is skill, what one *does* to solve the fundamental human problem. The Buddha calls this problem *dukkha*, translated by Ṭhānissaro as “stress.” Ṭhānissaro chooses “stress” to convey the sense of “strain on body or mind” conveyed by *dukkha*, “ranging from the intense stress of acute anguish or pain to the innate burdensomeness of even the most subtle mental or physical fabrications.”⁵

The idea of “skill,” the way we do things, entails “path,” the way taught by the Buddha to overcome *dukkha*. In a broad sense this is the noble eightfold path of the

¹ R. M. L. Gethin. *The Buddhist path to awakening: a study of the bodhi-pakkhiyā-dhammā*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001: 23.

² The symbol § followed by a number indicates a reading from the suttas translated by Ṭhānissaro in his *Wings*.

³ The capital letter M followed by a number indicates a numbered sutta from Majjhima Nikāya.

⁴ Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *The wings to awakening: An anthology from the Pali canon*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana, 1996: 59.

⁵ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 346.

texts, or whatever we do to solve our fundamental problem of *dukkha*. In the narrow sense, skill involves the specifics of meditation “method” or “technique,” the details of what we do on the meditation cushion to bring the mind to *nibbāna*, the cessation of *dukkha*.

“Path” always implies “goal,” the place to which the path leads, that which fulfils the path. This is *nibbāna*, translated by Ṭhānissaro as “Unbinding.” He chooses this translation on the basis of the Buddha’s use of the metaphor of fire. He points out that because the Buddha explained *nibbāna* in terms of the extinguishing of a fire, western scholars have seen *nibbāna* as “extinction,” some form of non-existence. But the people of the Buddha’s time had a different physics, and so a different understanding of fire and what happens when a fire is extinguished. For them, “a fire, in going out, did not go out of existence but was simply freed from its agitation and attachment to its fuel.”⁶ So for the Buddha, a fire “gone out” is a fire liberated from all limitations, and in particular, liberated from agitation (and so at peace) and from attachment (and so free). For this reason, Ṭhānissaro accepts the Theravāda commentarial reading of *nibbāna* as “unbinding.”

Path and goal are as inseparable as journey and destination, so *nibbāna*, the goal of the path, is inseparable from practice, the walking of the path. The meditation practice practised and taught by Ṭhānissaro is *ānāpānasati*, “mindfulness of in-&-out breathing,” or keeping the breath in mind. *Ānāpānasati* is practised in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna*, usually translated as the “foundations of mindfulness,” but by Ṭhānissaro as the “frames of reference.” The culmination of this practice, that which brings to mind to *nibbāna*, is the “entry into emptiness” (*suññatā avakkam*) and “non-fashioning” (*atammayatā*).

The metaphysics underlying the Buddha’s project of liberation is provided by dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*, translated by Ṭhānissaro as “dependent co-arising”). Dependent arising has implications for practice, for it teaches us that reality is workable. The world as we experience it is not simply given as the decree of a divine dictator, nor as the inevitable result of causes from the past. Reality is workable, our situation is workable, which means that skill is always an option. What we choose to do, now, matters, for ultimately only our actions are real. This entails *anattā* (“not-self”), because there exists *only* actions and their results, rather than the one who acts and is affected by the results of actions.

Dependent arising

Dependent arising provides a language within which one can speak of causality without reference to the existence or non-existence of any entity subject to causation. In other words, a language of not-self (*anattā*). Dependent arising also allows a radically first person approach to the problem of *dukkha*. We have been speaking of practice, what we do and what happens as a result of what we do. This reminds us that the Buddha is concerned only with the nature of human experience, from the perspective of the one undergoing the experience. The Buddha’s teaching is a first person discourse, unlike science which is a third person discourse. Science attempts a purely “objective” view, looking at the world of human experience from a point beyond. The experienced world is “out there” somehow; but

⁶ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 346.

for the Buddha, we are part of the world. We are, in a sense, the world, for the world has no reality separate from our experience of it.

These two factors, a way of speaking about experience without reference to anyone who undergoes experience combined with a first person perspective, make possible a radically phenomenological analysis of human experience, a way of relating to experience as no more than the experienced present, projecting nothing else into it. This phenomenological analysis is, of course, *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*, or insight meditation. There is an intimate relationship between the Buddha's theory and his practice, to the extent that it is extremely difficult to understand what he is talking about in the absence of meditation practice. Ṭhānissaro explains:

As with all insights gained on the phenomenological level, dependent co-arising is expressed in terms closest to the actual experience of events. Only when a person has become thoroughly familiar with that level of experience is the analysis fully intelligible.⁷

An implication of this is that dependent arising is meant to be understood only as a view *from the present*. Right now, certain causal factors are arising and ceasing. Right now, we can look back and see how these factors have been influenced by the past; right now, we can look forward and see how these factors will influence the future. But this understanding of time and process over time occurs *only* in the experienced present. So to attempt to understand dependent arising from a third person perspective, in which we mentally step outside this experienced process and view it from that point, does not work. Dependent arising can only be understood from within it. For when we speak of experience, we speak of the experienced *present*; when we speak from a third person perspective, we leap beyond experience, and therefore beyond the present into time *as something real*; more real, perhaps, than each particular event within time. Our sense of identity, of course, is founded on the supposed reality of time, and so identity crumbles when it is experienced only in and as the present.

The Buddha's teaching on dependent arising is summarised in a verse found scattered throughout the Nikāyas, which Ṭhānissaro translates as:

When this is, that is.
From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
When this isn't, that isn't.
From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that.

Ṭhānissaro points out that this verse expresses two different aspects of causality, *linear* ("From the arising of this comes the arising of that; From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that") and *synchronic* ("When this is, that is; When this isn't, that isn't.") "Linear" causation implies cause and effect over time: a cause *now* gives rise to a result *later*. "Synchronic" implies cause and effect *in the present*: a cause now gives rise to an effect now; or, cause and effect arise together and inseparably. These two aspects of causation are intimately related, but distinctly different.

⁷ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 43.

“From the arising of this comes the arising of that; From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that.” This implies linear causation, which entails *time*, and therefore past and future. With past and future comes the domination of time. If what we experience now is the result of what happened before, and if what we do now in response to this experience has results in the future, then we are stuck in time. We are prisoners of our past actions, bound to future results of present actions, and an exit from this infinite network of cause-&-effect – *samsāra* – is impossible.

“When this is, that is; When this isn’t, that isn’t.” Causation is not just linear, it is also synchronic. This means that any given situation – *this* situation here and now – is influenced by two sets of conditions: those that are the result of the past, and those that act from the present.⁸ This situation here and now is made up of both causes and results. Present causes, including our own input through our choices to act, give rise to both present and future results. Present results, this which we experience as our situation now, arises from both past and present causes.

This means that the present situation is open to change, and so both present and future are workable. The point of workability is the situation (both time and place – here and now) where/when our present input affects present or future. But the network of experienced causes and results are not just open; it is fundamentally unstable, liable to complete collapse. And the point of systemic collapse is the situation (both time and place – here and now) where/when our present input affects the present.

If causes and effects were entirely linear, the cosmos would be totally deterministic, and nothing could be done to escape from the machinations of the causal process. If they were entirely synchronic, there would be no relationship from one moment to the next, and all events would be arbitrary.⁹

The fact that both aspects are true makes the cosmic network workable. It allows us to learn from the past, shape the future, and respond, now, to the results of *kamma*, for while linear causality – manifesting as the tyranny of the past and the inevitability of the future – limits what we can do now, synchronic causality allows the room for free will, and so the shaping of the present and future.¹⁰ And if there is room for the shaping of present/future, there is room for skill, and practice. But synchronic causality allows for more than the shaping of present/future, for this would *change* *samsāra* but not *end* it. Synchronic causality contains the potential to bring the whole network to an end, which we would experience as liberation, or “unbinding” – *nibbāna*.

This infinitely complex structure of experienced reality is captured by the Buddha’s metaphor of dependent arising as catchment area rather than, as often presented in western accounts, a “chain” of causation. A chain is linear; a catchment area is a lot more complex. A catchment area consists a complete system made up of an infinity of individual parts, from tiny streams at the tops of the mountains, to

⁸ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 11.

⁹ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 12.

¹⁰ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 12-13.

developing creeks, gorges, rapids, waterfalls, and so on, down to broad flowing rivers, billabongs and deltas, all flowing into the ocean.

At any moment – at this present moment – all these different aspects of the catchment area are real; all are happening, now. And any aspect of this network is available, now. But this present complex web consists of innumerable individual flows of water, from tiny stream to broad delta, and any one or more of these can be traced in linear form from beginning to end; and any such linear form entails genuine differences over time.

All this is expressed in the verse giving us the principle of *idappaccayatā*, “specific conditionality,” or, as Ṭhānissaro translates it, “this/that conditionality.”

When this is, that is.

From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

When this isn't, that isn't.

From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that.

This describes a non-linear principle that is regular, but so complex that its movements cannot be predicted, and that is capable of being dismantled.

Unlike the theory of linear causality – which led the Vedists and Jains to see the relationship between an act and its result as predictable and tit-for-tat – the principle of this/that conditionality makes that relationship inherently complex. The results of kamma experienced at any one point in time come not only from past kamma, but also from present kamma. This means that, although there are general patterns relating habitual acts to corresponding results [§9], there is no set one-for-one, tit-for-tat, relationship between a particular action and its results. Instead, the results are determined by the context of the act, both in terms of actions that preceded or followed it [§11] and in terms [of] one's state of mind at the time of acting or experiencing the result [§13].”¹¹

Saṃsāra is an immensely complex system that is not deterministic in nature because of the connections of synchronic causation that constitute “feedback loops” with the potential to destabilise the system. These feedback loops represent instances of present action giving rise to present result, regardless of our inheritance from the past.

Ṭhānissaro cites chaos theory as an equivalent form of understanding in contemporary science. Chaos theory shows that any causal system that contains three or more feedback loops rapidly becomes extremely complex and unstable. To find a way out of such instability and complexity “requires that one find a reliable analysis of the sensitive points in the system and how that can be skilfully manipulated in a way that brings the system down from within.”¹² This deconstruction of the system of *saṃsāra* results in *nibbāna*, “unbinding,” or final liberation, and it comes about through an exploitation of the synchronic, and therefore open and unstable, aspect of the system.

¹¹ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 40-41.

¹² Thanissaro. *Wings*. 14.

Skilfulness

If the system of *saṃsāra*, which results in *dukkha*, can be shaped and ultimately brought down by skilful action, then we should learn about skilfulness in order to become sufficiently skilful to gain liberation.

Notice how the idea of “skilfulness” entails a first person perspective; that reality is shaped, whether we are aware of it or not, and therefore we should seek to shape it for the benefit of ourselves and others. So the *dharmas*, the “mental qualities” that shape our lives, are not so much “things” as “events,” events of our own making. We make them, but within conditions already given by the facts of linear causation, which we normally experience as a solid, third person reality. Stuck in a third person perspective, and in the ideology that arises from this, we become lost in our sense of “reality,” of what is possible or impossible. These assumptions, which constitute wrong view (*micchā diṭṭhi*), prevent us from engaging in the practice; or, if we do practise, it limits our “skilfulness,” our sensitivity to context, or relationship. And this sensitivity emerges as our choice, or intention, in any given instance.

[T]he first lesson of skillfulness is that the essence of an action lies in the intention motivating it: an act motivated by the intention for greater skillfulness will give results different from those of an act motivated by greed, aversion, or delusion.¹³

So skilfulness brings us to *kamma*, literally “action,” but in the Buddha’s teaching “intention,” or “the decision to act.”¹⁴ The Buddha normally speaks of three types of *kamma*: good, bad and a mixture of the two. But there is also a fourth, “skillful enough to bring about the ending of kamma [§§16-17].”¹⁵ This is the *kamma*, “action,” “choice” or “intention,” that deconstructs the edifice of caused reality, the infinite network of *saṃsāra*, and so triggers the experience of *nibbāna*. This fourth type of *kamma* occurs through “an attentive state of non-intention.”¹⁶

Radical phenomenology

The role of skill in practice is to bring the mind to the “attentive non-intention” that is the fourth kind of *kamma*. This is an awareness that does not project anything extra into present experience. It represents a “radical phenomenology,” “a focus on the events of present consciousness, in and of themselves, without reference to questions of whether there are any entities underlying those events.”¹⁷ The Buddha calls this radical phenomenology the “entry into emptiness” (*suññatā avakam*). Ṭhānissaro explains:

[T]he Buddha does recommend a mode of perception that he calls “entry into emptiness (*suññata*)” [see M.121], in which one simply notes the presence or absence of phenomena, without making any further assumptions about them.

¹³ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 23.

¹⁴ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 38.

¹⁵ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 39.

¹⁶ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 16.

¹⁷ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 40.

This approach resembles what in modern philosophy could be called “radical phenomenology,” a mode of perception that looks at experiences and processes simply as events, with no reference to the question of whether there are any “things” lying behind those events, or of whether the events can be said really to exist [see passages §230 and §186].¹⁸

This relationship to experience is radically different from our normal one. Normally, our “seeing” of experience contains a sense of something to gain or to lose from the event. We relate to experience in terms of “What’s in this *for me*?” So normal experience always entails affect, the capacity to move us in some way. It contains both what the Buddha calls “feeling” (*vedanā*), which is affect itself, and “craving” (*taṇhā*), which is our automatic response of grasping *to* affect, and is therefore always bound up with affect. To genuinely see events as just events we must be free from *taṇhā*, and so the radical phenomenology of the entry into emptiness implies awakening itself, and the collapse from within of the network of *saṃsāra*.

Here the mind is brought to a point of “non-fashioning” (*atammayatā*), where there is no longer any present input into the dynamic causal system. The practitioner maintains this equilibrium for as long as possible, and eventually the inherent instability of the system causes it to collapse, undermined from within. “This state of non-fashioning then opens the way for the experience of the Unfabricated [*nibbāna*].”¹⁹ [64]

The way to non-fashioning and the entry into emptiness is mapped by the four *satipaṭṭhānas* (“frames of reference,” “foundations of mindfulness”), which we will look at in detail next week. In *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* this level of the practice is conveyed by the passage:

Or his mindfulness that “There is a body (feeling, mind, mental quality)” is maintained [simply] to the extent of knowledge and recollection. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world.²⁰

In *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* (M121) this is the mode of perception called “entry into emptiness.”

Thus he regards it [this mode of perception] as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: “there is this.”²¹

In *Nandakovāda Sutta* (M146) the *arahant* is compared to a cow whose inner flesh is not connected with the outer hide. A skilled butcher severs the attachments between the outer hide and the inner flesh and covers the cow with the skin again. The cow is no longer joined to the skin. Here, the inner flesh stands for the sense organs; the outer hide stands for the sense objects; and the connecting tissues stand for “passion” (*rāga*, implying obsession) and “delight” (*nandi*, the satisfaction that

¹⁸ Thanissaro. *Wings*: vi.

¹⁹ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 64.

²⁰ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 79. See also Bhikkhu Bodhi & Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha. A translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. 2nd edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001: 146 ff.

²¹ Thanissaro. *Wings*: 79. See also Bodhi & Ñāṇamoli. *Middle length discourses*: 966 ff.

comes from satisfying desire, and which then sets up another desire).²² Passion and delight are components of “craving” (*taṇhā*, literally “thirst”), the response to affect. In this state the awakened one is no longer entangled in the network of *saṃsāra*.²³

What is the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) of one who has reached such a state? This is the question asked by Upasīva, and the Buddha replied:

One who has reached the end has no criterion
 By means of which anyone would say that –
 it does not exist for him.
 When all phenomena are done away with
 All means of speaking are done away with as well. Sn 5.6²⁴

Conclusion

Summing up, we can see that Ṭhānissaro is concerned chiefly with issues of *practice*, which he speaks of in terms of *skill*. How do we respond to experienced reality in such a way as to reach the end of *dukkha*?

Experienced reality - *saṃsāra* – is a certain way. It arises and ceases in dependence upon conditions, and has no reality beyond this infinite network of conditional relationships. It is dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and not-self (*anattā*). This fact makes it workable, creating room for skill. Further, the complexity of this system makes it inherently unstable, which means it can be brought down from within.

From this comes a particular vision of the nature of the practice, which we will explore more thoroughly in the weeks ahead. Briefly, the purpose of the practice is to bring the mind to the point where it no longer participates in the creation of *dukkha* (non-fashioning); and this occurs through the skilful cultivation of a particular kind of awareness (the entry into emptiness).

Next week we will look at the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, which provide the basic framework of the practice. What are the skills that make up the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā*?

²² Bodhi & Ñāṇamoli. *Middle length discourses*: 1123.

²³ Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff). *The mind like fire unbound: An image in the early Buddhist discourses*. Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana, 1993: 28.

²⁴ Thanissaro. *Mind*: 28.