

twelve links of causation

Saturday, August 23, 1969

Tassajara

Let's continue to study about the twelve links of causation. A more classical explanation of twelve links of causation is causation of life. And, the other is causation of suffering of our life. How—why do we suffer? Very different.

I said according to the classical explanation, but actually in Agama¹ or more old scriptures, twelve links is not twelve, as I said before.² And, it does not refer to the actual life of ourselves: like before we came to this world, and after we come to this world, and after our birth. Three worlds: past, present, and future. And two-fold of—three worlds—two-fold—twelve causations of life and death. This is a so-called “older” type of explanation of it. But in old scriptures this kind of understanding is not there. But after Buddhists divided into many schools, this kind of so-called “classical” explanation of causation of life and death in past, present, future: twelve links of causation appeared. This is not so old. The old one is rather an explanation of why we suffer. And, we count the reasons why we suffer. Or, we find twelve elements in our suffering. So this is a very different explanation, and this is nearer to the teaching of Buddha himself.

The other day Peter [Schneider] raised this question. And, do you have *Life of Buddha*, written by some Frenchman—I forgot his name?³ Do you have it? Someone else asked that same question, so she must have read that book. I don't know what kind of explanation he gives for the twelve causations of life and death. Do you know? Have you read it?

Student A: I have the book, but I haven't read it.

SR: Oh, I see. It may be interesting to compare Dr. Ui's [?]⁴ or his disciple Mizuno's⁵ explanation of it. It is rather difficult for me to translate it, but I will try as much as possible.

And here he refers to the Sutra of Sati.⁶ There was a Buddha's disciple named Sati. He understood his teaching of twelve links of causation, like how we suffer, who has a kind of soul, during the past and present and future. And, he was scolded by him, [laughs], by Buddha. And at that time he said—he denied something like the self.⁷ And Buddha said the purpose of this teaching is to explain that we have no self—but people who are caught by the idea of self, how they suffer. This is the purpose of the teaching.

And Buddha said, “You should not misunderstand my teaching.” Sati's understanding was—his teaching was about atman. Something like atman, will reveal in the past and present and future how we suffer—what kind of process it takes was the teaching of the twelve links. He understood in that way, and was scolded by Buddha.

Anyway, here Dr. Mizuno is trying to explain what are the twelve links.⁸ The—ignorance—I

translated it ignorance—ignorance means that lack of understanding of our life. Because of lack of understanding of our life they will have some misconduct. Because of that, they will have suffering. That we have suffering in this world is because of ignorance.

And second one is action. In Sanskrit, action is *sasskara* [J. gyo]. And ignorance in Sanskrit is *avidya*—a-v-i-d-y-a. And the second one is action or gyo. Because of ignorance we will have misconduct. And here gyo is the same as kamma—karma. Lack of right view of the world and life will have various misunderstandings and misconduct. And, once we make some misconduct or misunderstanding even, that will result in something bad. That is why we suffer. And this means also not only misconduct or action, but also accumulation of actions which will result in the next link, which is *shiki*—*vijana*. So this means misconduct, misleading, or misconduct, and accumulation of misconduct. Third is *vijana*, consciousness or conception as a consciousness.

And he referred to our experience in our everyday life before, and, whether it is good or bad experience or physical or spiritual experience or intellectual experience or emotional experience. Whenever we experience something. And that experience will create some force. And that force will result, in some form—a good or bad result. And it may be this kind of conduct will be accelerated in a good way and in a bad way too. And, we will have a kind of custom or—what was the word he said? A kind of accelerated action. If you get up early this morning, the next morning it may be easier for you to get up early.

Student B: Habit?

SR: Yeah, habit, like a kind of habit. If you do something bad, it will create some nature within yourself. And in this way the action will create something, some result. And if you take the idea of reincarnation in consideration, in this way we will be reincarnated in various forms of life.

The next one is consciousness or *vijana*. Consciousness or *vijana*. And this is the subject, of cognition. And this subjective something, which is called *vijana* or consciousness, a kind of consciousness, includes past experience. So, this kind of consciousness we have is the fruit of our past experience of various actions and experiences. This is consciousness.

And, this consciousness is not actually in a state like white paper. This consciousness has some color as a result of past experience. Only when this consciousness is like white paper, can we see things as it is. But, we cannot—our consciousness is not pure white paper. Because it is tainted various colors, we will have various suffering. And, this color comes from ignorance and actions from ignorance. This is consciousness.

And the fourth one is *nama-rupa*, name and form. Name and form means—“name” means our spiritual being, and “form” means our body, our physical body. So this means actually our five senses and five sense objects.

Next one is fifth—next one is *uaoayatana*—the six sense organs. This is quite simple, sense organs like eyes and nose and mouth.

And the next one is *spar-a*—contact or touch. It means that our sense organs and our subjectivity, or consciousness and objective world, become one and start some action that is touch. So actually this is touch. And, this is actually, sometimes intense cautiousness will appear when subjective and objective—sense organs and sense objects come together and some feeling. That feeling will be many different feelings. And, this also includes the intensity or less intensive touch.

And the seventh one is *vedana*—sensation. Sensation means, we just accept sense objects by sense organs, we have some touch, or we have some intense sensation. But that sensation at the same time may be discrimination of good or bad. Good son, bad son; good form or bad form; or good car or bad car. When we start to discriminate the sense objects in sense of good or bad that is the next one, sensation or *vedana*.

The next one is *tcuoā*, or thirst or desire, strong desire, like when you work in the sun, you will be thirsty. Thirsty desire is the next one. And, as soon as we have some good feeling or bad feeling, you will have strong discrimination, and you will have thirsty desire for good things. That is the next one. And, this is different from love in its true sense. It is strong attachment to something. So, you know, we are very strict with our love between man and woman, whether it is thirsty desire [laughs] or true love. When it is thirsty desire it is a kind of—not evil but—we say *katsuai*.⁹ *Katsuai* means thirst. *Ai* means love. And, the purpose of zazen is to cut off thirsty love and to purify our love is our purpose of practice. And I think your cultural background is not so strict with this point [laughter]. So to me your love is thirsty desire. When you start to love someone you feel very thirsty [laughs], strong thirst for love [laughs, laughter]. Dr. Mizuno didn't say so [laughs, laughter].

The next one is *upadana*, grasping—*upadana* or grasping. I will write it down on the blackboard if I have time tomorrow. Next one is *upadana*, grasping. So, this is something similar to the eighth one, but this is a stronger urge we feel in this element—a more strong urge of desire.

The next one is *bhava*, the being. Here we have the idea of self or being. When we start to feel a strong urge to love, we understand already someone in a sense of complete self. “There is my friend, and she loves me always,” [laughs]. “She will not change her mind.” In this way you will have a strong idea of self, of someone. But actually, she will not love you always [laughs]. She will change, of course. But, we think she will not change, and she will be always young and pretty, but I don't know. She may love sometimes someone else, maybe. But we think she is always loving you only [laughs]. This is to have a strong sense of self of others and strong self of ourselves. And this is almost—we have already completed when we come to the idea of existence, or *bhava*, we have a complete foundation of suffering of this world. You are completely qualified [laughs, laughter] to have various suffering. And this is how Buddha explained why we suffer.

And, the next one, the eleventh one, is *jati*, birth. And he explains here. This is—here we have completed a good foundation to suffer and, again after completing those foundations, we will

have a new experience of suffering again. This is the next one: birth—birth of real suffering.

And the last [twelfth] one¹⁰ is—as these kinds of experiences resulted from ignorance and various mistakes and mistaken actions, so this new experience will bring us the same suffering like birth and death, or old age, or various kinds of suffering—we count sometimes four, sometimes eight. This kind of suffering will be created.

This is a rough explanation of twelve links. This is a combination of a classical explanation and a more primitive, Buddhistic understanding of Buddha's teaching. [Sighs audibly.]

Do you have some questions? Hai.

Student C: Roshi, then am I right that the twelve links of causation are each separate, each is a cause, is a separate entity? I mean, it's not, like, twelve links, each one linked to another?

SR: Mm-hmm. Yeah. It is linked to it. It is more analytical.

Student C: Each one separate?

SR: The purpose of this kind of teaching is to—what do you say?

Students: [2-3 words.] Classification? Join them? Category? Discrimination? [General discussion.]

SR: To, you know—this is head, this is arms, this is body and—

Student: Analyze?

SR: Yeah, yeah—a kind of analyze.

Students: Discern? Discriminate? Dissect, Roshi?

SR: Discern or—yeah, maybe. Anyway, we have an idea of self, and the idea of self has a combination of various elements. You can analyze the idea of self psychologically. Buddha's way is very psychological, but not only psychological. He is more analytical—understanding of our psychology, more like he knows why we suffer, and he has experience of suffering, and experience of getting out of suffering too. And, accordingly, he analyzes our psychology in that way, not only a scientific way, but also it includes the way to get out of suffering. Now, some way to get out of suffering, knowing why you suffer. To know why we suffer is, at the same time, how to get out of suffering. And, he has pointed out various elements of suffering.

Actually suffering becomes actual suffering, or the idea of self becomes the idea of suffering, when those elements combine together. So, he pointed out this way, but this is a kind of analogy of suffering or the idea of self. So, those twelve links are closely related to one another.

[Sentence finished. Tape turned over here.] Uh-huh.

Student D: —and this has come up several times. I know that [1-2 words] people have asked you about desires: should we eliminate them or what? And I've given it a lot of thought, and it seems the twelve links are like—in the West we might call it a bogeyman, something to be avoided. And I don't personally understand why desire should be avoided. And, in most of the Buddha's sutras he says, that you should cut off desire. And the image that I have in my mind is of two men seeing a beautiful woman. One is very thirsty with desire, and the other is, you might call pure desire. The man with the thirsty desire sees the beautiful woman, and the man with the pure desire sees the beautiful woman, and they both desire her, and they move towards her, and they get closer and closer [laughter]. And she smiles at them and they get closer and closer [laughter]. And the—

SR: And finally— [Laughter.]

Student D: They embrace her.

SR: What will happen?

Student D: They both embrace her. And at the time they embrace her, she disappears. And the man with the thirsty desire starts crying and pulling his hair and shaking himself, and the other one just smiles and embraces *shunyata*. He's okay, he's okay. But he had the desire like the other person, but he didn't attach himself to it. And there's a confusion between this kind of desire and the other kind of desire. And we keep saying “eliminate desire,” and sometimes I keep saying any time I have any feeling I want to stop it, you know, and it causes confusion in me. And I know that desire on another level is okay. Could you talk about this?

SR: [Laughs.] You talked it! [Laughs, laughter.] Like Buddha did. That is okay, if you understand that much. But, you have to make a great effort to keep your love in a pure form. This is very difficult, very difficult. But you have to do it, you know.

Student D: How do you do it? [Laughter.]

SR: Hmm?

Student D: What kind of practices could you advise us in order to keep ourselves pure?

SR: Zazen practice [laughter]. There is no secret.

Student E: Do you think it would help if you do understand “form is emptiness and emptiness is form”? If you understand that, even you see a very beautiful lady, if you know “form is emptiness and emptiness is form” [laughter]—

SR: You know that [laughter].

Student E: I hope so.

SR: But, actually it's not so easy [laughter]. Yeah, it is easy, but here it is not so easy. That is why you here have to make some effort.

Student F: Roshi, could you substitute maybe the word "expectation" for the word "desire"?

SR: Expectation, yeah. It, desire or thirst, expectation, and suffering—all those words have nearly the same meaning because when suffering in this sense—I don't mean physical suffering, when you cut your fingers or something like that—or some philosophical suffering coming from some pessimistic philosophy, or suffering, physical or material suffering. But suffering which comes because we expect—because we try to improve ourselves, we cannot help but trying to improve ourselves. This is our nature. It is rather difficult for us to stay in the same stage always. We want to improve ourselves, and we don't want to go back. We want to go on and on.

So here already is a kind of expectation we have already. So this is actually why we suffer and why we seek for truth and why we seek for religious life. Here the suffering is not physical suffering or psychological suffering. Maybe most parts of psychological suffering will be included. Do you understand the difference? Expectation or desire? Desire means thirst—thirst or some urge—to feel some urge, or suffering. Those words are very close—their meaning is very similar.

And, so-called [1 word] explanation of it is—ignorance which comes from beginningless past. The terminology of ignorance is something which is beginningless beginning and which will have some end. That is ignorance. It is possible to put an end to it. When we realize that this is ignorance, then that is not ignorance any more [laughs]. That is wisdom already. So you can put an end to it. But no one knows when ignorance started. And, ignorance is some inherited passion from the beginningless past.

And the next [second] one is good and evil karma. *Sasskara* is good and evil karma. The third one, *vijana*, is conception as a form. This is a more—concrete version of the twelve links of causation. And the fourth one—and the first and the second one is our past life. Our past life belongs to our past life. And, the reason why we come to this world is because of ignorance, which started in the beginningless past. And, because of good and evil karma we came to this world. And the first step will be conception as a form. When we came into our mother's womb, we will have some conception. I don't know. [Laughs.]

But next one is body and mind. More and more we will have some body, like mind and body. And, we will have, naturally, in the womb of our mother six organs. And, as soon as we come into this world from the womb, we will have first contact with the outside world. And then we will have receptiveness or discrimination. And then we will have boyfriends and girlfriends, like thirsty desire. So, it is the age of puberty. And the next one will be the urge of sensuous

existence. And, we will be a perfect human being who has fully qualified to have suffering. This is [laughs, laughter], how the classical version of it goes. And we will have a next life, and in the next life we will have birth and death and the same problems. So this is the so-called teaching of twelve links in the three worlds, two-fold way.

As I said last night, at first Buddha's teaching was not so complicated, not so philosophical, and not such a special teaching. But, as his descendants studied his teaching more and more, and their purpose—their motto was how to preserve his teaching—how to remember his teaching and how to understand his teaching, it became a more complete form. So, they felt some urge to explain it easier and in a clearer way. This version is too clear [laughs]; not much meaning in it. Easy to understand, but, you know...

So, how to preserve our teaching is very difficult. If you try to understand it in some form, or in some form of teaching or some form of philosophy, you will lose the essence of the teaching. It is like to take off two horns from a deer. This is too much, too long, so it may be better to cut here, so that people may like it [laughs]. More and more you will lose the feeling of the deer. And after that—we shouldn't cut his horns so much, but it is too late. When people feel it's too late, they start to study something they had before. That is so-called Mahayana Buddhism. They missed the original teaching of Buddha rather than philosophy.

Some of you may feel, Mahayana Buddhism is very difficult to study. But Mahayana Buddhism has more feeling of Buddha in it. But it is rather difficult to study—much more difficult than to study Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is very systematic, very well-arranged, so that everyone can understand it intellectually. But if you study it, that's all. And if you remember it, you will be a good speaker, maybe [laughs]. But you will lose your spirit of practice because you think, "I already know everything about Buddhism. Ask me." [Laughs, laughter.] "I know everything about Buddhism!" That may not be so good.

Oh! [Laughs.] I brought my watch just to set it [laughs, laughter]. If I set it, I feel very good without seeing it.

That is, you know, Theravada Buddhism [laughs, laughter]. Okay! [Laughs, laughter.] [Claps hands.] But we have to watch it—we need to watch.

Thank you.

Twelve Links Of Causation
Juni-innen (Jap.)
Dvada-aiga-pratatyasamutpada (San.)

English Japanese Sanskrit

1. ignorance mumyo avidya
2. action gyo sasskara
3. consciousness shiki vijana
4. name and form myoshiki nama rupa
5. six senses rokusho uaoayatana
6. touch or contact soku spar-a
7. sensation ju vedana
8. desire or thirst ai tcuoa
9. grasping shu upadana
10. being u bhava
11. birth sho jati
12. old age and death ro-shi jara-maraoa

¹ The Mahayana name for an ancient collection of Buddha's sermons that are roughly equivalent to the Pali Nikaya.

² SR-69-08-21, p. 3.

³ A. Ferdinand Herold, The Life of Buddha, translated from the French by Paul C. Blum, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1954.

⁴ Possibly Dr. H. Ui.

⁵ Probably Kogen Mizuno (b. 1901): professor of Buddhist studies and president of Komazawa University, Tokyo. His Genshi-Bukkyo (Primitive Buddhism) (1956), for example, has a detailed discussion of the twelve links of causation.

⁶ Majjhima Nikaya 38 (Middle Length Discourses 38), Mahatanhasankhayasutra (The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving).

⁷ Sati believed that consciousness was a concrete substance that transmigrated from birth to birth. To the contrary, Buddha explained that consciousness is dependently arisen, and in the above sutra expounded the twelve links of causation to the assembled disciples.

⁸ For convenience, the twelve links are summarized at the end of the lecture.

⁹ katsuai (Jap.), taoha (San.): thirst; to wish the five desires fulfilled in the same way a thirsty man wishes to quench thirst

¹⁰ jara-maraoa: old age and death.

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