

Exploring the Buddha's Universe

The *Paticca Samuppada* or Dependent Co-Arising

(How)...can you be lonely, with no gap between you and all there is?

- Roshi Susan Murphy (Sorry, can't remember the reference)

Now that the Covid-19 virus has caused many of us to isolate ourselves from the normally frenetic modern world it may be a good opportunity to take time to explore at least little bits of the infinity of the Buddha's Universe. No need for trekking boots and backpacks. No need for Four Wheel Drives or speed-of-light spaceships. All that is needed is an inquisitive mind....and, a black pencil and a sheet of white paper.

Background

As the story goes the Buddha was born into a high status family in a small rural, non-Brahman, republic, in contrast to the surrounding Brahman (Hindu) kingdoms. It is now thought that the Buddha was contemporary with the Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 BCE) with his famous claim that *'.....an unexamined life is not worth living'*. More than a hundred years earlier the original of the Sophoi, or the seven Wise Men of ancient Greece, was Thales of Miletus on the Ionian Coast of Greece. Thales, besides correctly predicting an eclipse of the sun, some credit as being the originator of the profound Delphic Oracle advice of – *'Know thyself!'*.

Well into his young adult life Gotama the Buddha became dissatisfied with his understanding of the causes of suffering in the world around him. The prevailing Brahman view at the time was based on a cosmology of belief, a super-natural world with Brahma as the creator, the all-pervading Universal Consciousness. The life-force or soul (*atman*) was the individual Brahma spirit in all living things, and the re-incarnation cycle of life was this spirit of Brahma leaving the mortal body at death and then re-entering a newly forming body at conception, to be re-born into the world of suffering unless the 'good' karma accumulated in the previous life or lives far outweighed the 'bad'.

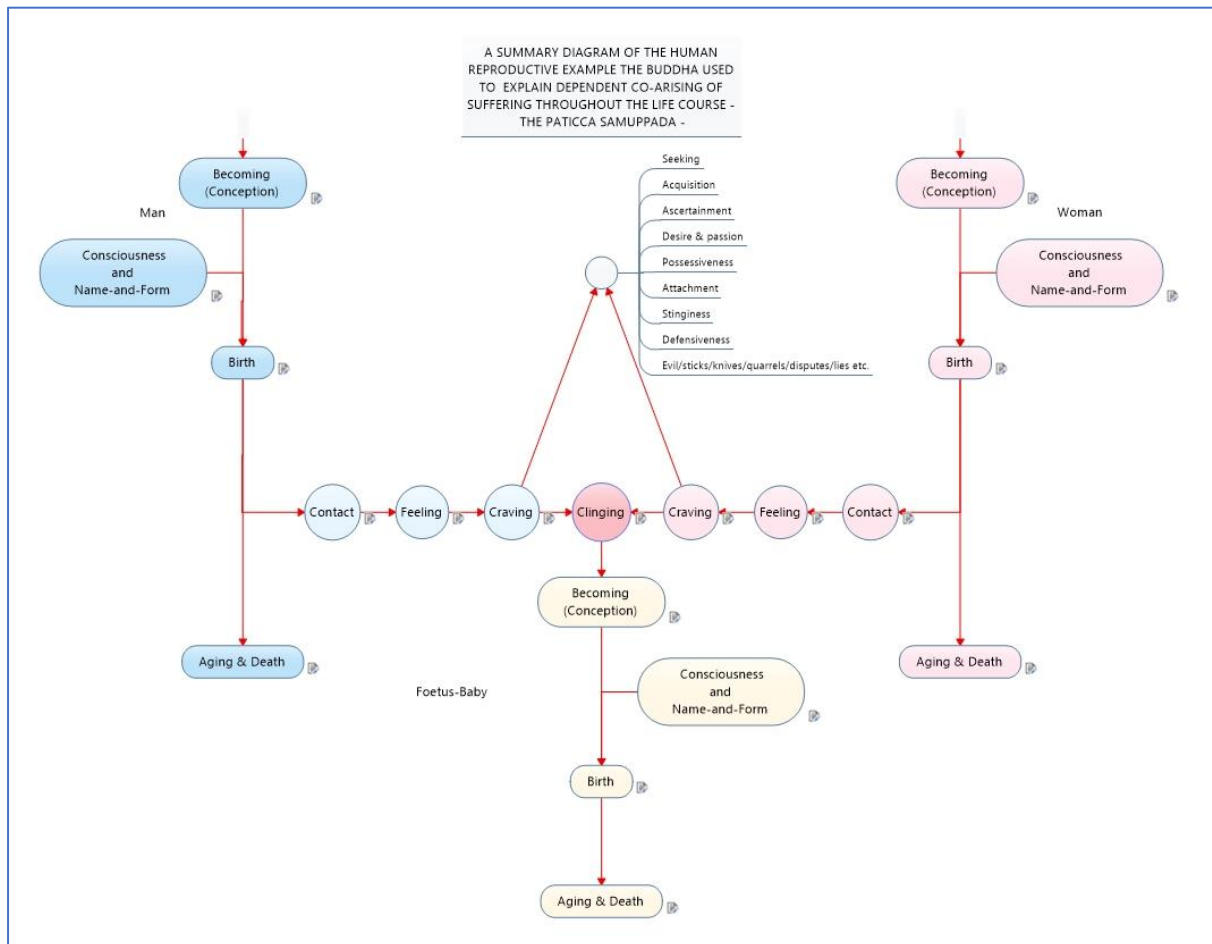
The Buddha spent six years in searching and practicing the traditional yoga and ascetic practices until, as the story goes, he gave up his searching, relaxed and sat in meditation under the Bodhi tree. It is there the understanding of the origins of suffering came to him. The methodology the Buddha used in gaining his insight or *'Enlightenment'* is set out in the Buddha's own words to Ananda, his personal assistant, almost hidden away in the Pali sutras, in the *Paticca Samuppada*.

The *Paticca Samuppada* or Dependent Co-Arising

The Buddha's description of his systematic method for gaining an understanding of the causal links of human suffering can be found in - *The Great Causes Discourse – Maha Nidana Sutta (DN 15)*, Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (online: dhammatalks.org). The relevant section begins with the words: *"I have heard"*, and finishes at the end of the paragraph headed *'Consciousness'*.

All life on Earth has the need for reproduction for species survival. In explaining Dependent Co-Arising to Ananda the Buddha uses the example of normal human sexual reproduction to demonstrate the causal links between birth, aging and death, and human suffering. Remember, the Buddha had had a wife and family before he started his six year search. If the reader is a 'visual' person like me, it may be a good idea to get that piece of white paper and a pencil, as mentioned above, as the only tools you probably need to begin exploring the 'Buddha's Universe'.

Starting with 'Becoming' (Conception) for the man in the upper left quadrant of the page, add 'Consciousness' and 'Name-and-Form' (in-utero), leading down to 'Birth'. Consciousness is one of those terrible words which can mean different things to different people, at different times. Here, we can simply think of it as the 'Life Force', the 'quickening' or the mother's feeling of movement at around 16 weeks gestation. 'Name-and-Form' and 'Consciousness' are inter-dependent as the foetus is growing in the mother's womb. If 'Consciousness' or life ceases in the womb, or at birth, then the potential of 'Name-and-Form' of a new human being is lost as well. It was common in many traditional societies not to name an infant at least until they had survived their first year of life.



In the Buddha's description to Ananda the 'normal' chain of events of human life leads inevitably from 'Birth' to 'Aging and Death'. Following this description on our piece of paper we can set out the sequence for the man on the left side of the page, and that for the woman on the right side, as in the above diagram. We can then follow the links of 'Contact', 'Feeling', 'Craving' and 'Clinging'.

In the Buddha's natural sequence 'Clinging' is the sexual union of man and woman which can lead on to 'Becoming' or conception of a new human being. The causal linkages leading up to this 'Clinging' are what the Buddha uses as a demonstration to Ananda of how suffering can arise. Firstly 'Contact' occurs between the man and woman. This is not physical contact necessarily at this stage, just that the man/woman notice each other through their respective sense systems – for example, vision, hearing, touching. This can lead to 'Feeling', or what we now know as the 'emotional overlay' that we attach to our perceptions....In this case perhaps, the 'Wow!' moment. This 'Feeling' in turn, if strong enough, can lead on to 'Craving'.

Remember, the Buddha was looking into the causal linkages of suffering. 'Craving' is where suffering can really take over, not just in relation to a potential sexual partner, but also for the related trappings of life such as the gaining of status, recognition, political power, and material goods, through – Seeking; Acquisition; Ascertainment; Desire and Passion; Possessiveness; Attachment; Stinginess; Defensiveness; Evil/sticks/knives/quarrels/disputes/lies.

So, in systematically elucidating his method for understanding the origins of suffering in human life, just using the example of the natural human drives for reproduction, the Buddha does not resort to the lazy, opting-out of a belief system, such as –

Brahma/Universal Consciousness/Atman/Kharma/Re-incarnation.

Let's Explore Further

The Buddhist Genesis: How the world came to be –

This is, because that is.

This is not, because that is not.

This is like this, because that is like that.

- from the *Majjhima Nikaya* (as quoted by Thich Nhat Han)

Some thoughts and suggestions in relation to how further exploration of the Buddha's Universe might be carried outusing just that piece of white paper and the black pencil –

1. Using your own diagram of the above example the Buddha used, draw it out in the centre of a large piece of paper. Using 'How/Why' links, as the Buddha did, work your way from any link (except maybe 'Aging&Death'!) across the page in any direction, and imagine you are explaining to Ananda how 'Domestic Violence' fits in to this tiny corner of the universe.
2. Again, if you like, starting with the same diagram as above elaborate it further through your own series of links along the lines of directions of thought raised in Roshi Susan's book – 'Red Thread Zen: Humanly Entangled in Emptiness'. That should more than fill your page!
3. Try linking the Buddha's diagram through to a koan, such as –
Dongshan was down by a creek with a monk, side by side, silently washing their bowls in the water. Two birds suddenly flew down and took hold of the frog sitting on a rock in front of them, tearing it in two as they flew off. "Why does it come to this!" was the cry ripped from the throat of the startled monk. But Dongshan offered him no avenue of escape. "It is only for your benefit," he replied.

Try linking Covid-19 to this koan.
4. The biggest challenge of them all, not because it is difficult, but because it covers the full extent of our present understanding of our universethe Buddha's Universe. Show the 'How/Why' linkages between the Buddha's 'Dependent Co-Arising', Charles Darwin's insights into 'Evolution through Variation and Natural Selection', and Albert Einstein's 'General Theory of Relativity'and throw in Quantum Theory for fun!

When we utterly accept what is here,

We liberate wild, native mind.

Mind as wide as space, and ruthlessly true to reality.

- Roshi Susan Murphy (Sorry, can't remember the reference)

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