

Dependent Origination

BY ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

While visiting the Sambosa Temple in Carmel Volleys California, Seung Sahn Soen Sa gave a Dharma talk to a large gathering of visitors on a Sunday evening.

Soen Sa, walking up to a table in the front of the room, held a stick up and drew a circle in the air. He then asked, "Do you know what this is? If you say you understand, I will hit you thirty times; if you say you don't understand, I will hit you thirty times. Why?" He paused for a few moments and then hit the stick on the table. "Today is Sunday," he said.

He then delivered this speech:

"Buddha said, 'Existence or non-existence depends on a series of causes and effects.' In Buddhism the process of conditioned life is viewed as one of continual phenomenal change. Aging and dying depend on birth, which in turn depends on becoming. Becoming depends on attachment, attachment depends on thinking, thinking depends on consciousness. This series of conditions perpetuates itself, causing suffering, the degree of which is measured by karma. The concept of karma can be defined as volition, or the act of making a choice.

"You were not born into this world because you planned or wanted to. You were born because your karma and your parents' karma caused you to be here. According to Buddhism, nothing occurs by accident; it does so by necessity through the functioning of karma. Our gathering here at Sambosa is not an accident.

"Some are born with silver spoons in their mouths; some in famous families, some in poor status: some as whites, some as blacks, some as yellows. All people have different physical characteristics, personalities, intelligences, attitudes, etc.

"Who or what creates this kind of universe where so many varieties of things are happening constantly? God? Buddha? Neither of them! The answer lies in the strict rule of cause and effect. Buddhism explains cause and effect with regard to the life continuum through the doctrine of dependent origination. It clearly shows how the cause becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. By the same token, the continuous recurrence of birth and death has been aptly compared to a circle. Death is not a release, but merely the prelude to rebirth. As long as this process keeps on recurring, suffering is inevitable.

"Craving, or attachment, initiates thinking, which in turn causes human suffering. Your thinking influences not only yourself but also everyone else,

which causes you to accumulate karma in your storehouse consciousness. This keeps you in a state of constant suffering.

"Thus, in order to stop suffering, you must first stop thinking. If you raise a thought or craving, that will differentiate you from everybody else. When you are not thinking, you and all people are one, and there is no suffering.

"The no-thinking, no-craving state of mind is the state of emptiness, The conception of emptiness in Buddhism, however, is not the total rejection of the common sense reality we experience through our senses, but rather it is the brushing off of our false views so as to see the world and things as they really are.

"The Buddha said, 'Men come and go with empty hands. Then where do they come from and where are they going? Life is like a cloud floating across the sky and death is like its disappearance over the mountain. As the cloud is without substance, so is man's life and death. It is all empty.

"The categories of existence and non-existence are applicable only in the realm of the conditioned and phenomenal world. Nevertheless, there is a seed innate in every man that never dies, that is crystal-clear and intrinsically pure.

"Then what is it that stops craving and thinking, through which you transcend yourself to reach the state of nirvana? It is the very Suchness. In this realm you are identical with everything and everybody.

"Realize that the myriad of things, alive or dead, organic or inorganic are all identical with Suchness. This is the Buddha state, the absolute and completely-independent unconditioned world where you can be with and of the whole universe.

"At the beginning of my talk I held up my stick and drew a circle in the air. If you were thinking for an answer to what it was, your answer would be no good. Only when you are able to cut your thinking will you understand. When I hit the stick on the table all our minds became one for that instant.

"I hope you understand this truth. When you do understand, I hope you will teach others so they too can stop their thinking, craving, and suffering.

"Thank you."