

A Brief Introduction to Solitary-realizer Bodhi

This article provides a brief introduction to the core content of Solitary-realizer Bodhi. What is Solitary-realizer Bodhi? It is the Solitary-realizer Vehicle, one of the three vehicles in the Three-vehicle Bodhi, which includes the Buddha Bodhi of the Mahayana, the Sound-hearer Vehicle and Solitary-realized of the Hinayana. It is also called the Solitary Buddha (Pratyekabuddhas) Vehicle or the Middle Vehicle. To distinguish the Solitary-realizer Bodhi and Sound-hearer Bodhi from the Great Vehicle Bodhi, they are collectively called the Two-vehicles Bodhi. The core practice in the Solitary-realizer Bodhi is the realization of liberation through direct comprehension of causes and conditions.

There are two types of Solitary-realizers. The first refers to those who have personally realized the contemplation on causes and conditions through their own observation and experience when no Buddha manifests in the world; they are called “the solitary awakened ones” or Solitary Buddhas, which means those who become enlightened through their own efforts without receiving teachings from a Buddha. The characteristics of these Solitary-realizers are their weak cravings and attachments to the six sense-objects coupled with low compassion for others. In addition, they are not willing to and do not look for teachers but rely solely on themselves instead, to contemplate and become enlightened in order to realize the virtues of liberation. In fact, Solitary-realizers have closely followed and studied under countless Buddhas over their past lives; however, due to their particular solitary disposition, they have vowed to become Solitary-realizers and liberate themselves from the birth and death of the three realms during the time when no Buddha manifests in the world.

The second type of Solitary-realizers are those who practice and learn from the Buddha when a Buddha manifests in the world. Through their practice, they manage to realize a small portion, a large portion, or the full portion of the Sound-hearer Bodhi. In addition to the contemplation on the Sound-hearer Bodhi, i.e., the Four Noble Truths of the five aggregates and the eighteen-elements, they further observe, contemplate, and realize that the dharmas of the phenomenal realms are arising and ceasing, suffering, empty, impermanent, and no-self whence attain liberation as well as transcendence from the three realms as the result of the Buddha’s teaching on the contemplation of the Principle of Dependent Arising.

The reason that the Buddha established the Three-vehicle Bodhi was because when He started to teach sentient beings, He found out that it was necessary to first help them

realize liberation so he taught them the Sound-hearer Vehicle first. After sentient beings managed to realize the Sound-hearer Bodhi, He then revealed the Principle of Dependent Arising, hoping to deepen and sharpen their wisdom.

Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana also have to learn and practice the contemplation on causes and conditions because it is also a part of the Dharma of the Mahayana; its complete and full realization is also a requirement for the ultimate realization and attainment of Buddhahood. The scope involving the direct comprehension of the Principle of Dependent Arising is very broad, deep and subtle. In the sutras, it is stated that after Ananda heard and followed the Buddha's teaching on the contemplation on causes and conditions, he then thought that the Principle of Dependent Arising was really simple. However, the Buddha admonished him and said, "Not so, Ananda! Not so, Ananda! The Principle of Dependent Arising is very profound, extremely profound!" In order to ultimately and thoroughly understand the Principle of Dependent Arising, one needs to not only observe and contemplate on the causes and conditions in the phenomenal realm but also realize the ultimate reality in the noumenal realm (Dharma realm); only then can one ultimately understand and realize the true content and implications of the Principle of Dependent Arising. In fact, only Buddhas can truly and thoroughly understand the Principle of Dependent Arising. All bodhisattvas follow and study under the Buddha, and because they have realized the true mind in the Dharma realm—the tathāgatagarbha—they are able to understand the more profound and subtle aspects of the Principle of Dependent Arising. This is Mahayana's Principle of Dependent Arising, which differs from that of the Two-vehicles.

The following is a section quoted from the Long Agama Sutras to expound the content of the contemplation on causes and conditions. The Buddha said, "Because of causes and conditions, the world is created; the aggregation of the world is due to causes and conditions; because of causes and conditions, the world ceases to exist; the cessation of the world is due to causes and conditions." (Volume 12 of the Dīrgha Āgama). "Because of causes and conditions, the world is created" means that sentient beings who dwell deeply in ignorance transmigrate through birth and death in the three realms and continuously accumulate causes and conditions to create the world of the five aggregates; the material world is also created with the collective karma of sentient beings. The Buddha taught that the aggregation of the world of the five aggregates and the material world indeed was due to both causes and conditions, not just conditions (only conditions without causes) or just causes (only causes without conditions). Some people mistake "dependent arising without intrinsic nature" or "all dharma are empty" for the Principle of

Dependent Arising; they mistakenly think that once all the required conditions have come together, all dharmas will be created, and once the required conditions fall apart, all dharmas will cease to exist. However, the Buddha taught that both causes and conditions are required to create the world, be it the world of the five aggregates or the material world.

“Because of causes and conditions, the world ceases to exist; the cessation of the world is due to causes and conditions” means that the noble disciples of the Buddha understand the phenomenon of transmigration of sentient beings the way it is, and they know that “because of causes and conditions, the world is created; the aggregation of the world is due to causes and conditions.” Then through the Buddha’s holy teachings, they faithfully observe and ascertain the arising and ceasing of causes and conditions, eradicate the causes and conditions that form the world, and return to the tranquil and extinct state of the tathāgatagarbha, which is the inherently quiescent nirvana. Through the observations and contemplation on the Principle of Dependent Arising, the noble disciples are able to eliminate self-view and self-attachment so that they can exhaust all future existence, accomplish all the pure practices, complete what must be done, and know that they will not incur any future existence. Due to having realized liberation and eliminated the world of the five aggregates in future lifetimes, noble disciples will no longer transmigrate through the birth and death in the three realms.

“Because of causes and conditions, the world is created; the aggregation of the world is due to causes and conditions” belongs to the transmigration-gate [process of transmigration] and refers to the phenomenon of sentient beings’ transmigrating through birth and death. “Because of causes and conditions, the world ceases to exist; the cessation of the world is caused by causes and conditions,” on the other hand, belongs to the emancipation-gate [process of the extinction of transmigration] and refers to the returning to the state of the inherently quiescent nirvana. One can achieve both the transmigration-gate and emancipation-gate by realizing the tranquil and extinct state of the tathāgatagarbha.

To explore the Principle of Dependent Arising, it is necessary to observe and contemplate from both the transmigration-gate as well as emancipation-gate. In the Solitary-realizer Vehicle, both of those who become enlightened through their own efforts without receiving teachings from a Buddha and those who practice and learn the Principle of Dependent Arising directly from the Buddha and subsequently realize it after directly witnessing and contemplating on causes and conditions (Sound-hearers) can directly

comprehend the truth of transmigration. The main goal of the contemplation through the transmigration-gate is to verify the fact of transmigration due to causes and conditions but not to directly observe and contemplate the extinction of transmigration.

The goal of the emancipation-gate is for sentient beings to continue to explore how they can return to the state of the inherently tranquil nirvana from the incessant cycle of birth and death after having verified the fact of transmigration through the transmigration-gate. The contents and goals of realization as well as the specific order and sequence of realizations of these two gates are different. If the contents or sequences are in disarray, one will not be able to realize the contemplation on causes and conditions. Therefore, before one can realize the contemplation on causes and conditions, one must verify that the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising is correct via the transmigration-gate.

So how could a practitioner of the Principle of Dependent Arising ascertain the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising? First, a practitioner should observe the various sufferings in life and explore their sources. When doing so, he will find out that there are eight sufferings—the suffering of birth, aging, illness, death, separating from what we love, associating with those we hate, not getting what we want, and the flourishing of the five aggregates. After ascertaining the existence of these eight sufferings, he contemplates on their causes. He will then realize that suffering is due to birth; when there is birth, there must be death eventually. But why is there birth? Because there is the existence of the three realms or the process of becoming. Why is there becoming? Because there is grasping. There is grasping because there is craving; there is craving because there is sensation. Therefore, if there is sensation, there will be craving; if there is craving, there will be grasping; if there is grasping, there will be becoming; if there is becoming, there will be birth; if there is birth, there will be old age, illness, and death.”

What conditions sensation? It is contact; because there is contact with a certain state, there are experience and sensation. With experience and sensation come craving. Why is there contact? Because there are six entrances. Why are there six entrances? Because there is mind-and-body. With the existence of mind-and-body comes the phenomenon of the six entrances, which will lead eventually to the suffering of aging, illness, and death. After one traces the sources all the way to the mind-and-body, one will realize that one can only trace one step further to the fertilized egg but no further. Why? Because if one traces further, one will have to arrive at the ultimate reality of the Dharma

realm—the tathāgatagarbha—that the learners of the Two-vehicles are aware of but have not yet been able to realize.

The learners of the two vehicles can only infer that there is a root consciousness that generates the mind-and-body. Regarding this, the Buddha taught: “Consciousness conditions mind-and-body; mind-and-body conditions consciousness.” (Volume 10 of the Long Agama Sutra). “When I reached this consciousness, I had to turn back and could not go beyond it.” (Volume 12 of the Miscellaneous Agama Sutra [Samyukta Agama]). Solitary-realizers have to directly observe and contemplate the ten links in the Ten Links of Dependent Arising (the aspect of transmigration of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising); through observing in forward and reverse order, they verify the fact of transmigration through “consciousness conditions mind-and-body.” Both the fact of transmigration and its causal effect depend upon this root consciousness, which is also called “the embryo-entering consciousness”, “the consciousness that co-exists with and grasps the five aggregates”, and “the embryo-dwelling consciousness”. Solitary-realizers need to verify the ten links of dependent arising first so that they are aware that there must be a root consciousness. Although Solitary-realizers have not been able to realize the root consciousness, they accept the existence of the root consciousness. In Mahayana, this root consciousness is called the ālaya consciousness or tathāgatagarbha. This root consciousness can generate and give rise to all dharmas. Through observing in the forward and reverse order, Solitary-realizers complete the contemplation on the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising and verify that there must be a true mind in the dharma realm. Because their goal is to realize liberation instead of attaining Buddhahood, they only need to eradicate the conditions of transmigration but not the realization of the true mind; they do not need to realize the true mind of the Dharma realm but only to know of its existence. Through inference on the need for the existence of the true mind, they are able to extinguish transmigration of the phenomenal realm and attain liberation. Hence, after the Sound-hearers have heard the Principle of Dependent Arising of the Solitary-realizers or after the Solitary-realizers have verified the contents of the contemplation on causes and conditions, they can be certain of the existence of the root consciousness and proceed to practice the emancipation-gate.

Before practicing from the process of the extinction of transmigration through the emancipation-gate, Solitary-realizers have to first verify that the root consciousness does exist and is inextinguishable. Then Solitary-realizers observe how the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising works during the transmigration through three lifetimes. They observe and contemplate the fact of transmigration in the Principle of Ten

Links of Dependent Arising via the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising over three lifetimes, i.e., starting from ignorance, action, and consciousness in the previous lifetime; to mind-and-body, six entrances, contact, sensation, craving, grasping, and becoming in this lifetime; and eventually to birth, aging, and death in the future lifetime. They will then contemplate how the causes and conditions in these twelve links can be eliminated to realize liberation and nirvana to attain the state of ultimate quiescence and cessation.

That is, in order to counteract the phenomenon of the transmigration through the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising, Solitary-realizers need to observe the sufferings of birth, aging, illness, death, and so on from the phenomenal realm. They realize that if one wants to eliminate the sufferings of aging, illness, and death, they must eliminate the “cause” of these sufferings, which is birth since whatever is created will definitely cease to exist eventually. They will then contemplate on how birth in the three realms can be eliminated. Where does birth come from? It comes from the process of becoming in the three realms because sentient beings possess the seeds of becoming of the three realms, which have been fostered and learned incessantly over innumerable lives, that lead to numerous rebirths over and over again in the three realms.

By directly contemplating the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising and inferring in reverse order, Solitary-realizers come to the following conclusions: After birth is extinguished, becoming needs to be extinguished; after becoming is extinguished, grasping needs to be extinguished; after grasping is extinguished, craving needs to be extinguished; after craving is extinguished, sensation needs to be extinguished; after sensation is extinguished, contact needs to be extinguished; after contact is extinguished, the manifestation of the “six entrances needs to be extinguished; after the “six entrances are extinguished, mind-and-body needs to be extinguished; after mind-and-body is extinguished, one will realize the following: mind-and-body in this life has existed since one entered the embryo and that the mind-and-body in this life is the result of the irrational acts of the consciousness aggregate in the past life. The acts of the consciousness aggregate are performed through physical, verbal, and mental acts. Although arhats also have physical, verbal, and mental acts, their physical, verbal, and mental acts are pure, and they are without ignorance. At the end, Solitary-realizers realize that the crux of the problem is ignorance. Due to ignorance, the consciousness aggregate performs incessant acts. To eliminate ignorance becomes the most important goal of the Solitary-realizer Vehicle. The above is the content of Solitary-realizers’ direct contemplation of the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising.