

An Overview of the Knowledge and Realization of the Solitary-realizer

This article briefly introduces the various knowledge and realizations attained by Solitary-realizers.

The practice of the Solitary-realizer Vehicle is achieved through realization of the contemplation on causes and conditions: the understanding, which is acquired through direct comprehension of the Principle of Dependent Arising, that all dharmas can be created only with the presence of causes and conditions, after hearing the Buddhadharma or contemplating by oneself. If one manages to further eliminate self-view and self-attachment, then one will be able to attain liberation from the suffering of birth and death in the three realms.

Through the elaboration on the transmigration-gate and the emancipation-gate, we hope to help the reader understand that the practitioners of the Solitary-realizer Vehicle must start with observing and contemplating the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising through the transmigration-gate. Only when one can observe and contemplate the dark dharma in the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising (transmigration) can one truly practice the contemplation on causes and conditions. Why is the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising called a dark dharma? Because the *tathāgatagarbha* has been collecting and storing the karmic seeds of ignorance over the past innumerable lives and causing the dark karmic transmigration in birth and death. Hence, the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising is called a dark dharma and is the true cause and phenomenon of sentient beings' transmigration in the three realms. Through observing and contemplating in reverse order the dark dharma of the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising all the way to mind-and-body, one ascertains that it is impossible for mind-and-body to be created from nothing and that there must be a consciousness (*tathāgatagarbha*) which generates the mind-and-body. One therefore understands the truth that "consciousness conditions mind-and-body; mind-and-body conditions consciousness; when I reached this consciousness, I had to turn back and could not go beyond it." As a result, one is certain that there must exist a true mind of the dharma realm, the *tathāgatagarbha*.

Solitary-realizers only know this truth but have yet to realize the true mind. They are merely certain that this root consciousness must exist to be consistent with the fact of transmigration of birth and death in the phenomenal realm that they have directly perceived and verified in the Dharma realm. They also understand that it is only because of this true mind of the Dharma realm can transmigration be accomplished.

Through such direct observation, practitioners of the Solitary-realizer Vehicle understand that there is an everlasting root consciousness that generates the body-and-mind that leads to transmigration of birth and death. This root consciousness is a neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma and does not belong to the dharmas of the three realms. They have concluded: "If that is the case, I can be liberated from the birth and death in the three realms if I can eliminate every cause and condition for transmigration of birth and death in the three realms."

The goal of the nobles of the Two-vehicles is not to attain Buddhahood but to attain liberation from the afflictions of birth and death in the three realms. Since they only want to be liberated from the birth and death in the three realms, they do not need to realize the true mind of the Dharma realm. They know: "I do not need to realize the true mind of the dharma realm; I only need to eliminate ignorance such as self-view, self-attachment, and so forth, and I will be liberated from the birth and death in the three realms." They are able to liberate themselves from the birth and death in the three realms but they lack loving kindness and compassion. Even though sentient beings who have karmic connections with them are still trapped in the sea of birth and death, these nobles of the Two-vehicles will not continue to take rebirth and save the sentient beings; they only seek their own liberation from birth and death. They know: "Even though I have not realized this root consciousness, as long as I have directly comprehended the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising and ensure that it is not nihilistic emptiness after the body-and-mind has been extinguished, I can proceed to eliminate the causes and conditions of transmigration in the three realms and enter remainderless nirvana."

Although Sound-hearers have not realized the root consciousness, they are not fearful of falling into nihilism when they continue to eliminate ignorance in their practice. After they have directly comprehended the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising in forward as well as reverse orders and reached the conclusion that the root consciousness is everlasting, they proceed further to directly comprehend the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising. From the transmigration-gate, they ascertain again that "the phenomenon of transmigration over three lifetimes is caused by the fact of not

knowing that the five aggregates are illusory and not being able to eliminate ignorance.” They finally realize that such transmigration indeed is huge suffering. They observe the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising in reverse order, starting from sufferings of aging, illness, and death, to birth, to the process of becoming, and eventually to the link of ignorance and ascertain that “this is how I transmigrated!”

The real reason for sentient beings’ transmigration is ignorance about the truth of the Dharma realm as well as the phenomenon of transmigration. Due to ignorance, they misunderstand and mistake anyone of the twelve links in the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising (especially the link of the consciousness aggregate) as everlasting and unchangeable and grasp it as a real existence. They do not know that the form, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness aggregates of the five aggregates are being grasped and are defiled, and they fall prey to the appropriated five aggregates and therefore continue to transmigrate in birth and death. Because this ignorance has not been eliminated, the phenomenon of transmigration will not end.

Through the contemplation of the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising in reverse order, one knows: “Eventually, I have to eliminate the link of ignorance, then I can solve the problem of transmigration in the three realms. Given that, I shall start from eliminating ignorance.” But what is ignorance? The Buddha’s teaching in the *Agama Sutras* states that ignorance is not knowing. Volume 1 of *The First Supreme Dharma Door of Discriminating Dependent Arising* discusses the content of ignorance and its functional appearance as “shielding the true reality and manifesting false imagination.” In other words, taking the consciousness aggregate as a true dharma and mistaking the unreal as real is ignorance. Because of ignorance and unknowing, one misunderstands, does not know the truth of life and death, and have doubt about the truth. Because of hesitation, doubt, misunderstanding, and topsy-turvy, one commits physical, verbal, and mental acts due to incorrect attention and thinking. These physical, verbal, and mental acts originated from incorrect attention and thinking are the main reasons for sentient beings’ desire to preserve the continuous and perpetual existence of the consciousness aggregate in future lives. Mistaking the consciousness aggregate for the true self, sentient beings wish they could continuously and perpetually preserve and keep alive the consciousness aggregate, which inevitably leads to future existence and rebirth.

Once sentient beings succumb to performing defiled and tainted acts, the body-and-mind of future existence will inevitably be manifested, which in turn leads to birth and death in the three realms in the next life. If body-and-mind is created, then the

phenomenon of six entrances will inevitably arise. If there are six entrances, then there will certainly be contacts. If there are contacts, naturally one will experience and perceive the six sense objects. When one experiences and perceives the six sense objects, there will be craving due to ignorance, misunderstanding and the topsy-turvy caused by the craving for ignorance. When there is craving, there will be grasping. When there is grasping, there will inevitably be seeds for future existence life after life. These seeds will return to sentient beings' *tathāgatagarbhas* (the root consciousnesses) again after continuous habituations. Hence, the phenomenon of cause-and-effect enable sentient beings to transmigrate in birth and death incessantly.

Therefore, after having directly observed the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising as well as the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising in forward and reverse order, Solitary-realizer nobles understand that the first thing that needs to be done is to eliminate ignorance. When ignorance is eliminated, the truth will not be concealed and delusion will not manifest again. After that, all they do and practice is for the sole purpose of eliminating the grasping of the seeds of future existence in the three realms so that they will not succumb to the tainted, conditioned, and grasping states of existence anymore.

Therefore, because of ignorance, there is “ignorance in a single thought”; due to the ignorance in a single thought, there is the link of the three kinds of action: physical, verbal, and mental acts (meritorious, non-meritorious, or non-propelling acts). The manifestation of the karmic actions of this “link of volitional acts” causes the arising of the consciousness aggregate.

What is the consciousness aggregate or the “link of consciousness”? The “link of consciousness” refers mainly to the group of the six consciousnesses and their mental factors (mental concomitants). One needs to be able to examine whether the cognition of the group of the six consciousnesses is consistent with the fact of reality. When one mistakes the six consciousnesses for true Dharmas, one is then a person with self-view who has not eliminated ignorance. If one further mistakes the mental concomitants of the six consciousnesses (the nature of the ability to see, to hear, and even the ability to feel and know) for true Dharmas, then one will fall prey to attachment.

When Solitary-realizers contemplate through the emancipation-gate, they need to also observe the illusory nature of the six entrances. The six entrances refer to the “six internal entrances at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mental faculties as well as the

six external entrances of the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental objects” as stated in Volume 8, *Long Agama Sutra [Dirgha Agama]*). In other words, they need to also observe that these six entrances are dharmas created from causes and conditions. All dharmas produced from causes and conditions are not real, everlasting, or unchangeable because they arise and cease depending upon causes and conditions. After they directly perceive the six entrances and know that all of these are Condition-arisen Dharmas, they further observe the six kinds of contact. The principle is similar: Through the eye faculty’s coming into contact with form, the ear with sound, the nose with smell, the tongue with taste, the body with tactile object, and the mental with mental object, they observe that these six kinds of contact arise only through the synergy and confluence of three dharmas; they are not true dharmas, not primordial, or everlasting. Therefore, they know that this link of contact is also a Condition-arisen Dharma that arises and ceases based on causes and conditions and is impermanent.

After having observed the “link of contact,” they continue to observe and contemplate the “link of sensation.” After observing, they know that there are three kinds of sensations: painful feelings, pleasant feelings, and neither painful nor pleasant feelings; sensation can also be subdivided into the five sensations of pain, pleasure, sorrow, joy, and equanimity. After careful observation, they will find that the three or the five sensations are all produced from causes and conditions and are Condition-arisen Dharmas as well. Since these are dharmas that are produced from causes and conditions, they will decay and cease eventually as the result of the change of causes and conditions. Therefore, the three or five sensations are not real, everlasting, or unchangeable, and our attachment to them will only lead to the continuous transmigration in future existence.

Next, they observe the “link of craving.” There are three kinds of craving: the craving for the desire, the form, and the formless realms. Craving for and attachment to the three realms or even craving for the five aggregates and the eighteen elements are the results of not knowing things as they really are. Because of desire, one savors and that leads in turn to craving. They discover that this craving is not real, everlasting, or unchangeable but a dharma produced from causes and conditions; when the conditions cease, the craving will cease.

After having observed the link of craving, they proceed to observe the four kinds of grasping. “Craving conditions grasping. What is grasping? There are four kinds of grasping: 1. The grasping of sensuality, 2. The grasping of wrong views, 3. The grasping of misconceptions about the precepts, 4. The grasping of the idea of the existence of self.

This is called grasping.” (Volume 1, *Sutra on Dependent Arising*). They observe the grasping of the idea of the existence of self, grasping of sensuality, grasping of wrong views, and grasping of misconceptions about the precepts and notice that these four kinds of grasping are also dharmas produced from causes and conditions. Hence, they can ascertain: “As a matter of fact, grasping is being created and is impermanent. Because it is created and is impermanent, it must be suffering and will perish and result in emptiness eventually.” Therefore, they are certain that this link of grasping is unreal and impermanent, and it has the nature of suffering and the nature of no-self.

Next, they continue to observe the “link of becoming” and discover that existence in the three realms (or the twenty-five states of existence) are manifested due to the manifestation of the grasping from past lives that has been held and stored in the *tathāgatagarbha*. Because becoming manifests itself in the three realms, it is ascertained that the seeds of existence in the three realms do exist. The existence of these seeds is due to the creation and grasping of the ignorance in past lives. Therefore, this becoming will eventually perish as well. Hence, they know that this becoming is also a dharma produced from causes and conditions and should not be grasped.

Next, they continue to observe the “link of birth.” Because of becoming, the three realms are created. The three realms are destructible and perishable and are also dharmas produced from causes and conditions. Since there is birth, certainly there are sufferings of aging, illness, and death as well as worry, sadness, and distress. All of these are not adorable or dependable. As a result, they observe all dharmas in a forward and reverse order as follows: through observing the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising, they are certain that the phenomenon of transmigration is accomplished via the root consciousness *tathāgatagarbha*. To seek liberation, they observe the dependent arising of the twelve links in the forward and reverse order and manage to eliminate self-view and eliminate self-attachment subsequently via the emancipation-gate. They attain the virtues of liberation after having eliminated self-attachment. This is the content of the practice of observing one’s behavior in the realization of the Principle of Dependent Arising. That is, the content of realization has to come from the perspective of the tenet of eight consciousnesses to enable correct observation of the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising. They need to first contemplate and ascertain the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising and be sure of the existence of the root consciousness *tathāgatagarbha*. Only then can they infer the existence of this root consciousness, infer that “when I reached this consciousness (the root consciousness), I had to turn back and could not go beyond it,” and proceed to realize the extinction of transmigration through

the emancipation-gate. Without the realization of “body-and-mind being generated by the (root) consciousness” as the foundation after going through the contemplation of the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising, sentient beings will never be able to proceed to the emancipation-gate and truly eliminate self-view or even self-attachment. Why? Because sentient beings will then continue to take the consciousness aggregate as the real self as advocated in the tenet of six sense-consciousnesses. Taking the consciousness aggregate as the real self is exactly the grasping of the “link of consciousness” and the succumbing to the topsy-turvy misunderstanding of ignorance (which is ignorance). If ignorance has not yet been eliminated, how could one perform physical, verbal, and mental acts based on correct thinking? Due to ignorant acts, there must arise three kinds of defilement: the defilement of affliction, the defilement of karma, and the defilement of suffering. Sentient beings transmigrate in birth and death incessantly because of these three kinds of defilement.

Some people claim: “The Principle of Dependent Arising is plain and simple; it is only the observation and contemplation of the dependent arising of the twelve links.” However, is it really just that? No, it is not. Why? Because there are those who cannot even differentiate between the Condition-arisen Dharma and the Dependent-arisen Dharma, how can they really understand the Principle of Dependent Arising? What is the Condition-arisen Dharma? In Volume 12 of the *Long Agama Sutra*, it is stated: “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.” The dharma brought about by the confluence of various causal conditions is called the Condition-arisen Dharma. Since the arising of the Condition-arisen Dharma is dependent upon the existence of the causal conditions, the cessation of this dharma will certainly take place when the causal conditions cease to exist and hence it possesses the characteristic of impermanence. An impermanent dharma is of the nature of suffering and will eventually cease to exist and become tranquil emptiness, hence the name “Condition-arisen Dharma.” Many people treat the Condition-arisen Dharma and the Dependent-arisen Dharma as the same, but they are different.

What is the Dependent-arisen dharma? The Dependent-arisen Dharma refers to the fact that all Condition-arisen Dharmas of the three realms are manifested by the root consciousness dependent upon the confluence of all the necessary conditions, especially the dependence on the preceding link as the conditioning cause along with the confluence of various other necessary conditions. Because their arising is dependent upon

the root consciousness, they are called the Dependent-arisen Dharma. Therefore, the Dependent-arisen Dharma refers to all dharmas that arise dependent upon the root consciousness *tathāgatagarbha* (the eighth consciousness, the Alaya consciousness) aided by the causal conditions. Hence, the Condition-arisen Dharma and the Dependent-arisen Dharma are very different. Because of this big difference, it is incorrect to say: “The Condition-arisen Dharma is the Dependent-arisen Dharma.”

In fact, the Dependent-arisen Dharma is very profound. For example, there are similarities and differences between the Dependent-arisen Dharma realized by bodhisattvas and that realized by Sound-hearers. Bodhisattvas’ realization of the Dependent-arisen Dharma as well as the Condition-arisen Dharma requires not only the sequential realization of Sound-hearers’ Principle of Dependent Arising but also the realization of how the five aggregates, eighteen elements and all other dharmas are manifested by the true mind of the Dharma realm aided by the necessary causal conditions. This wisdom is unknown and not achieved by the Two-vehicle practitioners and hence the realization of bodhisattvas is not the same as that of Sound-hearers or Solitary-realizers.

The wisdom realized by bodhisattvas is the direct witnessing of how the true mind of the Dharma realm generates sentient beings’ world of the five aggregates and all the dharmas of the three realms contingent upon various conditions. After having personally realized the true mind of the Dharma realm, the *tathāgatagarbha*, a bodhisattva further directly observe and comprehend how the ultimate reality realm (noumenal realm) and the phenomenal realm work together seamlessly. The bodhisattva is able to ascertain the fact that all dharmas are manifested by the ultimate reality realm and the phenomenal realm upon the confluence and synergy of the necessary causes and conditions. In other words, all dharmas are generated and manifested by the true mind of the Dharma realm directly, indirectly, or sequentially contingent upon the confluence of the various necessary conditions.

Therefore, some of the contents of realization of the Solitary-realizer Bodhi are shared by bodhisattvas while others are not. It means that the Solitary-realizer Bodhi realized by bodhisattvas is not merely the content of the Solitary-realizer Bodhi. The Principle of Dependent Arising (of the Solitary-realizer Bodhi) realized by bodhisattvas is very profound because they have completely realized the nature of causes (the nature of the root consciousness) and the nature of conditions; they have realized how the *tathāgatagarbha*, the main cause of all dharmas, generates all dharmas in the three

realms. The practice, realization, and awakening of the Solitary-realizer Bodhi are achieved through the contemplation of the Principle of the Ten Links of Dependent Arising and the Principle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising to directly perceive and ascertain that the *tathāgatagarbha* indeed gives rise to all dharmas contingent upon various necessary conditions. A bodhisattva must also practice and realize the Solitary-realizer Bodhi on the Bodhisattva Way because all dharmas, the knowledge-of-all-aspects, and all virtues have to be completely realized and fulfilled in order to attain Buddhahood.

Therefore, bodhisattvas practice and realize the Principle of Dependent Arising although they know that it is just a Dharma of the Two-vehicle because they know that in order to attain Buddhahood, they need to realize its content. Unlike the Two-vehicle practitioners, who are only aware of the various dharmas but are unaware of their underlying intricate connections and reasons, bodhisattvas have to not only learn about the innumerable dharmas but also understand the intricate underlying web of connections among these dharmas because they vow to take care of and benefit sentient beings who have karmic connections with them regardless of their dispositions. They are not like the Two-vehicle practitioners who often only know about the dharmas but do not know the intricate underlying web of connections among them. The Two-vehicle practitioners only know how to free themselves from the binding of afflictions and how to liberate themselves from the birth and death in the three realms, but they have very little knowledge about how to benefit sentient beings and how to attain Buddhahood. Bodhisattvas strive to achieve both their own goals and the altruistic goals of learning and understanding the intricate connections among the innumerable dharmas out of compassion and loving kindness for sentient beings. However, the real reasons and doctrines behind all the dharmas will not be completely understood until bodhisattvas attain Buddhahood. After having learned and known these true reasons and doctrines, bodhisattvas can then benefit all sentient beings during the process of attaining Buddhahood in the coming three great immeasurable eons in the future. Bodhisattvas are able to teach and guide those with the Sound-hearer or Solitary-realizer disposition or lineage because they can understand all dharmas that correspond with and realized by Sound-hearers or Solitary realizers.

From the above, we know that although the whole Buddhadharma has been explained from the perspective of the one-and-only Buddha Vehicle through the Three-Vehicle Bodhi, bodhisattvas need to realize what Sound-hearers or Solitary realizers know and realize. We should also let people know that the Principle of Dependent Arising

realized by bodhisattvas surpasses that of the Two-vehicle nobles; this is also the right view that all practitioners of Buddhadharma should hold.

