SN 12.35 — SN 12:35 From Ignorance as a Requisite Condition | Avijjāpaccaya Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

From Ignorance as a Requisite Condition

Avijjāpaccaya Sutta (SN 12:35)

In this discourse, the Buddha refuses to answer the question of whether there is anyone or anything lying behind the processes described in dependent co-arising. When his interlocutor asks, for each factor in the causal process, “Which is the x, and whose is the x?”, the Buddha equates this with the assumption that, “X is one thing, and it is the x of someone/something else.” He then equates this with the proposition, which he has rejected many times elsewhere in the discourses, that the soul is one thing and the body is something else, i.e., that there is something unseen lying behind the visible processes of life. However, the Buddha has also rejected, in as many times, the proposition that the soul

is the same as the body, i.e., that there is nothing unseen lying behind the visible processes of life. Avoiding these two extremes, he simply drops the question and focuses attention on what is directly perceivable—the way one factor in dependent co-arising functions as a prerequisite for the next. To focus on what might or might not lie behind these factors would be to tie oneself up in speculations about what, by definition, can never be experienced. But by focusing on the interplay of the factors that are directly perceivable, and—by so doing—developing dispassion for them, one can overcome the craving and ignorance that keep producing stress and suffering, and in that way gain release.

* * *

Staying near Sāvatthī … (the Blessed One said,) "From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications….From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering."

When this was said, a certain monk said to the Blessed One: "Which is the aging-&-death, lord, and whose is the aging-&-death?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One said. "If one were to ask, 'Which is the aging-&-death, and whose is the aging-&-death?' and if one were to say, 'Aging-&-death are one thing, and the aging-&-death are something/someone else's,' both of them would have the same meaning, even though their words would differ. When one is of the view that the soul is the same as the body, there is no leading the holy life. And when one is of the view that the soul is one thing and the body another, there is no leading the holy life. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: From birth as a requisite condition comes aging-&-death."

"Which is the birth, lord, and whose is the birth?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One said…. "From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth."

"Which is the becoming, lord, and whose is the becoming?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One said…. "From clinging as a requisite condition comes becoming."

"Which is the clinging, lord, and whose is the clinging?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One said…. "From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging."

"Which is the craving, lord, and whose is the craving?"

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said.... “From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.”

“Which is the feeling, lord, and whose is the feeling?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said.... “From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.”

“Which is the contact, lord, and whose is the contact?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said.... “From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.”

“Which are the six sense media, lord, and whose are the six sense media?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said.... “From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.”

“Which is the name-&-form, lord, and whose is the name-&-form?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said.... “From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.”

“Which is the consciousness, lord, and whose is the consciousness?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said.... “From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.”

“Which are the fabrications, lord, and whose are the fabrications?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said. “If one were to ask, ‘Which are the fabrications, and whose are the fabrications?’ and if one were to say, ‘Fabrications are one thing, and these fabrications are something/someone else’s,’ both of them would have the same meaning, even though their words would differ. When one is of the view that the life-principle is the same as the body, there is no leading the holy life. And when one is of the view that the life-principle is one thing and the body another, there is no leading the holy life. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

“Now from the remainderless fading & cessation of that very ignorance, every one of these writhings & wrigglings & wigglings—‘Which aging-&-death, and whose aging-&-death?’ or ‘Aging-&-death are one thing, and this aging-&-death are something/someone else’s’ or ‘The life-principle is the same as the body,’ or ‘The life-principle is one thing and the body another’—are abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

“From the remainderless fading & cessation of that very ignorance, every one of these writhings & wrigglings & wigglings—‘Which is the birth…. Which is the becoming…. Which is the clinging…. Which is the craving…. Which is the feeling…. Which is the contact…. Which are the six sense media…. Which is the name-&-form…. Which is the consciousness…. Which are the fabrications, and whose are the fabrications?’ or ‘Fabrications are one thing, and these fabrications are something/someone else’s’ or ‘The soul is the same as the body,’ or ‘The soul is one thing and the body another’—are abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.”

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 9; MN 63; MN 72; SN 12:46; SN 22:85–86; SN 44:10; AN 4:42; AN 10:93–96; Ud 1:10; Sn 4:10; Sn 4:14–15