

OF CONSTRUCTED EXPERIENCE

Anguttara Nikāya, 4:171

“These states, bhikkhus, are afflicted by ignorance. But with the complete fading away and cessation of ignorance, there is no longer that body/speech/mind conditioned by which pleasure and pain arises in oneself. There is no longer a field, a basis, a sphere, or a cause, conditioned by which pleasure and pain arises in oneself.” (A4:171)

When ignorance acts as a causal influence on the formation of intentions, the craving that necessarily comes with it ensures that every action will involve grasping and will thus formulate karmic substrates that require further rebirth and suffering. When ignorance is replaced with wisdom, as with an arahant, or with moments of insight more generally, then this karmic mechanism is undermined and there occurs a moment of freedom from such conditioning.

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yaṃ paccayā 'assa taṃ uppajjati

ajjhataṃ sukhaṃ/dukkhaṃ

These are the three modes of activity through which karma or action is produced. Bodily acts are overt behaviors (such as pulling the trigger); verbal acts involve the formulation of intentions into words that are either spoken openly or to oneself; and mental acts include almost everything else in the inner life. That such non-evident activity is also productive of karma is an important Buddhist teaching.

All manifestations of experience involve the arising and falling of mental states, and these states are all conditioned or caused by the influence of other states. Such interdependence accounts for complexity without agency: phenomena arise, but there is no person making it happen so. Here the causal relation is being emphasized between the quality of intention and the consequent feeling tone of experience.

Pleasure and pain are the two primary modalities of the inner life. As the “end products” of the cognitive series, it is this feeling tone that so often drives our choices by pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. Buddhist practice helps reveal the extent to which this outcome is influenced by both our level of self-awareness and the skillfulness of our understanding and attitudes towards objects of experience.