

## *The Regularity of the Dhamma*

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There's a school of thought that says each present moment is so new and so unpredictable that you shouldn't bring any preconceived notions from the past to apply to it. Any conditions you pick up from the past obscure the freshness of the present moment, so your duty as a meditator is to be totally present in an unmediated way to the raw data of the senses. By allowing yourself to be fully immersed in the raw data of the present moment, you'll instinctively know the proper response. There are no rules. All bets are off as to what's going to be the appropriate response to any particular moment, any particular situation.

That school of thought leaves you pretty high and dry when things get difficult. It throws you into the present moment with no lifesaver at all. Fortunately, that's not how the Buddha taught. The Buddha said that there's a regularity to the way things happen. That's how he describes dependent co-arising: "this regularity of the Dhamma." He doesn't say that everything is predetermined from the past, or that by knowing the past you'll be able to predict what's going to happen in the present or on into the future. He simply says that there's a regularity to the way things are shaped in your experience, and certain things tend to be the shaping factors.

In one analysis of dependent co-arising, he describes these factors as name and form on the one hand, and consciousness on the other. These two influence each other. Form is the form of the body. For example, you're sitting here right now with the form of the body, your sense of the body, how it feels from within. That sense of form is made up of solidity, warmth, liquid sensations, and energy: the four elements or four properties. As for name, it includes feeling, perception, attention, intention, and contact. Consciousness, he says, lands on these factors of name and form, and then things proliferate out of that.

Under the heading of name, the two most important factors are intention and attention. Other ways of describing dependent co-arising draw out this importance. Sometimes, prior to name and form, they list fabrication, *sankhara*, which is the intentional element in experience—whether physical, verbal, or mental. Physical or bodily fabrication is the breath, the intentional element in how you sense the breath, how you create the experience of the breath. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, which includes an intentional element. Mental fabrication is feeling and perception. There's an intentional

element there as well. So the intention is what's important, and it plays itself out in feeling, perception, and form.

Prior to fabrication comes ignorance. Ignorance means not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths—in other words, applying inappropriate attention. When you look at things in an inappropriate way, you frame issues in an inappropriate way, which means that your fabrications are going to lead to suffering. All the other elements of name and form and consciousness will tend toward suffering and stress as well. But you can change that way of attending to things. You can look at things in terms of the four noble truths: Where is the stress, what are you doing to cause it, where is there freedom from stress, and what kind of actions lead to that freedom? When you look in these terms, then the fabrications of your intentions go in a different direction; name and form and consciousness, all the other factors of your experience, go in a different direction: toward the end of suffering. This is the regularity of the Dhamma.

We tend to think of dependent co-arising as an extremely complex and abstruse teaching, and as the Buddha pointed out it *is* complex; it's not easy. Still, it does give us guidance in how to approach each present moment, where to look, how to look. One of the interesting things about dependent co-arising is that all these factors come prior to sensory contact. Even before you see sights, listen to sounds, and so forth, there's an intentional element already in play. You have an agenda: what you're looking for, how you're going to look at things. You bring that to each present moment. So it's important to bring the right way of framing issues, framing questions, to everything you sense. Remember this as you practice. These are the important elements: intention and attention. Everything else springs from there.

When things come up in the present moment, how do you look at them? Try to look at them simply in terms of stress and lack of stress. Which intentions and ways of attending to things lead to stress; which ones bring it to an end? Try to put aside any ideas of yourself or what lies outside of yourself. Put aside questions of what lies behind all of this. Just look at things as they're directly experienced as stress. This is a mode of perception that's important to develop.

The Buddha calls this mode "emptiness": seeing what's present or what's not present—particularly, present or not present in terms of stress or disturbance. That's where the big issue lies, and your duties as a meditator come from looking at these things in this way. If you see stress, you try to comprehend it. To do that, you need to develop certain qualities of mind: That's the path. You need to put the mind in a position where it really can look at stress coming and going, and not feel threatened by it, especially when the stress is really painful, really burdensome.

Our normal reaction when we feel stress and strain is to say, “This is happening to *me*.” And when something bad happens to *you*, there’s a different set of imperatives. The imperative is to get rid of it, to get it out of the range of what you identify as “*me*.” But if you can pull out of that sense of “*me*” surrounding your experience and simply look at the stress happening right here, right now—from a position of wellbeing, the wellbeing that comes from right concentration—then the imperatives are different. The imperative is to understand the stress, to see what’s causing it, and then to abandon the cause.

This is why we practice right concentration: to put the mind in a good position to see things clearly and carry out its appropriate duties. Actually, when the mind is in right concentration you’re standing where the Buddha stood when he discovered all of these things. It’s from this point of view that you can see: “This is the intention; this is the act of attention; this is the stress; this is the cause of stress.” You can see them clearly because you’re looking at them from the right spot.

Years back I went on a camping trip to Powell Point, which is the southern tip of a plateau in Utah, over 10,000 feet in elevation. The guidebook said that you could see a good third of southern Utah from that spot. We thought we were following the right directions, but we made a wrong turn and ended up in an outlook over Henderson Canyon. Still, we thought we were at Powell Point. The book said the road would end and then from there you had to walk out on a point. Well, we found a point that we could walk out to. From there, the book said, you could look out and see this, that, and the other thing. So we identified the sights: This was this, that was that, and this was the other thing. But then there was a huge plateau looming up to our east, which wasn’t mentioned in the book at all. Only after a good while did we realize that that was Powell Point. We had made a wrong turn. We were standing somewhere else. So, the next day we made our way up to Powell Point, and then we saw what the guide book was actually referring to. We realized that the this, that, and the other thing were not the this, that, and the other thing we thought we saw yesterday. We had labeled things wrong because we were standing in the wrong place.

If you want to understand what the Buddha is talking about, you have to put yourself here, right at the present moment, where the mind is immersed in the form, the breath energy, of the body. That’s where the Buddha stood. If there’s going to be any directed thought and evaluation, relate it to the breath. Any feelings and perceptions will be the feelings and perceptions of a mind really focused on the breath. As the mind gets more and more still, those fabrications fall away. Directed thoughts and evaluations fall away. The movement of the breath falls away. All you have is a still breath energy filling the body, a clear, bright awareness filling the body. That’s Powell Point. From there you can see

the Henry Mountains, you can see the Escalante region, you can see Bryce Canyon, the way they're described in the book.

In other words, from this point you can see stress, and you're in a position where you can really comprehend it because you don't feel so threatened by it. You're not compelled by your old imperative, which was to get rid of it. You attend to things in the right way. You see things simply in terms of stress, its cause, the path leading to its ending, and its ending. This is the framework you're supposed to bring to each present moment. In other words, you see things in terms of the four noble truths, and your intention is to perform the duties appropriate to each. When you develop that intention, it's bound to lead you to the end of all suffering and stress.

So this is the regularity of the Dhamma. You may not be able to bring purely appropriate attention to every moment of your life, but you can get used to looking at each moment in terms of identifying your intention and examining how you frame the events of your life. Do the narratives get in the way of your seeing things in terms of skillful and unskillful intentions? Or do they actually help? You should approach each situation with these thoughts in mind: Where is the stress here? What can you do to at least minimize the stress, the harm, the disturbance, whatever is a burden for you or the people around you? This way you come to each present moment armed with a knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma: where you should focus your attention, and what the main priority should be—which is to keep on the path.

In this way the Buddha doesn't leave you high and dry, for no matter what the situation, this is how to look at it: in terms of the four noble truths. Your intention should be to try to comprehend the suffering, the stress, wherever it may be in that moment, and to develop the factors that will enable you to comprehend suffering. You may have other issues—for example, when you're dealing with people, it's very different from sitting here with your eyes closed—but your basic framework can be the same. Once you've got this framework firmly in mind, you can go wherever you want and deal with any situation that confronts you, because you're working from a framework that instead of leading to more suffering and stress, actually helps bring them to an end. And that way, whatever the situation, you're on the path.

The ability to keep all this in mind is mindfulness. That, combined with appropriate attention and the right intention, is what turns each moment into a moment of the practice, regardless of the situation. So this is how the complexity of dependent co-arising gives you tools for the present moment, tools that you can use for the sake of your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of all the people around you. Each moment may be new, but it follows a pattern. Always keep that pattern in mind.