

Not What You Are, What You Do

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When you first look at a teaching like dependent co-arising, it seems very abstract and very far away from anything you might be doing in the practice. But if you look at it more carefully, you see that it makes a whole series of important statements that have an immediate bearing on what you're doing right here.

To begin with, when the Buddha talks about the causes of suffering, he doesn't trace it back to what you are. He doesn't say you suffer because you're basically bad, or because you're basically good but somehow have been socially conditioned to forget your true inner goodness. He comes back instead to what you do. That right there is a radical statement, and it opens huge possibilities. It's hard to change what you are, but you can change your actions simply through knowledge, through understanding which things you do are going to cause suffering, which states of mind lead to suffering. You can look for those and you can change them.

To the extent the Buddha does talk about what you are, it's far along the path of dependent co-arising, way up there in what's called *bhava* or becoming. It's not a question of what you inherently are, good or bad. Very simply, your being comes about from what you do. That's the reverse of the way most of us think. Most of us think that our basic nature is a certain way, and we act in certain ways because of our basic nature. The Buddha says instead that what you are—in the sense of how you identify yourself on a sensual level, on the level of form, or on a formless level—can be traced back to what you do. You can learn to do things in a more skillful way, which will lead to a change in your sense of what you are, and that in turn will be less and less likely to cause suffering.

This is why the Buddha's teaching is a training, because the kind of ignorance it's meant to overcome is not an ignorance of what you are; it's simply a practical ignorance of which kinds of actions work for true happiness and which kinds don't. That's the basic principle of the four noble truths. Each of the knowledges in the four noble truths deals with a task that you develop as a skill. That in and of itself is another important statement. If the ignorance at the root of the problem were simply a matter of not knowing your true nature, it would be an all-or-nothing sort of thing. You'd know it or you wouldn't. But skills can be developed gradually. Your sensitivity develops, your dexterity at shaping things more skillfully, more appropriately, develops over time. So the path overcoming

this practical ignorance isn't a sudden, all-or-nothing sort of path. It's a gradual path, a gradual training, in gaining more and more skill.

It's in this way that the teachings of dependent co-arising are directly connected to what you're doing right now. You're focusing on your breath. You're directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath. You use certain perceptions, and certain feelings get involved. These are all elements in the factor of fabrication, which comes right after ignorance. We breathe ignorantly. We perceive things through ignorance. Our thoughts about things, the way we evaluate things, and our use of language generally are done with ignorance. As a result, we suffer.

But if you bring knowledge to these processes, they can actually become a healing kind of fabrication. After all, the path is a path of fabrication. The Buddha doesn't tell you just to drop all activity at once, to be totally passive or totally devoid of any kind of intention. We hear that the goal at the end of the path is to be free from fabrication, so we think we'll just stop fabricating and that should get us there. But the mind can't do that. The path doesn't work that way. The intention to stop fabricating is itself an intention. You can get very much attached to that kind of passivity and still be stuck with all your problems.

So instead we bring more and more knowledge to the process of breathing and how we use our thoughts around the process of breathing. Sometimes you hear that our thinking, which is based a lot on language, is the reason why we suffer, that we picked up these bad social influences that taught us to think in dualistic terms or whatever, so we've got to drop language entirely. But again, that's not the Buddha's approach. He says that if you use language in ignorance, you're going to suffer. But the problem is not with language; it's with the ignorance.

I was talking to a Hindu monk a while back, and he told me his response to someone who came up to him and asked, "How can we get beyond duality?" His response was: "What's wrong with duality? You're talking to me, aren't you?" Language is useful because it makes distinctions. If you couldn't make distinctions, how could we communicate? What would our language be like? It would be like speaking in tongues at a Pentecostal Church: *booh!* Who knows what it means? It doesn't mean anything, or could mean everything, which is a totally useless language.

The mind has to make distinctions. We feel distinctions. We have a sense of right and wrong not simply because we're taught them by society. It's a deeply ingrained habit that comes from our sense that some things are painful and some things are not, and you've got to do something about the things that are painful. This goes deep into our sense of feeling and perception, mental fabrications that are often pre-linguistic. Deep down inside, we know that anything that threatens

our existence is bad, anything that helps it is good. Even lizards know this much. That's why it's embedded in the lizard brain, a very strong sense of lizard good and lizard bad. The hatred of pain, the love of pleasure, the ability to perceive an enemy, to perceive an escape from an enemy: These are really basic to the mind, much prior to any kind of social conditioning. Our social conditioning, our more refined uses of language, are actually needed to mitigate some of those lizard fears and knee-jerk judgments.

So instead of throwing out language or throwing out our social conditioning, we learn how to use them more skillfully. And working with the breath is an ideal place to start. You give space to the mind by breathing in a way that feels good. You can use your linguistic habits to talk to yourself about the breath: How does this breath feel? How does that breath feel? Where would it feel good to breathe right now? Which part of the body needs a larger dose of good breath energy? In this way you get more and more in touch with the immediate feeling of your body so that your linguistic habits can show immediate benefits. It feels good to breathe this way. It feels good to breathe that way. Your mind and your body are getting more intimate so that all the levels of fabrication—physical, verbal, and mental—start working together around a common sense of wellbeing.

In this way they get to communicate with one another. The process of focusing on the breath in a skillful way is really a healing process. Each time you sit down to meditate, don't think of it as a chore. Think of it as an opportunity to do some more healing work. And don't think of it as a time when you're obliged to stop thinking. In the beginning, you have to use directed thought and evaluation to get things to settle down, to adjust things, to get everybody together. And when everyone is together like this, interesting things come up. Hidden feelings, hidden perceptions suddenly show themselves. And you can work through them.

It's almost like dealing with a person who's possessed. The possessed person from the point of view of Western psychology is a schizophrenic: There are two different personalities in the one person. From a more traditional perspective, there really are two different people in there. The problem is that they're not cooperating. They're working at cross purposes. If they can learn to cooperate, there's no problem. Who cares whether there are two or twenty people in there? If they get along, the problem is gone. That's how Ajaan Fuang approached cases of spirit possession. Instead of driving out the spirit, he'd negotiate with it, so that it would stop interfering in the possessed person's life.

We have the same sort of problem even though we may seem normal. Our directed thoughts and evaluations tend to work at cross purposes. The way we feel and our different perceptions can be running off in every direction at once.

This is why we have to meditate. To work with the breath is to create a space where all the different parts of the mind—all the different members of the committee, all the different levels of sensation and activity going on—learn how to be with one another in a peaceful spot, working on a common goal. You're showing goodwill for one another because you're cooperating. In that way, interesting things come up and you can deal with them. You can learn new habits in how you relate to your body, new habits in how you think, how you frame an issue in the mind, and how you work through the difficulties in whatever issues you encounter. When you learn how to deal with all the parts of yourself in a healthy way like this, it's a lot easier then to start dealing in a healthy way with other people, too.

So the breath meditation not only helps you. It also helps everybody else you live with, because it gives you paradigms. For one thing, it gives you immediate training in how to employ the *brahma-viharas*, the sublime attitudes of limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. In other words, you start out with goodwill for yourself, allowing yourself to breathe in a comfortable way. When you see that your breathing is uncomfortable, or that the way you think is causing dis-ease in the body or the mind, you have compassion for yourself: "Let's try to figure out a better way to do this." When it's going well, you don't start feeding on the idea that you're not worthy of this, or that you really shouldn't allow yourself to feel this good. You try to maintain that sense of wellbeing. Appreciate it. Let the ideas of deserving and not deserving just go by the boards. Again, those attitudes are usually based on an idea of what you are deep down inside, that you're the sort of person who deserves to be punished for things you did in the past. That's not how the Buddha's teachings work. Different actions will inevitably lead to different results. There's no question of anyone deserving to suffer. So if you're able to maintain a sense of wellbeing, keep at it. If you're operating from a stable sense of wellbeing, you're going to start acting in more skillful ways all around.

And then there's equanimity for the things that you can't change, the bad habits you aren't able to fully eradicate, or the problems that come in from past kamma that you can't alter. The purpose of equanimity is to keep you focused on the things you *can* change, so that you don't waste energy focusing on the things you can't.

In this way, as the members of your committee work together on the breath in a skillful way, you're gaining some training in what are essentially social virtues, the brahmaviharas. Then you can apply the same lessons to your dealings with people around you.

So instead of being a process of lobotomizing the mind so that you don't think, meditation is actually training in learning how to think in more skillful

ways, how to act in more skillful ways—with knowledge, with an understanding of actions and their results. In particular, it's training in learning how to distinguish the types of activities in the mind that would cause a particular situation to produce suffering or not.

In the course of this training, the question of who you are gets put aside. The question of who you've been gets put aside. You can focus purely on what you're doing, what you can do to train yourself to be more sensitive and more effective in bringing about an end to suffering, and what you can do to master activities that lead more and more to true happiness. After all, the issue is not what you *are*, it's what you *do*. And if what you do is not skillful, you can learn to make it more skillful with each in-and-out breath.

Those are some of the lessons that you can derive from what seems like a very abstract teaching on dependent co-arising. It *is* abstract. It's put out as a list and it's a very convoluted one. As the Buddha himself admitted, it's not simple. It's like a tangled bird's nest, he said, or a knotted ball of string. But you can pull on a few strands, pull out a few of the twigs, and you find that even the individual strands and twigs are really helpful in putting an end to suffering, teaching you how to think and act and even breathe in ways that can bring suffering to an end.