Dependent Co-arising in Fifteen Minutes

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Someone once asked me what the most important things were to know about with regard to dependent co-arising. If you wanted to get some practical use out of the teaching. The Buddha might have been offended by the question, because after all the whole teaching is meant to be practical. But there are three things that are worth noting. One is the relationship among the different factors. They’re laid out in a line. But as they appear in your mind, they’re not laid out in a line. And if you look into the sub-factors and the explanations for each of the factors, you find that there’s a fair amount of back and forth, feedback loops, where one thing gives rise to another, and that other thing comes back and affects the beginning piece. In the case of one thing being a cause and not functioning also as an effect, which means that you can look at the relationships among the different factors, basically wherever you want. The Buddha points out that you can take this whole process apart, any part in the process, because you have these feedback loops. That’s one good thing to know. The second good thing to know is that most of the factors that have a big impact on giving rise to suffering come before contact. In other words, your mind and body are primed by the way you pay attention to them, whether in ignorance or with knowledge, either to give rise to more suffering or to put an end to suffering. Intention, intention, perception, even the way you talk to yourself. Now these things, of course, because of the nature of the system, also are affected by sensory contact. But it’s important that the Buddha says that these things come first, particularly with reference to the factor or sub-factor of intention, under name and form, coming before sensory contact. Because contact at the senses, the Buddha said, is basically your old karma coming back at you. But here there’s intention before that. The intention before that is your intention in the present moment. That puts things together in the present moment. So your present moment intention is something you actually experience prior to the results of past karma. That’s pretty radical. It’s how you approach things comes first, which means, of course, that we have to train the mind. You don’t just say, “Okay, this is the way things are. This is the contact that comes in, and then I’m going to think about what I’m going to do about it.” Before you even have the contact, you already have some ideas about what you want, which is why as everybody notices, different people can look at the same thing and see different things. Because they’re coming from different places. Not only physically, but also mentally. So we meditate so that we can get more in touch with these factors that come prior to contact. Because they provide the foundation for everything else. Even though craving is said to come after contact, what it is that we crave, we have craving located. It’s going to be in the aggregates. It’s going to be in your factor of fabrication. You can have craving located in your direct thought and evaluation. You can have craving located in perceptions, acts of attention. So even though craving comes after contact, it’s going to be centered on things that come prior to contact. And finally, the important thing to know about dependent co-arising is that it’s not foreign to the practice of concentration. Because as you get the mind into concentration, you’re actually using these different factors. Under the factor of fabrication, you have the breath. What are we looking at right now? We’re looking at the breath. You have direct thought and evaluation. That’s verbal fabrication. How you talk to yourself. You focus on a topic, and then you make comments on it. Right now, you should be focusing on the breath. Commenting on the breath. If you find that you’re focusing on something else, commenting on something else, come back to the breath. And finally, there are perceptions and feelings. Of course, there’s the feeling of ease or the feeling of dis-ease that you have around the breath. And the perceptions you have about what’s happening as the breath comes in. What are you focusing on? The air? Are you focusing on the contact with the nose? Are you focusing on the movement of energy in the body? Where does that energy begin? Does it begin outside? And when it comes into the body, is it fighting to get in, or is the body welcoming it? And if the energy comes from within, where? Where are the beginning points? And can you move those beginning points around? All this is perception. These are things you need to do in order to get the mind to settle down. It’s not the case that you get the mind quiet, and then magically it will understand the five aggregates. Because it’s quiet, it understands the five aggregates, because it’s been using those five aggregates to get the mind to settle down. And also learning how to look at these things as activities. Because they can, if you don’t look at them in the right way. Turn into a state of becoming, where you’re taking on identity around them. You’re looking for something that you want. You take on the identity of the person who’s going to find it, and the world in which it’s going to be found. That’s becoming. That’s way down in the last minutes, after clinging. Once there’s clinging, there’s going to be suffering. Someone asked, “What’s the relationship between the pinnacle arising and the four noble truths?” Well, everything up through craving, in the list, is the second noble truth. Everything starting with clinging, and then goes through becoming and birth. That’s the first noble truth. Now, when you bring knowledge to these processes, that’s the path. Once you’ve got the path, that leads to the end of suffering. So it’s all right here. The Buddha’s just parsing it out. To give you some ideas of where to look, which activities right now are the ones where your craving is focused. Ideally, if you can get the mind to settle down in concentration, it should be focused on your intention to stay here, or on the act of attention, watching what’s going on. Because it is possible to analyze your everyday sensory experience in terms of the pinnacle arising, but those things happen really fast. And a lot of them all at once, in many, many cycles. But as you get the mind to settle down, things slow down. And everything is gathered around one spot. Where are your intentions? They’re right here. Where’s your act of attention? It’s right here. Your perceptions. Everything is right here, gathered together, where you can see it. It’s simply going to be a matter of parsing out which is the area where you’re clinging to, and why you’re clinging. What are you craving? So it’s all right here. The Buddha’s simply notifying you that these are the various ways you can separate it out. There’s a passage in the Canon where he talks about Sariputta analyzing his concentration, and goes even into more detail as to what’s going on in this mind that’s gathered together. So ideally your mind might have gathered this together. It’s not just dead space. You want to see that it’s quiet, but underneath the quiet, a lot of little tiny activities going on. Like a jar of water. You know those big jars they have in Thailand, that you used to bathe from. So whenever you look at the surface of the water, and the surface of the water is very still, but there are little mosquito larvae just waiting to come out. So your mind is still, but the little larvae of perceptions, and attention, and clingings, and cravings, and all the things that are listed, they’re ready to fly and turn into mosquitoes, and come and bite you. So when things get still, and very, very still, don’t assume that nothing is happening. These things are all happening. It’s just a matter of learning to become more sensitive to what you’ve got right here. The Buddha wants you to focus in these ways, because he wants to get you out of your ordinary states of becoming. And see things simply as events. This is a lot easier to let go of them. If you try to destroy a state of becoming, that becomes a craving for non-becoming, and that’s a problem. But if you can simply focus on the events that would lead up to another state of becoming, and develop some dispassion for them, that’s the way out. Is independent co-arising happening in your mind, or is it happening in the world? It’s a question the Buddha would put aside. Your sense of who you are is happening in dependent co-arising. Your sense of the world is happening in dependent co-arising. It’s the standard. That flips things around. So get used to getting the mind to settle down. To get it to settle down is effort well spent. Some people say, “Well, I don’t have the talent in that direction.” This is not the education system that we have in our modern world, where children are tested to see where they’re talented, and they’re channeled into the talented area. And they allow other people to take care of the things that they’re not talented in. Talented or not, this is what you’ve got to do. And then he teaches you how to do it, even if you’re not talented. Because this question of putting it into suffering, it shouldn’t have to depend on your talent. It’s not a path meant only for some people. It’s the path meant for everybody. And whether it comes easily or not, don’t let that be an obstacle. Realize that this is serious business. The world of the Buddha is not a world of make-believe. Because, after all, suffering is serious. And the Buddha is serious about helping you to get out. So take his teachings to heart. They’re not just meant to show off his ability to come up with new terms. He says these are important things to look at. And you get to know them by getting your mind still. So get your mind still. And try to be honest and observant as you do it. And then you find out that this teaching really is of practical use. For the best of all possible purposes.

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