

Intelligent Design

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One of the major ironies of how Buddhism has come to the West is how the teaching on dependent co-arising has been turned into a teaching on interdependence or interconnectedness. With the original teaching, the emphasis was on how things work together to cause suffering, whereas the new teaching is something to celebrate. It's good that everything works together, everything fits together. We're all interdependent, we're all interconnected, and it's a lovely, comforting thing. But when you look carefully at the way things are actually interconnected, it's hard to see much to celebrate. The fit is always a little loose, a little awkward, and this causes a lot of pain and suffering. Extra water vapor coming off the Atlantic has now killed people in New Orleans and driven up oil prices all over the United States. It's a weird string of connections.

Or you don't have to look that far afield. Just look at your own body, at how things are connected in the body. See how the human body is constructed. The back: As you grow older you begin to realize how poorly designed the human back is. If there *is* a designer, it's not a very intelligent design, or if there is an intelligence behind it, it's a malicious intelligence. It's designed for pain; it's designed to fall apart.

Or look at how human beings are born. You start with sex, which requires a lot of lust, but then lust – whoever designed lust, if there was a designer, was pretty malicious because lust isn't something you can control. You start lusting after the wrong people, which is what most people seem to do most of the time. And lust doesn't only create babies. It also leads to deception, to murder, to disease, to all kinds of problems, and yet it's an essential part of the mix to keep the human race going.

And then there is pregnancy: all the pains a woman goes through in bearing a child. In Thailand, before each ordination, they traditionally have an afternoon-long chant. A layperson is hired to chant to remind the young monk candidate of all the suffering his mother went through in raising him. If the chant lasts for about four hours, three of those hours are focused on the nine months of pregnancy – the months of morning sickness, the months of something kicking in her stomach. And then there's birth. They say that the most extreme pain that a human being can endure is the pain of giving birth. And it's no fun for the child, either. If there is a design behind all this, if there is an intelligent design, it's a malicious intelligence.

So this is the world that we're born into. This is how we're born. And it required a Buddha to approach the world with some compassionate intelligence, seeing all this interconnectedness and saying there is a way we can use these

interconnected things, these dependent things, to find a way out of the suffering. That's what he gave his life to: both the finding and the teaching.

And it's a very fragile teaching. If you look at Buddhist history, you see that wherever the Dhamma goes, people find all kinds of ways of trying to divert the teaching to other purposes, forgetting that its original purpose was the most compassionate: showing the way out of suffering. Our imagination is so tied up with the normal way of using connectedness or interdependence that it really has trouble negotiating that compassionate use.

This is why the path is so hard: It goes against the grain. If anything calls into question the idea of an intelligent designer or a compassionate designer, it's the fact that the quest for the end to suffering, the quest for a true and lasting happiness, goes so much against the grain of the human mind. Keep that in mind as you practice. It's to be expected that the practice is going to go against the grain. And because the path requires working with tools that normally fit into another purpose – the survival of the body – it's very easy for us to get off track. You have to keep in mind the fact that deep down inside your deepest desire is a desire for happiness, a happiness that's not going to change on you, a happiness that's not going to leave you in the lurch, a happiness that doesn't have to involve other suffering.

That was the desire the Buddha respected within himself, and he respected it within other people as well. That's why he searched for this path. When he found it, that's why he taught it – to speak to that specific desire. And yet there's so much in the world that tells us that it's unrealistic, it's too much trouble. All those voices are ready to pounce on any problems that come up in the practice. But keep that little fire burning inside: that if there's any sense to this life at all, it lies in finding a true happiness. Always try to protect that. Do what you can to maintain it, use your intelligence to sidestep any discouragements that might put it out.

After all, this path is made out of conditioned things, so there are times when it seems like everything comes crashing down and you have to put it together all over again. But it can always be put together again. Whether it's going to snuff out that little flame is really up to you. The trick to surviving the bad periods in the path is to keep that long vision in mind and to remember the nature of this path: It's a constructed path, a fabricated path. It leads to something unfabricated, but the path itself is a fabrication, which means that it's dependent on conditions. Sometimes the conditions aren't all they could be, but we do have this intelligence within us that can learn how to make the best of difficult things, makeshift things, to hammer things together in a new way.

So do what you can to strengthen your intelligence on the path. This is a strength composed of five things. First, there's the conviction that there's got to be a way out of suffering. Second, there's persistence, sticking with that conviction, acting on it all the time. Third, there's mindfulness: You remember to keep that conviction in mind all the time and to apply it to all of your actions.

Fourth and fifth are concentration and discernment. The discernment there is to help find ways over the obstacles that we all inevitably find on the path, and the concentration is to give your mind the food it needs to keep its energy up.

The texts talk about persistence as a requisite for concentration, but the relationship goes the other way as well. Do your best just to stick with one object. When everything else seems to be crazy in life, just say, "Okay, I'm going to stay right here. If I don't know anything else for sure, what I do know for sure is that the breath is now coming in, the breath is now going out. Let's just hang out here for the time being." In that way you can weather whatever crisis comes up, and it gives you the strength to deal with things, to recover.

I was reading recently about studies they've done of major disasters and catastrophes – huge hurricanes, earthquakes, fires. They've noticed how people immediately after a catastrophe feel a bizarre sense of euphoria. They develop a sense of common purpose as they drop their normal concerns and band together to rebuild, to recover. Then, after a while, once things get back to normal again, everybody goes back to their old ways. As one researcher pointed out, right after a catastrophe there's a suspension of time; people's normal narratives stop functioning and there's a sense of liberation from those narratives as you've now got an obvious, immediate, common purpose. In fact, one of the researchers said it sounded a lot like Buddhist meditation to him: the idea of dropping the narrative of the past and the future and just staying with the present moment, finding a purpose in the present moment. That gave a buoyancy to the rebuilding efforts.

Well, try to use that same attitude when your meditation comes crashing down. You've got some rebuilding work to do. It gives you a purpose and it's something you can focus on totally in the present moment. The best way of doing that is to drop the whole narrative that's driving you crazy: the fact that things seemed to be going well and now all of a sudden they've crashed. Whether it's a sudden crash or a gradual one doesn't really matter. What matters is that you realize, "Okay, just forget about the narrative and focus on the needs of the present moment." That's all you're responsible for. That's all you have to worry about. You'll find that that will give you the buoyancy, the energy you need in order to start the rebuilding work.

So, again, what you're using here is the process of dependent co-arising, the interconnectedness of conditioned phenomena, but you're pointing it in a new direction. In one of the suttas the Buddha describes what one modern teacher has called transcendent dependent co-arising. It's the typical pattern, starting with ignorance and going through craving and ending up in suffering. And the normal reaction to suffering, as the Buddha once said, is a combination of bewilderment and search. We're bewildered about why this particular type of suffering is happening and we search, hoping that somebody else will know a way out. What usually happens is that the bewilderment simply adds more ignorance. The search turns into more craving, and that leads to more suffering.

But there are times when the search turns into a solid conviction: There must be a way out. And you're going to do whatever is needed to find that way out. You've reflected on life and seen that the design, if there is a design, is not compassionate at all. All you have to see is someone go through the process of aging, illness, and death, and you realize – if there is a design – how harsh it is. But more likely this is just the way things happen to be, without any overarching point or purpose. As you realize that, you've got to reflect on the fact that there must be a way out. And you've got the Buddha and his Noble Disciples to say, "Yes, there is." We're fortunate that we have their testimony. Their testimony is like a challenge. Are you up for the challenge? If you're not, you're going to have to suffer like everybody else. If you *are* up for the challenge, though, you're still going to suffer for a while, but it will be in a different way. It's a suffering that leads to the end of suffering. So make the most of this opportunity because it's the only intelligent way to find happiness – and it doesn't come along all that often.