

Feeding Frenzy: Dependent Co-arising

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The Pali word for the worlds we create in the mind is *bhava*, which literally means becoming. We keep creating these worlds. And if you look at dependent co-arising, you see that they're based on two things. The immediate prerequisite is clinging, *upadana*; and clinging in turn is based on craving, *tanha*. But both of those words have another meaning. The word for clinging can also mean feeding, taking sustenance; and the word for craving means thirst. The mind is thirsting for things, and so it latches on to the five aggregates and tries to feed off them. Form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and sensory consciousness: These are the things we feed on.

When we're meditating we're trying to create a good *bhava*, a good place for the mind to stay in the present moment. If you create a world for yourself that maintains its reference to the present, then it's a lot easier to see what that world depends on in the present as well. In other words, you can see the process of thirsting and feeding as it's happening. That enables you to see through the process, so that you don't get misled by the worlds you create.

When you create worlds of the past and future, though, you have to block out large parts of your present awareness in order to stay focused on those little worlds. That's why they're not helpful in the meditation. They're helpful only to the extent of enabling you to remember things you did in the past or anticipate in the future that help focus you back on the present. In other words, you can remember the times when you were mindless, not very alert, and you can reflect on the damage it caused. Or you can reflect on the dangers that await you in the future if you're not mindful and alert. This kind of thinking is helpful because it motivates you to get back to the present moment to develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness right now.

But if you want to see these processes in action, you've got to watch in the present moment. So you create the world out of the breath, your inner sense of the body. Take the sensations you feel in the legs and the arms, etc., and try to fashion them into a basis for concentration, a place where the mind can stay, that you can take as your dwelling. The sense of ease and fullness you can develop through the breath can help to alleviate your thirst. It gives you something good and nourishing to feed on.

The texts actually talk about feeding on rapture. In the midst of a world of hungry people, the Buddha said, we feed on rapture like the radiant gods. And he's not just talking about hungry in the sense of hungry for physical food. If you look at what's going on in the world, if you read the newspapers and news magazines, you see what people are doing from their sense of psychological hunger, and it's not a pretty sight. So when we say that in the midst of hungry people, we're feeding on rapture like the radiant gods, it's not a selfish or narrow pleasure. We're trying to get ourselves out of that feeding frenzy.

This process of psychological feeding is a process we have to understand in the mind: How does this happen? The Buddha says that there are four ways of clinging or feeding inside. One is simply feeding on sensual desire. You can think about situations you'd like to have in your life that would make you feel pleasant,

that you would derive some pleasure from. You can think about times in the past when you had pleasures, or about pleasures you anticipate in the future. And the mind feeds off of that. There's also feeding on views, clinging to views. Then, as you've probably noticed, there's a strong sense of me or mine around the clinging, feeding on the identity you build around your views. "I'm the person who has the right views; I'm the person who understand things better than other people; my take on things is right." And there's feeding on certain ways of doing things, your habits and practices, your particular way of doing things that you feel is the right way of doing things, in and of itself.

Now, some of these forms of food are actually part of the path. You need to have views for the path, you need to develop certain habits and follow certain practices as part of the path. And you need to develop a certain sense of yourself as capable of following the path. The Buddha doesn't criticize these things, at their proper time and place. What he does criticize is feeding on these things as ends in and of themselves.

And why does the mind feed on these things? Because it feels empty without them. Sometimes it feels lost without them, deprived of its bearings. We create our bearings for ourselves through our views, through our ways of doing things. What it comes down to is that we think we need these things for our happiness. Without them, we feel lost. These are our means—we think—for obtaining pleasure. These attitudes are based on thirst: the thirst for sensuality, the thirst for becoming, or the thirst to destroy what we've got. But all these things are motivated by a desire for happiness, by a desire for wellbeing. The thirst in turn is conditioned by feelings of pleasure or pain or neither pleasure-nor-pain, a neutral feeling. And these come from sensory contact.

So one way of understanding the processes in the mind is try to trace them back: Exactly what contact triggered them? Was there a thought? Was there a sound? Was there an idea that suddenly triggered you into creating these worlds? That's one thing you've got to look for: What are the triggers? Sometimes, you find, the triggers can be very small. But dependent co-arising digs deeper than that. It says that the issue is not just the contact. We come to sensory contact with a lot of preconceived notions, a lot of attitudes ready to pounce on things. This is why contact is not the beginning of dependent co-arising. Prior to contact you've got the senses, and prior to the senses you've got name and form. Name and form are crucial here, particularly name, for it includes feelings, perceptions, intentions, attention, and the contact among these things in the mind.

This is why the Buddha focuses the practice of the path right here, at the processes of name. You've got to change your intention. You've got to change the way you understand things, which things you pay attention to, which things you ignore. Our usual approach for happiness is that you identify with certain things: your sense of who you are, who's going to benefit from these efforts you're making to create happiness, and exactly what things you have under your power, under your control, that can be used to create that happiness. That's all an issue of attention: how you attend to things, how you look at them, what your perspective is, what questions you ask. And that big question, the question of "I"—"Who am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?"—that's a constant question, and we're always coming up with different answers. And because that question eats

at us, we try to create an identity to stuff into its mouth. But you can learn to stop feeding on it if you can keep reminding yourself that that's not the issue. The issue is simply what can be done to lead to happiness—which sometimes requires a sense of self, but sometimes doesn't.

This is why right view is the beginning of the path, because it focuses particularly on the most skillful way of attending to things. Once you've got a skillful way of attending to things, that changes your intentions. So the focus of your attention should be to understand: "What is the cause of suffering? What are the causes for the end of suffering? If I see myself doing something that leads to suffering, how can I stop? If I see that there are states of mind that lead to an end to suffering, how can I encourage them? How can I develop them?" Those are intentions that you've got to nourish. Otherwise, when the usual triggers for craving and clinging or thirst and feeding come along, you go right back to your old feeding patterns.

So to help strengthen the new way of giving attention, or the new way of developing intentions, the Buddha has you develop certain perceptions. You've probably heard of the three characteristics, but it's interesting to note that the term "three characteristics" doesn't appear in the Pali Canon. The Buddha talks about *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, but he doesn't use the word for characteristic—*lakkhana*—to go along with them. He uses the word perception or mental label: *anicca-sañña*, *dukkha-sañña*, *anatta-sañña*. You learn to label things as inconstant, stressful, not-self. The other word he connects with them is *anupassana*, or contemplation: *aniccanupassana*. To contemplate is to look for these qualities in your experiences. In particular, you look at the raw materials that you ordinarily use to build your sense of yourself, to build your sense of the world, to see how they're inconstant. When the raw materials are inconstant, how are you going to build anything solid out of them? It's like building a house out of frozen meat. The meat seems solid, you can stack it like bricks, but it's going to melt. Who would want to live in a house like that? It's stressful. It's asking for disaster.

So you look for the stress inherent in trying to find happiness in things that are inconstant. When you see the raw materials as stressful, ask yourself: "What can I build out of stressful things that would really provide true security?" And when you see that they're not totally under your control, when they're *anatta*, what sense of reliable self could you build out of these things? You can build a temporary sense of self, and there are times when you need that, but ultimately it doesn't give the satisfaction you want. That's because these thought worlds, once you've set them going, start doing things on their own; they have a logic of their own, which you can't always anticipate. So how can you trust them?

These are the factors the Buddha has you focus on—attention, intention, and perception—so that when you catch the mind jumping at the opportunity to build a thought world, you can ask yourself: "Why am I doing this? What am I going to get out of it?" You look at the raw materials and you see that they're not the sort of things you could build anything reliable out of. Then you look at your motivation: "Why are you doing this? What do you want out of this?" You start asking the Buddha's questions: "Does this activity lead to suffering or does it lead away from suffering?" These are the things you've got to keep in mind.

One way of doing that is to develop a good solid foundation here in the

present, so that it's easier to stay in the present. The longer the mind stays in the present, the easier it is to be mindful and alert. The more mindful and alert it is, the more clearly it can see these processes as they're happening.

Dig down a few more steps into dependent co-arising, and you come to fabrication. Fabrication comes in three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the breath; verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrication is feeling and perception. When you're focused on the breath, thinking about and evaluating the breath, you've got all these things right there. You've got the breath, you've got yourself thinking and evaluating the breath, and you've got the feelings of pleasure and pain that come from the breath, along with perceptions that keep you focused both on the breath and on the pleasures or the pains that come from the breath. When you learn to look at things in these terms and can maintain this world, you're in a much better position to watch the process of how the mind creates other worlds. When it forgets, when it tries to block out this world of the present, that's the ignorance that sets those other thought worlds into motion.

So you've got to keep reminding yourself stay here, stay here, stay here. Try to get as interested in the breath as you can. Try to understand: What is this bodily fabrication, this breath energy, anyhow? How does the in-and-out breath relate to the sense of energy in the different parts of the body? How can you create a sense of ease here that helps to satisfy you, that helps get rid of that hunger to go out and create other places, other worlds to go foraging in? The greater the sense of fullness you've got here—the fullness that comes from learning how to relate properly to the breath—the more you can cut through the hunger, the thirst, that would force you to create other worlds of being, other worlds of becoming.

So when you look at dependent co-arising, it's not just an abstract exercise. It actually explains a lot of the reasons why the Buddha teaches meditation the way he does, why he tended to teach breath meditation more than any other kind of meditation, and why the path begins with right view. Right view helps redirect this causal process away from the ignorant clinging and thirst that ordinarily we feed on—or that we try to feed on, trying to find some satisfaction—and focuses it in a direction where it provides more satisfaction, a greater sense of fullness.

Dependent co-arising not just a map about abstractions; it's actually a map of your feeding frenzy. And even though the map has lots of factors that even the Buddha admitted are all entangled, it does make one clear and simple point: When contact hits, it's not just making a mark on a blank slate or a passive mirror. The mind is already primed to go looking for food even before contact happens; when we encounter contact, our main question is whether we can eat it. This is why we have to meditate: The causes for suffering are inside. And this is why the Buddha has us focus attention on our intentions, perceptions, and views, because as long as we're ignorant of these things, that ignorance keeps driving our feeding frenzy.

Which is why dependent co-arising is also a guide to what you can *do* to help abort this process of constantly creating unsatisfactory feeding worlds in the mind, worlds that lead to suffering, worlds that lead to stress. It teaches us new feeding habits. When we learn how to feed on the breath, we don't have to create the different identities that need to go out and engage in a feeding frenzy on

other people. And it's good not just for us, but also for everyone around us.

So develop a taste for the breath. Learn how to be a connoisseur of your breathing. When you learn to feed here, you really develop the various strengths of the mind—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—that can strengthen it to the point where ultimately it doesn't need to feed anymore. And that's a great gift right there, both to yourself and to everyone around you.