

Interconnectedness

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Everything in life is very interconnected. Everything is dependent on conditions, and the things we do then in turn become conditions for other things in life—not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of the people around us. It's like throwing a pebble into a pond. The waves go out in many directions, and can sometimes cover the whole pond. They can even bounce off the shore and come back, in many intricate patterns.

This principle of interconnectedness can be a good or a bad thing depending on what you do with it. Some people think that interconnectedness is automatically a good thing, but when you remember that harmful actions are also part of the general web and they can have repercussions that go on for a long time, that's a scary thought. Also, our happiness often depends on the actions of other people, many of whom we don't even know. So how can we trust them? We like to think we can trust the conditions on which our life depends, but when you really think about it you realize how fragile the whole enterprise is if you're looking for happiness outside.

This is why the practice has us turn inward, because there inside is the element of our experience that's not dependent on outside conditions. That element consists of the choices we're making from moment to moment. Those can be free. They don't have to depend on outside conditions. Otherwise we'd be in a totally deterministic universe. There'd be nothing we could do. We'd be cogs in a machine, whirling around as the other cogs whirl around. But that's not the way things are. We do have choices. And it's through our choices that we turn the principle of interconnectedness into either a good or a bad thing, depending on how skillful or unskillful our choices are.

As we're meditating we're trying to train this potential for freedom. We're trying to actualize it in a good way by working on the skillfulness of our intentions, because those are the forces over which we have some control. The things we intend to do, the choices we make: If we can do them with more mindfulness, more alertness, we find that gradually we do become more and more skillful.

So, as you're sitting here with your breath, try to be as mindful as possible of what you're doing. Try to keep your mindfulness as continuous as possible. That strengthens your mindfulness. As for your alertness, try to be as sensitive as possible to the breath. How does it really feel to breathe? Where do you notice the sensation that lets you know, "Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out"?

Where do you feel those sensations? How do they feel? Do they feel good? Do they feel okay but not especially good? Do they actually feel uncomfortable? If they feel uncomfortable, try different ways of breathing. Adjust the breath. You do have this freedom right here, this element of choice with regard to the breath. The breath is one of the few bodily processes that can be automatic but also can be shaped by your choices.

So work with it, explore it. Try to become more sensitive to this aspect of your awareness. As you become more sensitive to the breath, you also become more sensitive to the mind. That's important, because if we want to be able to judge the quality of our intentions we have to be really clear about what they are, to make sure there's nothing hiding behind them. In other words, our intentions can often present a really nice face to us, but if you dig down a little deeper you find there's something else behind the face: something that's not quite so pretty, something that you'd prefer to hide from yourself. And yet, part of you knows what's going on.

So, one of the immediate benefits of the practice is that once we become more honest with ourselves there's less of this internal deception. The mind plays fewer games with itself, and as a result it can be clearer about what it's doing right now, clearer about what input it's putting into the interconnected system in which we live. This is important because the basic principle is that the more good you put in, the more good you experience, and it also helps the people around you.

In the West we often think that you have to work either for your own good or for the good of the people around you, but you can't do both together, whereas the Buddhist principle is that if you're really skillful you get to do both at the same time. The good things you do help you *and* help the people around you—if you're really skillful. This means going beyond ordinary good intentions to *informed* good intentions, *skillful* good intentions. Those are the kinds of intentions you want to work on.

As we meditate we're developing the qualities we need to make our intentions more skillful. We take our one intention—which is to stay with the breath right now, not to let ourselves get knocked off by other thoughts—and we try to maintain that intention. In maintaining the intention we learn an awful lot about what it means to give rise to an intention, maintain the intention, check the intention, make it more and more skillful with practice. We intentionally shape this process, because the most important type of interconnectedness is the interconnectedness in the mind—how our perceptions and our intentions, the questions we ask ourselves, the answers we give ourselves, how we go about forming those answers: how these processes are all interconnected. They can be interconnected in a way that leads to suffering or in a way that leads to happiness, to freedom. It all depends on how we *use* those interconnections.

So whether interconnectedness is going to be a good thing or a bad thing is up to us. As we meditate we're given the tools to make those connections a good thing so that the way our mind functions causes less and less suffering for ourselves—and less suffering for the people around us. As you work through the processes that ordinarily would give rise to greed, anger, or delusion, you find that you can manage them in a way that doesn't have to stumble into those unskillful states. At the same time, you find that the people around you are subjected to less of your greed, anger and delusion as well. The whole atmosphere surrounding you changes. As you bring the mind to a more skillful state you find that it tunes into the skillful habits of the people around you. This forms a kind of connection as well.

As you work on this, however, you find that the connectedness is not nearly as interesting as the potential for freedom. How is it that we do have this freedom here to make choices? Where does this freedom come from? Where does it lead if we pursue it?

The Buddha's insight into interconnectedness was that it was a very complex process, and complex processes like this, by their very nature, have points where they cancel one another out. There was a mathematician who studied these points and discovered what he called "resonances": points where the different processes just cancel each other out and suddenly you're outside the system entirely. The same goes with our experience. The Buddha found that you can manipulate causality to get beyond causality. This is where it really gets good, because when you can get outside of this interconnected system you find that your happiness doesn't have to depend on interconnectedness. It doesn't have to depend on the good or bad decisions of other people. It doesn't have to depend on your own good or bad decisions. Totally free, totally independent: That's where it gets really good.

When you have a happiness that's totally independent, then as you continue to live in the world you find that you can give more freely of wise decisions, right decisions, skillful decisions, because you don't *need* the feedback that comes from other people.

The sad side to ordinary interconnectedness is that a lot of it consists of feeding. Different people feed on each other. Sometimes the feeding is mutually beneficial, sometimes it's not. Some people are willing to offer emotional food to other people; they're happy to do it, they're glad to do it. Other times the process is not so voluntary, but as long as we're living in this interconnected system we're always subject to this process of feeding. One person depends on another. The second person depends on the first, or depends on somebody else. As with all food chains, it's always ready to break at some point. There's always that uncertainty, and no matter what's given in the food chain there's always going to be hope for something in return. When you get outside of the chain though, you don't need anything from anyone, and you're happy to give whatever you've got. That kind of giving becomes truly pure giving.

Some people think that the idea of a totally independent source of happiness is selfish, or a way of running away from the real world, but it's not. How can it be selfish when you're in a position that allows everything you do to be an act of giving? What exactly is it running away from? It's running away from your old feeding habits, your old dependencies, which are not only unstable for you but can also be oppressive for others in ways that you might not think, but they're there. Just the fact that we have this body depends on food, clothing, shelter, and medicine — and where do those things come from? How many people are happily involved in the process that brings us food, happily involved in the process that brings us clothing, shelter, and medicine? There may be some people who are happy to do it, but a lot of people are doing it through pain and suffering. That's why we chant that reflection every evening, to remind us of this fact.

So that's what you're running away from. You're running away from a mode of existence that depends on the exploitation of others. That's not a bad thing to run away from. It's not a bad thing to abandon. Especially when running away in the proper way

puts you in a position where you can still be giving. Then the way you continue to participate in this interconnected system until the day you die is purely through acts of giving, purely selfless, because you don't need anything from anyone else. That's where we're headed as we practice.

So, keep that in mind. There is interconnectedness in the world and it can be a good thing if you make it a good thing. But it has its limitations. It's always conditional. And it always involves taking. People like to think of interconnectedness as light reflected in multiple mirrors, or light-beams going from one jewel to another in Indra's net: each jewel illuminates and is reflected in the other jewels. These are all pretty images, but that's not the way interconnectedness functions in the actual world. One animal feeds on another. One person feeds emotionally on somebody else.

When the early Buddhist texts teach causality to young novices, they start with a simple fact: All life depends on feeding. So interconnectedness is not simply light-beams going from one person to another. It's a process of feeding—which is not always a pretty process.

So although you can make it good—at least relatively good and helpful—the best way to use the process is to get so skillful, so clear on this element of freedom contained in each of your choices moment by moment, that it opens up to something totally *other*, where there's no need to feed. When there's no need to feed, you're totally free. Imagine going into the wilderness without the need to feed. You could wander around forever. It's because we need to feed that we carry food with us, which puts a limitation on how long, how far we can go. Or even worse, some people go hunting. That's really oppressive. If you didn't have to feed you could wander everywhere forever. No limitations. No need to oppress anyone. We're limited by the fact that we have to feed.

So, when we practice we make the mind stronger and stronger until ultimately it doesn't need to feed anymore. It's not like the body. The body always has to feed, but the mind—when it reaches a certain level of strength—opens up to something totally other where there's no need to feed. That's the “good news” of the Buddha's teachings: that the processes in this interconnected world in which we live can be mastered in such a way that you go beyond it totally, and then for the rest of your life what you put back into the process is purely a gift.