

## *The Limits of Interconnectedness*

*July 20, 2015*

When we meditate, we're focusing on our part of our awareness that we don't share with anyone else: our own sensation of the breath, our own experience of what's going on in the mind. This is because eventually we want to deal with the problem that lies in this part of our awareness, which is our pain, our suffering. Nobody else can feel our suffering. No matter how much politicians may claim that they can feel our suffering, they don't. They can imagine it, but that's all. Suffering is something very personal, very individual.

And the Buddha's insight was that we can solve this problem from within. In other words, the solution lies in this part of our awareness as well, the part that's not shared with anyone else. Our own sense of the breath, our own sense of our thinking: Those can be transformed into a path. If we bring awareness, if we bring knowledge to these different processes, we can change them from a burden into a way to the end of the burden.

We do live our lives connected with other people, of course, but the connections are through our karma. We hear a lot about interconnectedness, that this is what our very being is, something interconnected. But it's through our actions that we're interconnected.

There is the sense that we're all living in the same world, breathing oxygen. As they say, each time you breathe in, you've probably got a molecule or two of the oxygen that Julius Caesar breathed or Queen Elizabeth the First. And we all live in the same weather system, geological system. But that doesn't mean that these things can contribute to everybody's happiness. These systems are not designed to make everybody happy. In fact, as the Buddha pointed out, a lot of the ways in which we're interconnected actually lead to suffering.

Right now here in Southern California the weather is amazingly good for this time of the year. I learned this morning that there's a horrendous heatwave back East. It's all part of the same weather system. There's no way the weather's going to be perfect for everybody all over the world. To be good here, it has to be bad someplace else. When it's good some other places, then it's going to have to be bad here. You can't expect any real happiness out of those kind of interconnections—or any reliable happiness. It comes and it goes.

There's also the sense in which we're interconnected through our need for our requisites. We need food, we need clothing, we need shelter, we need medicine. And that really places a burden on other people, on other beings. That's why we have to reflect on these things every day, every day, so that we use them just enough for the sake of the practice: just enough food to keep going; just enough clothing to protect us from the elements; just enough shelter to

protect us from the elements; just enough medicine to keep the body going in relative health. Anything beyond that, we're beginning to impose too much on others.

So the general interconnectedness out there is not always a good thing. In fact, Interbeing is Inter-eating. We feed on one another.

The types of connections that can be helpful, though, are the ones that we connect through our karma. In that chant we have about our actions: *kammabandhu*, we are related through our actions. It's through our choices that we're connected with different people in different ways—which is one of the reasons why you want to be very careful about how you relate to others, how your actions have an impact on others. Try to create connections that are good. This is what generosity is for; it's what virtue is for

Meditation helps in this way as well. The stronger we are inside, the less we have to lean on others. The more clarity we bring to our own actions, the less we're likely to harm others. And the greater sense of strength we have inside, the less we're likely to do unskillful things. Because it's usually through a sense of weakness or being threatened, being fearful, that we can do harm.

So as we meditate, it's not just for us. We're creating the basis for good connections. Without this inner basis for good connections, there's no telling what kind of connections you're going to create. You never know how long those connections are going to last. Sometimes they go from one lifetime to another to another.

There's a passage where the Buddha says it's hard to find someone who hasn't been your mother in some lifetime, someone who hasn't been your father, brother, sister, son or daughter. But a lot of those connections are long ago. They're people you just barely meet this time around, and that's it. Other people, as soon as you meet them, it's like two magnets: You're drawn together. But magnetism can be either good or bad. You have to be careful.

But as we create these connections, we have to do it with the knowledge that they're all going to have to end at some point. So you want to make sure that the connection, while it lasts, is a good one, that it's beneficial for both sides. If you're going to be feeding off of each other, then provide good food to each other, food that's actually strengthening, so that when the relationship ends, both sides are better. They've benefitted from it, you've benefitted from it, and both sides have learned how to be more and more independent—because we have to keep coming back to this part of our awareness that's our own.

You notice this when people are getting very sick and reach the point where you can't really communicate with them. Or someone's in a lot of pain: Sometimes the pain is so overwhelming that they can't get beyond the wall of the pain. They're stuck inside. Those are the times when you would like most to help, but there's so little you can do.

We're all going to reach that point someday. And to be less of a burden on one another at that point, you want to be able to have your inner work straightened out, so that when pain comes, when illness comes, when death comes, you know how to handle the difficulties without thrashing around—and without paining the hearts of the people around you.

So we have to be very clear about where our true responsibilities lie, where our true position for strength lies. It lies in here. We always want to lean on other people. As long as you have a body, you're going to be leaning on somebody. But you want to lean in as skillful a way as you can, and provide other people with support too. That's what makes social life bearable: that we help one another.

But it always has to be with the consciousness that these relationships are going to end. And as you die, as you go towards death, for focus is going to be forced more and more into this area right here, right now, i.e., your direct experience of your mind, your direct experience of your body, how body and mind feel from within. You want to make sure that you've developed the tools from within, so that when you're left totally independent, totally without anyone else to rely on, you have the resources to maintain yourself with ease.