

Interdependence

March 26, 2020

We are so independent on one another. And for a long time, we've been told that we should celebrate that fact—the idea being somehow that the system of interdependence could be tweaked so that everybody benefits.

But look at us now. Our interdependence has brought us illness, it's brought death to some people, it's brought a lot of fear, because we know deep down inside that this interdependent system—any interdependent system—is unstable.

To survive, we need one another for the food we eat, even the air we breathe. We breathe one another's air. Living beings feed off of other living beings, both emotionally and physically. There's no way we could survive as beings without this principle of interdependence.

But this also means that survival is suffering—survival as beings is suffering. Now, for a lot of people, the only alternative they can imagine would be non-existence, a total wipeout. But the Buddha found that there is another alternative: You can free yourself from having to be a being. You don't have to be defined as a being or anything at all. And there is a happiness that doesn't have to depend on anything. That possibility is what we practice for.

But you can't use that possibility as the means. The means are interdependent actions: the things we hold on to; the things we identify with.

Think of the image of the raft. You want to swim from the dangers on this shore to the safety of the far shore. This shore, the Buddha said, stands for self-identity: the ways in which we define ourselves. The far shore is unbinding. To get to unbinding, we have to find twigs and branches and leaves and grass on this shore, bind them together in the right way into a raft, and then put our raft in the water, the four-fold flood. We then make our way to the further shore by exerting an effort with our hands and feet. The effort here is the effort we put into our meditation, the effort we put into virtue, concentration, and discernment.

We use the things we've got and we try to use them skillfully, which means that as we're practicing, we're still interdependent. We're still in an unstable position—but, at least, it's better than not practicing.

I know a lot of people who feel a lot of anguish at this time because they don't see any way out. They feel trapped. They've begun to realize that interdependence does trap you. If you don't know the way out, it's pretty scary.

But the Buddha's good news is that there *is* a way out. Still, we don't find it by celebrating the twigs, the branches, and the leaves. We simply make use of them, we make *skillful* use of them. As I said the other day, the proper response

to interdependence is not celebration. It's heedfulness, circumspection: realizing that we have to be skillful, and that we have to be skillful all around. Because, after all, the means by which we get to the other side are, at some point, things we'll have to abandon.

So, you have to be heedful even of the path, circumspect in how you develop the path.

So, take this time to develop a good strong sense of *samvega*—but, at the same time, a sense of *passada*: that there is a way out. We can find our way to freedom. But it requires that we be skillful—and not just skillful in the meditation. Skillful in our all our interactions with one another.

It's in times of stress and restrictions like this that we should come to appreciate one another, rather than fighting with one another. We need to realize that we have depend on one another.

So look for the good in other people. That is what the principle of admirable friendship is all about. You take other people's examples of conviction, generosity, virtue, discernment, and you try to emulate them.

So, look around you. There are good examples all around you. No one person may be fully developed in all four qualities, but look for people who are more developed than you are: the ones who are

- strong in their conviction that their actions will make a difference;
- virtuous, very careful to be harmless;
- generous with their time, generous with their knowledge, generous with their forgiveness; and
- discerning in how things come and go in the mind, seeing which things come and have a good effect, which things come and have a bad effect. That's what it means to have discernment.

The texts define discernment as discernment into arising and passing away, but it's not simply a matter of watching things coming and going. It means being able to make comparisons, seeing how, when some things come, good things come along with them; when other things come, bad things come along with them. You begin to realize which causes you have some power over and which ones you don't. You focus on the things that you can exert some power over and use that discernment to examine your conviction, virtue, and generosity, so that you can be circumspect in how you practice these things.

Sometimes conviction in the principle of karma can get you really worried about what kind of bad karma you might have in the past. I had a lot of questions like that when I was in Brazil: "How do I know that I don't have bad karma in the past?" And the answer is: "You have bad karma in the past, otherwise you wouldn't be a human being." But then the Buddha teaches you that you don't have to suffer from that past bad karma. You can develop your ability not to be overcome by pleasure and pain. You can develop your

immeasurable attitudes, the sublime attitudes. You develop your virtue and your discernment—and the process of developing these things can protect you from your past bad actions, so that you're not totally exposed.

But, at the same time, we have to accept the fact that there are bad actions in the past and they may come up in all kinds of different ways. The trick is how to learn not to suffer from their results.

You can also bring discernment to your virtue. There's always a problem when people follow the precepts: They think themselves better than other people. Then a kind of conceit develops around them. As Ven. Ananda pointed out, there is healthy conceit and unhealthy conceit. Healthy conceit is when you see that other people can be virtuous and harmless, they're human beings, you're a human being, if they can do it, you can do it, too. Unhealthy conceit is when you start comparing yourself to find where you're better than others. Discernment reminds you: Watch out for that!

The same with generosity: Generosity can have its bad side as well, when you start giving in ways that are not skillful, giving in ways where you harm yourself or harm the recipient. Discernment helps you see that and gets you to stop doing that.

So, discernment is not just a matter of watching things coming and going and saying: "Oh, that thing is just coming and going, there's nothing really solid there, so I might as well give up." You see that there are ways of acting that are skillful and not skillful, and even with the skillful qualities you have to be circumspect. And you're discerning enough to figure out how.

When you see these qualities of conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment in other people, you try and emulate them and develop them in yourself. That's how our friendship with one another, our interdependence, actually becomes an asset on the path.