

## *Dependent Co-arising Right Now*

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According to the Buddha's analysis of suffering, we suffer because of three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. In every case, the Buddha says, these kinds of craving lead to more becoming. The question is, how do we get around them? How do we get rid of them? After all, the path to the end of suffering will require desire as well. We've got the added problem that you would think that craving for non-becoming would help get rid of becoming, but becoming is basically taking an identity in a world of experience, and the craving for non-becoming thinks in terms of identities and worlds of experience. Even though it wants to destroy them, it ends up dealing in terms of becoming and creating more becoming into the future.

The trick lies in learning how to express your desire in terms that have nothing to do with identities or worlds of experience. That's what the teaching on dependent co-arising is all about. We look at the raw materials that lead up to becoming and try to get to them before they take on an identity as a world of experience or as an identity of who you are. And although the list in dependent co-arising is long, certain basic principles hold across the board.

The number-one principle is that you don't ask who is doing the actions in dependent co-arising and you don't ask where they're happening. In fact, the different factors in the process of dependent co-arising are meant to show you how your whole idea of an identity comes about, how your idea of a world comes about. So you want to look at those factors simply as events. As the Buddha said, they're events happening right here, right now. They condition one another right here, right now.

In some cases, the conditioning is immediate:  $x$  happens and  $y$  happens immediately. When  $x$  stops,  $y$  stops.

In other cases, the conditioning takes place over time. But the Buddha never talks about how long that span of time might be. It could be just a couple of instants. It could be a couple of lifetimes. That's not the issue, because once you start thinking about how long it's going to be, you start thinking in terms of the world. And the number-one way of making sure you deal properly with dependent co-arising is to make sure you don't think in terms of worlds; you don't think in terms of identities. You stay with just phenomena happening, conditioning one another right here, immediately present to your experience. You don't have to think of anything hiding behind the phenomena, or of there being

nothing behind the phenomena, because that starts you thinking in terms of identities and worlds all over again.

Another important thing to notice about dependent co-arising is that it starts with ignorance. Ignorance is defined as not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, because you're basically seeing things in terms of your identity in a world. If you look in terms of the four noble truths, there's no mention of identities or worlds at all, just what the suffering is, what's causing it, and whether its cessation is possible. The Buddha's approach is that you attack the cause and, because the cause is conditioned, it can change. It can cease. There's also a path that attacks that cause and leads to the cessation.

Again, no reference to who you are or how large the time scale is or how big the world is in which this is happening. It could be happening in your mind. It could be playing out in the world outside. It's the same principle all over.

As the Buddha said, with all the different factors in dependent co-arising, you bring this type of analysis to any of the factors prior to clinging, and you can nip the whole process in the bud. So what are the factors?

Half of them are prior to sensory contact—that's another important thing to notice. Most of the causes for our suffering are things that we bring to our experience. Now, this is good news. If the suffering were caused by our experiences, by the world outside, how could we put an end to suffering? How could you change the world enough to make sure you didn't suffer? You look at people who tried to make big changes in the world that way, and they end up doing a lot of damage as they find people getting in their way and they just run right over them.

It was the Buddha's insight that even though he was born in the noble warrior class, which tended to see problems in that perspective, he said, "No, the real problem is inside." He said, "The arrow is in the heart." So you have to turn around and pluck the arrow out. This means looking at the way in which you approach experience, and if you approach it with knowledge—in other words, seeing all of the things leading up to sensory contact in terms of the four noble truths—you won't have to suffer, because you're not going to be giving rise to the craving that causes more becoming.

So what have you got? Starting with ignorance, ignorance conditions fabrications. These can be bodily fabrication—the breath; verbal fabrication—the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication—perceptions and feelings. That's on the immediate level as you're sitting here meditating. But then there's also the bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication that creates karma going on to new births—the same principle operating on a larger timescale.

The important thing is that you can see the larger factors right here. After all, if you're going to move your body, you have to breathe. If you're going to speak, you have to talk to yourself first. If you're going to think, you've got to use perceptions and feelings.

This illustrates an important principle here: that the patterns of causality on the large scale are the same as those on the small scale. If you want to know the large scale, you can watch the small scale right here as you meditate. For instance, while you're focused on the breath right here, you've got all three forms of fabrication. You can choose to approach them with ignorance, or you can choose to approach them with knowledge. With ignorance, you're saying, "Here I am trying to meditate," and you judge how good a person you are by how well the meditation is going. It all becomes *you* in the world of experience. But you could also meditate looking at these things simply as fabrications. Here's the breath. Here are these processes in the mind: directed thought and evaluation, and there are perceptions that hold identify the breath, and then the feelings that come as you stay with the breath or don't stay with the breath: feelings of pleasure or feelings of dis-ease. But you can convert them to more feelings of pleasure if you use the right perceptions.

So here's an immediate way of dealing with dependent co-arising. You don't have to know the whole series. Just focus on what you're doing right now, and put your sense of self out of the way. Put your ideas of world—in other words, how you compare with other people, what you're going to do after you leave the meditation—put all of that aside. And then you can look: Is the breath pleasant or unpleasant? If it's unpleasant, what's causing it to be unpleasant? Is there some imbalance in the elements in the body? Or is it an imbalance in activities in the mind? Look at the way you're talking to yourself. Look at the perceptions you're holding in mind. Maybe you should try a different perception. When you're thinking in these immediate terms, you're bringing knowledge to these processes, so that instead of being a cause for suffering, they're actually a path to the cessation of suffering.

Then these fabrications, in turn, will affect your consciousness. Your consciousness will affect name and form. Name and form is basically the five aggregates. And those are right here, too, simply that fabrication is divided up here into a few other categories: attention, intention, and contact. You look at how you pay attention to the breath. You can look at your intentions in staying with the breath. You look at how your perceptions and your attention and your intentions all play off one another. And again, you keep "you" out of the picture, and simply look at what's causing what to happen here. Then you pass judgment:

Is this good? Is it not good? If it's not good, what can be done to change it? That's bringing knowledge to these processes. These are the things that condition your senses, and then from the senses, they condition the contact you have with the world.

The pattern of dependent co-arising then goes on from there. From contact, there's feeling; from feeling, there's craving. From craving, there's clinging; from clinging, there's becoming. Once you've got becoming, there's birth, aging, illness, death with all their attendant suffering.

But notice that the really important factors are prior to sensory contact. And where do you deal with those factors? You deal with them as you meditate. This is why, when we meditate, we're not contemplating big abstract truths. We're simply here to watch the workings of the mind to see what conditions what and how those conditions can be moved in a good direction, all the time keeping our sense of "us" as much in the background as possible, keeping our sense of the world as much in the background as possible. That's when you're turning these factors of dependent co-arising from conditions for suffering into factors of the path.

So you've still got desire. It's not as if you pretend that you don't want to come to the end of the path, that you don't want to put an end to suffering, or that you don't want to put an end to the different forms of craving. I was listening the other night to somebody saying just that—that the Buddha puts you in a bind. He tells you that you suffer because of sensuality, craving for sensuality. But if you crave to have an end to sensuality, that's a craving for non-existence, and that's a form of suffering, too. So the solution, the person said, was just not having any desire at all. Of course, why would you not want to have desire? Because you want to put an end to suffering. You're being dishonest with yourself. But that wasn't the Buddha's approach.

He said we suffer because we approach things thinking in terms of becoming: our identity in a world of experience. So change the way you frame your desires. Tell yourself you want to understand the fabrications of the mind, the workings of the mind, and get "you" and "the world" out of the picture as much as possible. Acting on that kind of desire gives results.

So even though dependent co-arising is complex—and there's that famous passage where Ananda comes to the Buddha and says, "It looks complex, but it's really simple," and the Buddha said, "No, it really is complex." It's because it's so complex that we get entangled in suffering"—still, you can take it apart, break it down so that it becomes a manageable teaching. And the Buddha's primary way of doing this is focusing on the breath—seeing the breath as bodily fabrication,

seeing the events in the mind as mental fabrication, engaging in verbal fabrication with as little “you” in there as possible. And that can be enough to cause this whole pattern of causes and conditions leading to suffering to begin to unravel.

So keep your focus right here. Keep the way you frame the issues right here, and your desire for the end of suffering can become a reality.