

Dependent Arising as the Middle Way

By Kokyo Henkel, 2015

The Buddha once said, “Those who see dependent arising see the Dharma and those who see the Dharma see dependent arising.” Dependent arising is the middle way, free from extreme views and ideas. Everything that arises moment to moment comes to be dependent on other factors; nothing exists independently, on its own. Everything arises dependent on conditions and ceases dependent on conditions, and those conditions also arise dependent on other conditions. At a Dharma talk, I speak because you are there. I wouldn’t have come if you hadn’t come. So, the arising of this person depends on the condition of you, and you wouldn’t be sitting there if there weren’t a speaker giving a talk. You are listening dependent upon my speaking and I am speaking dependent upon your listening. We dependently co-arise in each moment; neither of us would be in this situation without the other.

Here’s a story from the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, in a section called “The Book of Causation.” In one of the sutras, the wandering yogi Kashyapa came to the Buddha and asked, “How is it, Master Gautama, is suffering created by oneself?” Suffering, or discontent, is an important issue for the Buddha. He once said, “I only teach two things: suffering and the end of suffering” and of course he also taught dependent arising, which is how suffering comes to be. Since Kashyapa hadn’t yet heard this Dharma, he asked if suffering is created by oneself. How discontent comes to be and how it ceases is important for all spiritual practitioners, past and present, who want to relieve the suffering of themselves and others.

So Kashyapa asked, “Is suffering created by oneself?” “Not so, Kashyapa,” said the Buddha. “Then is suffering created by another?” “Not so, Kashyapa,” the Buddha said. “How is it, then, Master Gautama, is suffering created both by oneself and by another?” “Not so, Kashyapa,” the Buddha said. “Then does suffering come about randomly or spontaneously, neither created by oneself or by another?” “Not so, Kashyapa,” the Buddha said.

These are four possibilities of how discontent might arise, and the Buddha denied them all: suffering is not created by oneself, by another, by some combination of oneself and another, and not created randomly or spontaneously, without a cause. Poor Kashyapa then asked, “Well how is it then, Master Gautama, is there then no suffering?” The Buddha said, “It’s not that there is no suffering, Kashyapa. There is suffering.” This is the first Noble Truth. “Then is it that Master Gautama does not know or see suffering?” The Buddha said, “It’s not that I don’t know suffering, Kashyapa. I do know suffering and I do see suffering.” This is getting stranger and stranger; if there is suffering, where does it come from if not one of these four ways?

Kashyapa said, “Let the Blessed One explain suffering to me, let the Blessed One teach me about suffering.” The Buddha said, “Kashyapa, if you think that the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences the result of that action, then you assert that there is someone who exists permanently and that suffering is created by oneself. This is the view of eternalism.”

For example, I may be holding on to a view about what’s right and someone else might have a different view. We start having an argument, and I get upset and say some harsh words to the other person. They get upset and walk away and then I feel ashamed and regretful, which is a kind of suffering. I do or say something, and then later I experience the result of something I did. I’m suffering now because yesterday I said something harsh, and today’s “me” and yesterday’s “me” are the same. This is the extreme view of eternalism, the usually unconscious belief in a singular, permanent, independent self, an indestructible essence that has no beginning and end. This is imagining a continuous thread called a “self” that we feel came to be when we were born, or as far back as we can remember. We do feel that there is some continuous unchanging “me,” don’t we? I propose that this is the way we all actually do think and feel 99% of the time, usually unconsciously. Even if we have

heard teachings about “no self,” and they make sense conceptually, still we feel on a deep gut level as if we are the same person as yesterday, and therefore “I” feel ashamed about things “I” did in the past.

The Buddha went on to say, “Kashyapa, if you think that the one who acts is one person and the one who experiences the result of that action is another, totally separate person, then one asserts that suffering is created by another. This is the view of annihilationism.” This is the idea or feeling that yesterday’s “me” was another person than today’s “me,” a completely different and separate person, with no relation to me now. Most people don’t think in this way, but people who hear the Buddha’s teaching about “no self” might start to think this way. This is a misunderstanding of “no self,” the belief that there’s no connection between me sitting here now and yesterday’s me.

We can imagine the dangers of this kind of view. For example: “I’ may have really hurt somebody yesterday, but today that’s fine because that wasn’t me, there is no self that connects today’s experience with yesterday’s experience. So that’s too bad if yesterday’s person hurt you, but don’t blame me!” This is sometimes called “emptiness sickness” or “Zen sickness.” If there’s no connection between things at all, then there’s no responsibility. This is the view of annihilationism, meaning that yesterday’s me is completely gone now, without a trace. When an ancient Zen teacher was asked if an awakened person falls into cause and effect or not, he said “no” and immediately fell into the body of a wild fox. Actually an awakened person does not obscure cause and effect, does not deny dependent arising.

Eternalism is the belief in a continuous thread of unchanging self, and annihilationism is the belief that there is no connection between yesterday’s experience and today’s experience, everything is just spontaneously arising. Then the Buddha says, “without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dharma by the middle.” The Buddha teaches the middle way free from extreme views. The middle way is dependent co-arising, which the Buddha expresses here as, “Dependent on ignorance, habitual tendencies arise.” With ignorance of the middle way, volitions based on false views arise, such as the impulse to speak harshly. “Dependent on habitual tendencies, dualistic consciousness arises. Dependent on dualistic consciousness, name and form arise.” The way the mind names and conceptualizes things as separate from itself is the result of dualistic consciousness. “Dependent on name and form, the sense faculties and their objects arise.” Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, all dualistically relating to an external world of colors, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and thoughts. “Dependent on these sense faculties and their objects, contact arises.” The eye contacts color, the ear contacts sound, and so on. “Dependent upon contact, feeling arises.” As soon as a sense faculty contacts an object, there is a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. “Dependent on feeling, craving arises.” Of course we want to have a pleasant feeling. “Dependent on craving, grasping arises.” The contracting or tightening of mind and body is a solidification of craving: I want what is pleasant so I’m going to get it. “Dependent on grasping, becoming arises.” I got it! I become the one who has gotten what I wanted. “Dependent on becoming, birth arises. Dependent on birth, aging and death and various kinds of suffering arise.”

Kashyapa asked if today’s suffering is caused by oneself, the same one who spoke harshly yesterday, or caused by another, the one who spoke harshly yesterday who has no relation to me today. The Buddha replied that neither of these is correct, nor is some combination of both of them correct, nor does suffering arise without any cause. If there was a real and continuous “self” there would be no way out of the cycle of discontent, and if there was no relation between today’s experience and yesterday’s experience, there would also be no possibility of freedom. But suffering arises dependent upon conditions, therefore all is possible. If conditions change, the result will change; with the cessation of ignorance, habitual tendencies cease. Awareness of the middle way, not obscuring cause and effect, makes it possible to live freely in the world of arising and ceasing without blaming oneself or evading responsibility.