Interconnectedness

November, 2001

Life is a very precarious thing. It depends on all kinds of conditions that are beyond our control. There’s the weather, there’s the economy, there’s disease. These things have been with us all along. Now that human life has become more complex and even more interrelated, it becomes more precarious. We have global economies. We’ve always had global weather patterns, but now the economy is global as well, as are diseases. There used to be diseases with strike in certain places, and they never got beyond certain natural barriers. Now they’re all over the place. So the precariousness of life that the Buddha talked about has not gone away. It’s just become even more precarious. People don’t like that. They want a sense of security. They want a sense of ease in life. There are basically two places you can look for it in life itself. In the dependent situations or gaining release from what’s dependent on other things. Most people prefer to look in the first place. In other words, they want basically the life they’ve got with a little bit more security and a little bit more dependability. But as the Buddha pointed out, even when things were less precarious, it just doesn’t work out that way. But still, we keep wanting it. Maybe this explains why so many people talk about connectedness as the goal of the practice. The idea being that there’s this large system that’s all working together for the good of everybody. It’s where connectedness is a good thing, because behind it all there’s a benevolent intelligence. Or at least some way that it’s going to work out that it’s going to be for everybody’s good. Someone once said that the crisis of modern life, not so much the crisis as just the basic emotional problem or the existential problem, is that we are so interconnected, and yet those connections are hidden. You go down to the store and you buy food. You have no idea where the food came from, who planted it. You go buy clothing. Recently there was an article in a magazine that traced how a Gap sweatshirt gets to your hands. It starts in Uzbekistan and makes travels to Iran and Korea. You get all over the place before it gets to some warehouse in Kentucky, and then from there to the store. It’s so easy for one little link in that chain to get broken. That’s why these hidden connections are so scary. We have a sense that we’re very dependent on things that we not only are not under control, but we don’t even know about. That’s why we crave a sense of connection, a sense that connection is a good thing, that it’s all going to work out in the end somehow. And yet, as the Buddha pointed out, it just doesn’t. There are always glitches. Every complex system has its own destruction built into it, has its own breakdown built into it. Chaos is a part of organization. Organization is a part of chaos. And so, as the Buddha pointed out, there’s only one way to really gain security, and that’s to get out of the system altogether. So it’s not a question of connectedness. That’s not our goal. Our goal is freedom. That’s where the only security is. Now, there are stages in the practice where you do bring things together. This is what concentration practice is all about. All the scattered bits and pieces of your mind, you want them to come together, get right here at the body, right here in the present moment. Then you find that as you stay with the breath, not only in and out of the nostrils, but the sense of energy flowing throughout the body. The sense of awareness and the breath begin to seep into each other. They begin to interpenetrate. So we do have that sense of connectedness inside. But again, that’s not the goal. It’s the path. Getting the mind connected like this serves a purpose, because then we won’t have to use our insight to say, “Okay, where are the real natural dividing lines within the mind?” Because up to this point, our sense of division is based on preconceived notions. But when you get the mind all together like this and allow it to sit for a while, it begins to separate out. The awareness separates from the object in a way that you might not have expected. Particular acts of the mind begin to be very clear. Especially when the breath settles down so that it’s totally still throughout the body. That’s when the motions of the mind get really obvious. You can see a perception as it leaps out to label something. You can see thought constructs as they begin to stir, even before you’ve put a perception on them. There’s a sense of stirring. It’s hard to say whether it’s a physical stirring or mental stirring, but it’s there. If you want to stay in a state of concentration, you can just kind of breathe right through it, untangle that energy, even before it’s had a chance to form into a thought and it’ll go away. Otherwise, the thought will form and then it will suddenly take over and your concentration on the breath has gone. You can see these events very clearly because the mind is very still, because there is this sense of unity that you’re working with, a sense of harmony inside. The mind is in harmony with the body. The body is in harmony with the mind. When they’re in harmony like that, then you can begin to see precisely which events are happening at which time. You can see them as they’re actually happening. Rather than thinking about them in the abstract, they’re right there to see. So again, this sense of interconnectedness is not a goal in and of itself. It’s part of the path. It puts the mind in a place where it can see things more clearly, see where they do naturally, and separate out. John Lee has a nice image of taking a rock and putting it into a smelter. When the rock reaches a certain temperature, the tin will separate out of its own accord. You don’t have to go in and pick out the tin bit by bit, but when it reaches that point, the tin just separates out. The lead separates out at a different temperature, the gold at a different temperature, the silver at a different temperature. Once you bring things together like this, then when they separate out, it’s because they separate in a natural way, not because of your preconceived notions. That’s the difference between discernment in an abstract and discernment as it’s actually developed in the practice. The distinctions you see are actual. When you begin to take things apart like this, then you begin to see what lies beyond them. As long as you’re bound up in the connections, even the nicest sense of connection, you can have, is one in the mind that’s concentrated like this. But as long as you’re bound up in connections, you’re still subject to forces beyond your control. You look around at nature and the idea that there’s providence out there, that everything’s working for everybody’s well-being. The evidence just doesn’t support it. Like the weather. There are times when the weather is wonderful here, but that same weather sometimes is bringing hurricanes someplace else, tornadoes someplace else, drought someplace else. The weather has never worked up a system yet where the weather is perfect all over the world. It’s all built into this big system. So you can’t look to the system with a sense of interconnectedness for any real security, for any real guarantee that it’s going to work out for your own happiness, for your own well-being, or for the well-being of all. So what you’ve got to look for is where are the things that you can control? You can control certain states of your mind, at least for the time being. Control them while you can. Turn them into the path. Turn them into this sense of solidity, this sense of connectedness, this sense of harmony within. So you can see what’s going on. If you just stop at that sense of harmony, there will come times when it starts falling apart again. So before that happens, you want to get to something even more firm, more lasting. So it’s important that we be very clear on what’s the path and what’s the goal. The path and the goal are two very separate things. We talked about this the other night. Some people read about the goal, “This is what enlightened consciousness is like. This is what enlightened awareness is like. This is how enlightened people act.” And we try to clone what they do, how they think, how they see things. It’s not something you can clone. If you could clone it through an act of will, everybody would have been enlightened a long time ago. What you do is you put the mind through the process, like the rock in a smelter, so that things begin to separate out naturally. That’s when you get the pure gold. So the sense of unity, the sense of harmony, the sense of connectedness that we develop as we get the mind concentrated, that’s the path. It’s the path you follow, but it’s not the end. It’s not the goal of the practice. That point has to be stressed over and over again, because there’s so much misunderstanding about it. It’s good that we can use concentration as a place to gather the mind. It’s good that we can use the sense of well-being that comes from things coming together. But remember, you use it. Don’t just sit there and celebrate it or indulge in it. It’s a tool. And as with any job, you use the tool. Hold on to the tool until the job is done. Then, when the job is done, you can let go. So even the question of separateness or connectedness is not an issue anymore. Because you’re totally free. It’s only when you reach that point that you can really say that you’re secure, that you’re safe, that you’ve done what had to be done, and you’re finished with it. If connectedness were a goal, there’d be no end to anything. Because there’s no end to connection unless you make an end. That’s what we chant about, capable of making an end. An end to connection, an end to separateness, an end to dependence, of all kinds. That was a release the Buddha found in 2000. That was 600 some years ago now. And it’s a release that’s still available to us at this point in time. And it’s still just as necessary. It hasn’t gone out of date.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0111n1b1%20Interconnectedness.mp3>