Independence & Interdependence

July 4, 2011

Some people would like to rename this Interdependence Day. And so it’s good to reflect. To what extent are we independent? To what extent are we interdependent? And what that tells us about how we have to practice. There is that passage where the Buddha tells Ananda that having admirable friends is the whole of the holy life. We depend on the example of the Buddha that this is something that can be done. True happiness can be found. And there’s a way to do it. It’s not just a hit or miss. The Buddha lays it out in steps. It’s a skill you can master. And it’s our condition and conviction in that possibility that keeps us on the path. This is why conviction is the beginning of the strengths that give us the stamina we need on the path. Because if it weren’t for the Buddha, would we be sitting here focusing on the breath? If you were left to your own devices, you probably never would have thought that focusing on your breath might be a good thing, that it could take you someplace important. But you look at the example of the Buddha, his noble disciples, and all the noble disciples down to the present moment. You see that they’ve done it. And the Buddha does encourage you to think in the way that says, “If they can do it, so can I.” If there’s a part of the mind that says, “I’m not capable of doing this, I’m running into obstacles, I must be hopeless,” the Buddha says to put that part aside. It’s there to destroy you. You can think of all kinds of reasons why you would never be able to gain awakening. And so you have to think of reasons in the other direction. Think of all the noble disciples who, prior to their awakening, were in even worse shape than you are. Some of them were contemplating suicide. The phrase they have in the Theragatha and Therigatha is that they got so worked up they ran amok from their dwelling. In other words, the practice was so frustrating it was driving them bananas. So at least you’re not running amok from the sala right now. And so you have to think in that way. “If they can do it, so can I.” Because you look at the qualities that the Buddha said enabled them to gain awakening. On the one hand, it was a list of ardency, resolution, determination, heedfulness. These are all qualities we can develop. They’re not superhuman qualities. It’s just a matter of really working on them and giving them strength. In another place, he said it was because of two qualities. One was his unwillingness to rest content with what skills he had attained. And then to keep putting in effort to see if he can gain more skills. These are all things that human beings can do. It’s just a matter of knowing how to give yourself encouragement. So it’s in this way that we’re dependent on others to show us the way, to open this possibility. Because if it weren’t for this possibility, what would we have? Well, we’d have the general run of the mill things. We get born, scramble around, try to gain some happiness, and then we die. And if that were all there was to life, it’d be pretty depressing. When you consider the fact that it just doesn’t happen once, it happens many, many times. You’re born, scramble around, die. Born again, scramble around, die again. It’s good to think that there is a way out. And the Buddha shows that it definitely is not just a thought. It’s a real possibility. So that’s one of the ways in which we can have to depend on someone else in our practice. We also depend on advice from others who’ve been on the path before us. And they’re concerned to keep the path open. When you’re on the path, you want to do everything you can to make sure there are no weeds on the path getting in your way. Once you’ve reached the end of the path, then as far as you’re concerned, the weeds could grow back again. But you turn around, you look and you see other people on their way. They’re trying to come down the path. And so you do what you can to keep the weeds from growing and to keep other people from coming in and planting weeds. Because there is that happening. So we have the example of others, we have their advice, and we have their individual advice to us. These are ways in which we have to depend on one another. And then, of course, to practice, we depend on the generosity of others. Without that generosity, we wouldn’t have the time to practice. So it’s to that extent that we are interdependent. But interdependence does have its drawbacks. Because, except for the case of arahants, we’re feeding off of one another all the time. That was the Buddha’s analogy for the causal processes, that x has to feed off of y, and y probably has to feed off of z, and it goes down the line. And there’s a lot of stress and suffering in that process, not only for the people being fed on, but also for being a person who has to feed. There’s a lot of uncertainty in our individual lives, in the survival of society. We’ve got this crazy system going on here, consuming all the resources of the earth. And yet, if it were to collapse, a lot of us would die. And no matter how you’re reborn, you’re always going to be feeding off of somebody else, and they’re going to be feeding off of trying to feed off you one way or another. So this should give you some encouragement to look for that way out, to find a happiness that doesn’t require feeding, a happiness that’s secure. And that’s where your independence has to play a role as well. Because the reason you’re not there yet is for lack of skill. You approach feelings unskillfully. You approach all the aggregates unskillfully—form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. It’s because we feed on these things unskillfully that we continue to suffer. And no one else can make you suffer. No one else can make you skillful. They can point out ways in which you aren’t skillful and give you suggestions for how you might try to develop skill. But the actual skill is something you have to develop by developing your own mindfulness, your own alertness, your own ardency, all the good qualities of the path. So even though the fact that we know of the path through our dependence on others, we can’t follow the path totally depending on them. We have to follow it ourselves. Again, the Buddha only points out the way. It’s up to you to follow it. In fact, as you follow it, you become more and more independent. You become a more and more trustworthy observer of what’s going on in your mind, what’s going on in your actions, what’s skillful and what’s not, how you can develop the skillful qualities, how you can abandon the unskillful ones. One of the descriptions of stream entry, once you’ve finally taken the path and it opens up into the deathless, is that you become independent of others in the teaching. In other words, you finally have your sure guarantee that you understand the teaching, you know what it’s all about, you’ve seen some of the results. And you’re not just taking it out of other people’s words now. Then, of course, total freedom, total independence, comes with total awakening. The mind no longer has to feed on anything at all. It no longer has to depend on anybody at all. For the body to survive, you still have to depend on others. But for the happiness of the mind, that’s totally independent. It’s paccattha, it’s individual. This is the part where some people say, “This is a selfish goal,” but you can’t do it any other way. You can’t go out and save other people, because you can’t go out and make them skillful. The person who’s reached the end of the goal, if he or she has the talents to teach others, is happy to teach, happy to share. And at that point, it’s a sharing that doesn’t have any feeding in return. It’s a total gift. But we are here for the sake of independence, and you’re trying to exert your independence in a skillful way. The gift to others there is that you’re no longer going to feed on them. And you can provide them with the example that they can then depend on. I’m sure this wasn’t just a bunch of fairy tales written back in ancient India. It’s a real possibility here and now. So that’s the kind of independence that’s really worth celebrating, the kind of interdependence that’s worth celebrating. It’s not simply the fact that we are interconnected that’s good. It’s the fact that there are some people who’ve found the way out, and they’re willing to show us through their example and their words that it is possible for us to find the way out. That kind of independence is worth celebrating as well. So how do you celebrate it? You practice. That was a Jon Fueh Fong’s response when anyone commented to him that they were really appreciative and really felt indebted to him for the teaching he’d given. He wanted to know how to express their appreciation. He said, “Be really serious about the practice.” And that’s why he shared the teaching to begin with. And this is our best way to repay them, whatever dependency we have.

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