Suffering from Interdependence

September 8, 2011

Interconnectedness is not always a good thing. As we’ve seen from today’s events, something happens to the power grid and more than a million people are affected. When your happiness depends on so many interconnected things working, it’s fine. It’s very precarious. This is one of the reasons the Buddha said that this kind of happiness is not really happiness. It’s a lot of stress. Not only are we trying to find happiness based on this, but the whole essence of these interconnected systems is that we’re feeding off one another. That’s the Buddha’s basic image for causality. All living beings subsist on food. When he’s teaching causality to young novices, that was the image he gave. We feed on other people emotionally. A lot of the interconnected system is that somebody’s gain is also going to be somebody else’s loss. So it’s no fun being fed on, and the fact that you’re always hungry, which forces you to feed, that’s not pleasant either. So what we’ve got to learn how to do is find a source of happiness that’s independent. That doesn’t rise and fall with the rise and fall of everything else. To get there, you’ve got to use the interdependent system. You can’t reach something uncaused by using something uncaused, because it can’t function in that way. We use the elements of dependent-core arising and we turn them into a path. There’s intention and attention. Attention is the way you look at things. So we try to turn our attention into right view. And our intention is to figure out the causes of suffering so that we can perform the proper duties to abandon the causes, comprehend suffering itself so that we can see where the causes are to begin with, so we can abandon them, and to develop a path. The path is made out of fabricated things. So the path itself is not all that stable. It’s a lot more stable than things elsewhere in the world, particularly the concentration we’re trying to develop right now. It does depend on conditions, but it’s a happiness that’s a lot more independent than anything else out there. So the path is something we put together. It’s something we fabricate so that eventually it’ll lead us to a point of real stillness and real clarity. And that will allow us to see something that’s not fabricated, just like a road takes us to the mountain. The road doesn’t cause the mountain, and the road itself doesn’t take us there. We have to follow the road. But by following the road, we get to the mountain. This means, of course, in the course of the practice there’s going to be ups and downs. I don’t know anyone whose practice could be graphed as a smooth line going up, up, up, up, up, without any dips, without any valleys. And so you have to learn how to negotiate them. In fact, that’s an important part of the path, that you don’t get knocked off by setbacks. Some days the concentration goes really well, and then the next day it seems to just totally disappear. It’s because the mind itself is a very complex, interdependent system. Lots of things are going on in the mind. And so you don’t want to let yourself get driven crazy by the intricacies of the mind. Just remember that. That it’s natural for the systems of the mind to have their breakdowns every now and then. One little thing can spread to affect lots of other things in the mind. And take that as an opportunity to go back and learn. What did you miss the previous time? A lot of the practice is just this, going over the same territory again and again and again. In hopes that each time you go over it, you see something new you didn’t see before. We may not like to have to go over the same territory. We like to reach first base and then get sent back to home base. But sometimes there are a lot of things we didn’t learn going from home base to first, so we have to learn it again, learn it again. And just remember, this is par for the course. And try to keep things in perspective. When the Buddha talked about many lives, it was partly because it was a fact and partly because it was a useful thing to know in the practice. Some people say, if you think about having many lifetimes, you get complacent and say, “Well, I can practice in some other lifetime.” Well, that’s missing the fact that there’s an awful lot of suffering involved in these processes, of course. Going from one life to the next. And even though it may seem daunting that this would be a many-lifetime path, still the amount of suffering that you can put an end to by following the path is immense. As the Buddha said, it’s like getting some dirt under your fingernail and then asking, “Which is more, the dirt under your fingernail or the dirt in the great earth?” Of course, the dirt in the great earth is much more. He says the dirt left under your fingernail is the amount of suffering left for someone who has attained stream entry. And the dirt of the entire earth, that’s like the suffering left for someone who doesn’t attain stream entry. So even though the path may be difficult, not following the path is a lot more difficult. And the rewards of following the path are great. There’s another passage where he says, “If you could make a deep deal, they would stab you with a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, a hundred spears in the evening, every day for a hundred years. But you’d be guaranteed to gain stream entry at the end of that time.” In other words, that would be a good deal to take. And when you attained that vision of the Dhamma, you wouldn’t think that would be attained in pain. So the bliss of stream entry is that impressive and that important. And the pains and frustrations of having ups and downs in the path are nothing compared to the sufferings that come from not being on the path. So let’s try to keep things in perspective. This is a fabricated path. But it is the highest level of fabrication, the level of fabrication that involves the least suffering and opens the way to a total freedom from suffering. So whatever difficulties there may be and however many lifetimes it may take, they’re all worth it. Because otherwise you’re stuck in this interconnected system of inner fear. It’s repeating. And there’s no real rest, unless you find the way out.

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