Tools from Dependent Co-arising

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The topic of dependent co-arising came up this afternoon, and a lot of people thought, “Ooh, that’s awfully far away and complex.” Admittedly, it is complex, but it’s not that far away. It’s actually a big box of tools to help us figure out why we’re suffering right now and what we can do to put a stop to it. The general shape of it is important to notice largely in the fact that when you experience things at the senses, and this includes at the mind, there’s already a lot of previous activity going on that’s going to shape how you receive input through the senses. And it’s because of that activity that you suffer. Without that activity, there wouldn’t be any suffering. If you could learn how to do that activity more skillfully, there wouldn’t be any suffering. And because the input through the senses is one way that the Buddha describes old karma, and what you’re doing right now as you approach that as new karma, it means that your new karma is actually coming prior in your experience to the old karma. This is what you want to work with. Our problem is that we’re focused usually on things fairly far down the line in the line of causes. One of the purposes of meditation is to back up, get closer and closer to the earlier layers of causation, so we can do them more skillfully, do them with more awareness, more skillful awareness. And one of those factors is the factor of name, in name and form. The Buddha lists five things there. There’s attention, there’s intention, there’s perception, feeling, and contact. Attention is the kind of questions you bring, the kind of questions you pay attention to as you’re focusing on something. And for a lot of us in daily life, the big question is, “How can I feed on this, either physically or emotionally? What pleasure can I get out of this?” Those are the questions we pay attention to. And then there’s our intention. It’s our intention, what do we want out of something, or our reasons for doing things. Then there’s perception, the ways you have of placing labels on things, the feelings you bring to the situation. And then contact, which is a sense of contact among these mental events on this level. In other words, you’re aware of your intention, you can be aware of your feelings and perceptions. And it’s because of that that you can do something about them. Now, when we’re meditating, we’re trying to manipulate these things in a skillful way. The question we bring now is, “How can I develop concentration?” That’s related to appropriate attention and the fact that that’s the duty with regard to the path. We’re trying to create a path here out of what you’ve got. So what have you got? You’ve got the breath and you’ve got the mind. You want to put them together. You make that your intention, that you’re going to keep your awareness with the breath. Then you use whatever perceptions help you stay with the breath comfortably so you can create a feeling of well-being. And so as you’re doing concentration practice here, just simply the activity of making up your mind, you’re going to stay with the breath and learning how to evaluate the breath, ask the right questions about it, using perceptions that help hold you here. So you create that feeling of well-being, either ease, rapture, or equanimity. You’re already getting hands-on experience with name or the activities of name. Then, if you find yourself suddenly having trouble staying with the breath, that some hindrance, like sensual desire or ill will, pulls you away. The extent to which you have some hands-on experience with these activities helps you take those hindrances apart so you can get back. For example, with desire, you can ask yourself, “What are you trying to get out of this fantasy that you’ve got right now? What is it that you’re trying to get out of it that you’re paying attention to here? Can you pay attention to it in a different way, see the desire simply as a hindrance?” That changes your perception. And what is your intention? What are you trying to get out of it? Why do you think you’re getting anything out of it? Why do you perceive that you’re getting anything out of it? And then when you can reestablish the intention to leave it, then you’re already able to get back to the breath. So you use these categories of understanding what’s going on in the mind, the various ways the mind puts things together. So on the one hand, you can put together good mental states, and on the other hand, you can deconstruct states that are not so good. The same sort of thing with ill will. If you suddenly find yourself overcome with thoughts about someone you really dislike and you’d like to see them suffer, ask yourself, “Okay, what’s the feeling that you’re getting out of this? And what is the perception that makes you think that you would actually benefit by seeing them suffer, or why you would be glad to see them suffer?” What’s your intention in following this thought? How are you paying attention to it? Are you just trying to go into more details about how you’d be satisfied? Or maybe you can apply appropriate attention instead, seeing it as a hindrance, something that’s wasting your energy right now. Ask different questions about it. Apply different perceptions. Seeing yourself as in need of some good meditation instead of in need of thinking about getting revenge or seeing revenge gotten. And when you can reestablish your intention to get back to the breath, they’ll carry you back. Now, it doesn’t require that you go through all these steps every time. But if you find yourself really snagged by something, learn how to take it apart in these ways, in terms of these different name factors. Then you’ll find you’ve got a good checklist for dealing with anything that comes in and takes over the mind. Then you can turn around and look again at the state of concentration you’re trying to create. Is the state of concentration out of balance? Remember, when the Buddha is talking about the factors that pull you out of the hindrances, it’s the factors for awakening. And again, that’s not a list that we tend to stay away from because it sounds awfully far away. It’s not the factors that constitute awakening; it’s the factors that lead to awakening. They’re primarily concerned with how you get the mind into concentration in a way that’s balancing both insight and tranquility, which is what we’re trying to do here. You start with mindfulness, deciding that you’re going to keep the breath in mind, and then you analyze how to do it skillfully. As you’re doing it skillfully, that in and of itself becomes mindfulness. When you do it right, it gives rise to a sense of rapture. From the rapture you get a sense of refreshment that allows the mind to finally settle down and be still. Notice that the rapture comes first. There’s a surge of energy that helps to satisfy and heal the wounds in your mind, or heal the wounds in the energy of your body. Then you can calm down. There’s calm, concentration, equanimity. If you’re having trouble getting into this state, you have to ask yourself which of the factors are lacking and which ones are excessive. Three of the factors are the calming ones, so it’s the calm, concentration, and equanimity. And three are the more activating ones, analysis, qualities, persistence, and rapture. When your mind is feeling sluggish, you don’t need the calming qualities yet. You need to work on the more stimulating ones. The Buddhist analogy is of a fire. If the fire is burning too hot, you put ashes on it, you put water on it. This is not the time to add more fuel. On the other hand, if the fire is too weak, okay, put more fuel on it. There are times when you’re way too active, so you’ve got to think of ways of just calming, calming, calming things down. Apply your attention here. The Buddha says you develop the factors for awakening through appropriate attention, asking the right questions. Where is the potential, say, for a rapture in the body right now? Where are the parts of the body that, if you allow them to be undisturbed by the in and out of the breath, develop a sense of fullness? If you’re feeling sluggish, where is the potential for persistence? In other words, what can you do to motivate yourself? To make you see that this is something you’ve really got to do, and you’ve really got to do it now. Then you can perceive that a particular tactic might work, and you give it a try. In this way, you use the factors of name to skillfully give rise to whatever factors for awakening you need. So these lists are not there just to be abstract and to be approached with fear. They’re actually meant to be tools for checklists, say, and lists of tools that you can use to get the mind into concentration or pull it out of the hindrances if it’s wandered off, or to get it back into balanced concentration. So learn to look at what’s going on in your mind in these terms. In a way, it’s like learning a foreign language. The Buddha has his particular way of analyzing what’s going on in the mind. It might not correspond with the way you’ve been looking at how your mind works, in the same way that a foreign language divides the colors up somewhat differently than we do in English. But if you get a sense for the Buddha’s range of terms and the range of meanings, you see that they really are very useful tools. They’re useful for getting the mind out of its distractions and getting it into concentration, and then develop the concentration even further. So it leads to insight. So make use of these tools. Don’t be afraid of them. Because if you’re afraid of them, what have you got? The Buddha kept teaching dependent co-arising over and over and over again. There’s a whole sanghuta devoted to it. And granted, he didn’t teach it to beginners. But he did teach it to people who are serious about practicing, because it provides you with a wide range of tools that you can apply at whatever stage in this series of causes that lead up to suffering, whichever one resonates with the way you can see how your mind is working. Start with that, and your appreciation of the rest of this series will spread from there.

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