What’s Relative, What’s Constant

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There’s a parallel between the Buddha’s teachings and the theory of relativity. Most people think that relativity means that everything is relative. But that’s not the case. It simply means that the constant is not where we thought it was. In Newton’s theory, space and time are constants, and everything else is relative to that. Then Einstein came along and said, “No. The speed of light is a constant. Space and time are relative to that.” It’s a little disorienting, thinking that space could shrink or expand, time could speed up, slow down. The parallel is that we ordinarily think of ourselves as a constant. Me and my story and our experience of pleasure and pain is pretty random. Sometimes we do good things, we get bad results. We do bad things, we get good results. Do good things, get good results. Bad things, bad results. It doesn’t seem to make any sense. But think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. In his first knowledge, his identity was the constant that he was trying to trace. But he saw that his identity was pretty random. From one lifetime to the next it would change. It didn’t necessarily go up. Sometimes it would go down. An analogy he used later was that it’s like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end. Sometimes it lands splat in the middle. So his question was, is there a pattern there or was it truly random? And in the second and third knowledges he found out there was something that was constant. The laws of causality, particularly as they pertain to karma, intentional actions. So it’s not so much who you are, it’s what you do. Now who you are is a result of what you do. That changes the constant. Because who you are can change. And there’s a lot of good news there too. If you hold on to yourself and say I’m this kind of person, I wouldn’t feel comfortable being anything else. Or reflect on the fact that you’ve been many many things. Think of Ajahn Mun recollecting his previous lifetimes. He came across a period when for 500 lifetimes he was a dog. It’s hard to think of Ajahn Mun as a dog. But as he said, there was a period when he was satisfied with the pleasures of dogs. Dog sensuality. That’s why you’re stuck there. So what could happen to Ajahn Mun? Imagine your past history. It’s all kinds of things. Which is why all kinds of things happen to us, based on the actions of many different identities that we’ve assumed all along. But the constant is this pattern of acting on skillful intentions, you get good results. Acting on unskillful intentions, you get bad results. Now the working out can be complex. Because what you’re experiencing right now is not totally determined by the past. It’s also partially shaped, in fact, largely shaped by your skills here in the present moment. How skillfully you shape your thoughts, your words, your deeds, your experience of the body, your experience of feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, even consciousness. All these things are shaped by intentions. This is why when we meditate, we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, to look at what we can do to improve our internal skills. And as issues come up that deflect us from the present moment, think of them in terms of karma. As I said, karma is the constant. Your identity is not the constant. People can do things to you which you think are horrible. And you can tell yourself, “I never would have done that. Why is this happening to me?” Well, how do you know? If you hadn’t done something like that, it wouldn’t happen to you. Sometime in the past. So remember, you’re not the constant. What you are is relative to the principle of action, the principle of causality. This is why when the Buddha talked about dependent co-arising, people would ask questions that would try to put it into a context, say like the context of the world outside, or the context of who you are. He would refuse to answer those questions. The pattern of dependent co-arising, that’s the constant. And your identity is something that’s shaped within that constant. Your sense of the world is shaped within that constant. It takes a while to get your head around this, but it’s a useful thing to learn to think about. Try to see things from that perspective, rather than the perspective of me and my problems, or me and my issues. Learn how to take things apart. Like when the Buddha talks about the present moment, the role of fabrication. So you experience the aggregates because of this intentional activity. The process of fabrication takes the potential for form, the potential for feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, even consciousness, and turns it into actual aggregates. I was listening to a Dharma talk the other day when someone was saying, “Consciousness has to be unconditioned. After all, how could one conditioned thing know another conditioned thing?” Well, that’s what happens. Knowing something is a conditioned process. The only thing that’s unconditioned is consciousness without surface, and that has no objects at all. All other consciousness is conditioned. So the question is, how are you conditioning your consciousness right now? What are you focusing on? What are you paying attention to? How are you talking to yourself? Your inner conversation? Have you ever stepped back and just said, “Well, this is just a bunch of directed thoughts and acts of evaluation.” Look at it simply in those impersonal terms. When thoughts are going through the mind, have you ever stopped to categorize, “Well, what are the actual perceptions, the labels I’m putting on things, that have led to this riot of thoughts in my mind?” The Buddha talks about the perceptions and categories of Papancha. Now, Papancha is a kind of thinking where you identify who you are, and then once you’ve taken on that identity, then you have to lay claim to your part of the world in order to survive. Of course, you’re going to get into conflict. So there you are, going from “I am the thinker” to “fighting.” Sometimes Papancha is translated as “conceptual proliferation.” It’s the end of the vocabulary of Vipassana communities, where it just means your thoughts are running wild. But for the Buddha, it’s not so much that your thoughts are running wild, how many thoughts you are, it’s the categories you’re using to talk about things. Once you put an “I” in there, you’re trying to make that the constant, and it’s going to have trouble. So just notice the acts of perception, the labels you put on things. What would happen if you changed them? Change the labeling. Take something like colors. We have a pretty set notion of what different colors are, and where one color shades into another. But you go into different languages and you find that the map of the color wheel is very different from one language to the next. You can’t say that one map is more accurate. That’s just how things have developed. There’s an arbitrariness to our perceptions. Even on something basic like that, to say nothing of our ideas about social interactions or our emotional life. They’ve made lists of words, of emotions that you would have in one language that other languages have trouble describing. So it’s good to look at perceptions as pretty arbitrary, pretty random. Then ask yourself, to what extent am I driving myself crazy by holding on to certain perceptions? I could change them to other perceptions that are just as true, but actually more useful. So you look at your perceptions, not so much based on what you’re used to thinking in terms of, where they’re coming from, where they’re going. This was how the Buddha got onto the path, by divining his thoughts, not in terms of what he liked or didn’t like, or what thoughts were his kinds of thinking and not his kinds of thinking, but simply thoughts that came from skillful mental states and thoughts that came from unskillful mental states. Thoughts that would lead to good actions, thoughts that would lead to afflictive actions. That’s changing the constant, changing the categories. So maybe disorienting at first, but you find that the Buddha’s way of looking at things in terms of karma, and the many identities you’ve had over who knows how many eons, is actually a good tool for liberation. Remember the image of the handful of leaves when he was going through a simsapa forest? The simsapa tree has these little tiny tiny leaves, like little dimes. They were thinner than dimes, they were very small. He picked up a whole handful and said, “Which is more, the leaves in my hand or the leaves up in the trees?” And the monk said, “Of course, the leaves in the trees are much more.” He said in the same way, “The things I learn in the course of my awakening are like the leaves in the trees. What I taught, what I have been teaching, is like the leaves in my hand.” And so one of the things he taught, of course, was the teaching on karma, and the teaching on dependent co-arising, teaching on rebirth. That’s part of the handful of leaves, that’s part of the teaching on the four noble truths, that’s part of the teaching that can help put an end to suffering. So instead of seeing it as a weird artifact, of Asian culture that somehow got stuck in the Buddhist teachings, realize it’s something he thought about and he chose carefully, as a tool that you can use to learn how to use the teaching on karma and rebirth as a tool. As for dependent co-arising, that’s a very complex tool, if you try to comprehend the whole thing, but break it down. As the Buddha said, if you bring awareness, you bring knowledge to any one of the connections there, between one event and the one right next to it, that’s enough to bring the whole thing down. So look at the different connections and see which ones speak to you. The connection between ignorance and fabrication is a useful one to start with, because as you’re sitting here meditating, you’re getting more hands-on experience with bodily fabrication, i.e. the in-and-out breath, and all the variations of the ways that you can breathe. Verbal fabrication, direct thought and evaluation, all the different ways you can talk to yourself about the breath, all the different questions you can ask, all the different ways you can try to change the breath and evaluate it, what you’ve done. And then mental fabrications, the perceptions, i.e. the mental images you use. You try out different ones. Learn how to master these. I was reading an article today on the topic of mastery, and they’re saying that people who master a skill have four qualities. Enthusiasm, generosity, generosity in the sense of really giving themselves to their field, unbroken concentration, and then playfulness. All those correspond to the basis for success. Enthusiasm corresponds to chanda, desire. Generosity, in the sense of really giving yourself to the practice, corresponds to persistence, energy, effort. Unbroken concentration corresponds to intentness. And playfulness is a part of using your powers of analysis, trying something out, seeing what works. If that doesn’t work, using your ingenuity to figure out something else. Try to master just these issues of bodily, verbal and mental fabrication. And see them as processes, not so much as your old ways of talking to yourself, your old ways of perceiving things, even your old ways of breathing. If you get the “you” out of the way, the “me” out of the way, you find there’s a lot to play with. There’s a lot of possibilities there that you wouldn’t have thought of before. So try to get a clear sense of what really is constant, i.e. the pattern of causality. Now everything else is relative to that. And that’s a tool for liberation.

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