What It All Comes From

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The Buddha tends to put aside most of the questions that activated Western philosophy. Who am I? Where did everything come from? Is there some benevolent intelligence in charge? Is there malevolent intelligence in charge of all things? The Buddha said that the beginning point of all this wandering on is inconceivable. Not only unknowable, something you can’t even conceive. And he did say there’s no one in charge. So we can’t blame ourself for going on with other people. The question is why things are the way they are. The Buddha has you look into the present moment. What do you do in the present moment? He says everything is rooted in desire. All our actions come out of a desire to get something. And the nature of that desire is that our actions really do have consequences. That’s something we want. And it turns out they do have consequences. The problem is that they’re also unintended consequences. We see something that we want. Then we look for the world in which that thing exists. And then we want to take on a role in that world so that we can get it. That’s called becoming. And it builds in the nature of desire. Desire is always moving someplace. When you look in the present moment, there’s nothing static. It’s moving. It’s moving toward a goal. And the question is whether you’re going to get that or not. And will it make you happy? That’s all part of the desire. You want to find happiness. But sometimes the things we want are connected to other things. That thing we want is in a world that is connected to other things in that world. It takes a lot of insight to see the connections, to see the whole picture. The Chah’s simile is of a snake. You look at the tail of the snake and it looks like it’d be nice to grab hold of. It doesn’t have anything dangerous. But it’s connected to the mouth. And the mouth has teeth. So you pull on the tail, you get bit. And after a while you begin to say, “Okay, you can see how the tail is connected to the mouth.” And you avoid that. But a lot of times the connections are a lot more subtle and harder to see. Which is why we keep aiming at things that end up causing us trouble. This is what we’ve been doing, wandering on, wandering on, a slave to craving, as we chatted just now. That verse comes from, well it’s not a verse, but a series of teachings. It comes from a sutta in which a young monk is talking to a king. The king had asked him why he had ordained. Because the king assumed that most people ordained because they had family problems. They lost their relatives, lost their health, lost their money. Hard up, basically. Or in today’s parlance, they were losers. But here the young monk came from a wealthy family. His parents were still alive. He was healthy. Why did he ordain? The monk gave a series of dharma summaries. He said he learned from the Buddha. It starts with the world is swept away. Those things that you aim at just keep going, going, going. It does not endure. There’s no shelter. There’s no one in charge. You have nothing of your own when you die. You have to leave everything behind as you go on. But then we’re still a slave to craving. That’s the problem. We can’t think of anything better. We’re not sure that there would be anything better. We keep coming back for what we know, hoping to tweak it here, tweak it there, make it better. And we can, to some extent. As the Buddha saw in the night of his awakening, there are some very high levels of heaven where the beings live for a long, long time. More than one universe. Forty universes sometimes. That’s a long time. And they think they’ve reached the goal. They’re aiming at acting in ways that lead to happiness. But it turns out that the results of their past good actions wear out and they fall. They get complacent. So it takes a lot of determination to figure out the way out. We can’t blame the situation on anybody. It’s part of the nature of being a conscious agent. Wanting something, and then seeing the results of your actions. The Buddha basically took that combination of desire and being able to be sensitive to the results of your desires, and turned it into a path. It’s said that dharma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to a path of action, you reflect on it. Your role as a conscious agent is a serious thing. You try to keep as honest as possible, and willing to do whatever is needed. This is a lot of where we fail. We put forth an effort, and either we don’t get the results and we just kind of give up, or we do get the results and we get satisfied with them. Like the Brahmas, they’re satisfied where they are. And the Buddha tried to teach them there are cases where he couldn’t get through to them. They’re just going to stay where they were. But of course that meant that they were going to fall. But it’s when you really assume responsibility as a conscious agent that you can actually get out. So we take this role that we’ve started assuming and take it seriously. Why are we assuming it to begin with? There’s no answer to that. But just take it as part of being a conscious agent. This is what happens. You have to learn how to be more and more conscious of what you do with your agency. And there’s no need to complain about that. Just complain about your old habits. Sometimes it does seem like samsara is a sick joke. It’s really, really hard to get to some high level. Up with the Devas, up with the Brahmas. And then you hang out there and everything is very easy. And you get lazy. And once you get lazy, then you’re headed for a fall. You fall down and it hurts. And then how you respond to that hurt is going to be really important. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about dependent co-arising. Now in most of the cases, dependent co-arising ends with suffering. But there’s one where you get to suffering and then what comes next? Conviction. Conviction there’s got to be a way out. And based on that you start acting in skillful ways. There’s joy. Based on the joy there’s concentration. Concentration leads to discernment. It leads to release. So you have to have the proper response to your suffering. So that you’re confident there’s a way out. We see this in the two main emotions that are talked about most in the Theravada tradition. There’s sanguega on the one hand and there’s pasada on the other. Sanguega is when you get a strong sense of life going around and around and around that’s pretty meaningless. Pasada is when you’re confident there’s got to be a way out. And the Buddha found that way out, as I said, in just being really good at being a conscious agent. It was in that way that he discovered that the principles by which our actions give results started with two very simple principles, but they can get complex. And this is why we’re so deluded about what’s connected to what. What the results of our actions really are. Because some of the reactions lead to results that don’t give fruit for quite a while. By the time you get the fruit you’ve forgotten how you planted the seed. Other cases come immediately. So quickly that it’s hard to believe that what we did was related to what happened right then and there. When you have this combination things can get complex. Because when something comes up you don’t know. Does it come from something you’re doing right now or is it coming from something you did in the past? It could be either, it could be both. So you’ve got to get the mind really still so you can see these things clearly. Now how do you think the Buddha discovered these things? He didn’t have any texts to read and argue about. He just had his own mind and his ability to observe his actions, to observe the desires in which they were based. He developed really good mindfulness and alertness so he could see connections that other people hadn’t seen before. Connections between causes and effects. First came his understanding about long-term causes, in other words how you do something and then it leads to a result in a succeeding lifetime. But then he saw even that was not as simple as many people had taught. It’s not a case you simply add up all your good actions in this lifetime, subtract all the bad actions, and then go to this, whatever some result is. He said it had a lot to do with your state of mind at the moment of death. And that could cancel out a lot of good karma, or not really cancel it but delay it. If it’s a bad state of mind it can delay some good karma. A good state of mind can delay some bad karma. Which got him to reflecting that some things have an immediate impact. That have nothing to do with your past actions. That gives him the possibility of freedom. Because otherwise, if everything were dependent on your past actions, everything would be totally determined. But here we have choices. So he’s looking into those choices in the present moment. That’s what led to his third knowledge, which led to his true awakening. So you see these things in the mind when it’s really quiet. And you stick with the determination that you’re going to find the way out. Because the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, gained many knowledges that a lot of people were very satisfied with. People in the past had gained knowledge of previous lifetimes, their own previous lifetimes. They’d gained knowledge of seeing how beings are reborn after death. And they stopped there, satisfied. But the Buddha realized that this still didn’t end the problem of suffering. So he took the knowledge he’d gained from those first two knowledges and applied it to the question of what is the suffering right now? What’s causing it? And is there a path of practice that leads to an end of suffering? He found that there was. So there’s determination, focus, strong honesty, and strong willingness to do whatever is required to get out. So strong desire, strong awareness. Those qualities of a conscious agent just raised to an nth degree. And that takes you out. When you get out, then you don’t need to be a conscious agent anymore. Because being a conscious agent is this role that we take on. Because we just have a sense of lack. When there’s no lack, then we can let that role go. For a lot of us, we’re more attached to our sense of our own identity than we are to the idea of a happiness that would be total and complete. But when you remember that your sense of identity came from the sense of lack, is maintained by a sense of lack, maybe you can change your attitude. Maybe happiness is outside of space and time, and it would be a good thing. The Buddha says it is. All the noble disciples say that it is. It’s up to you to give it a try.

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