

# The Arrows of Thinking

## PAPAÑCA & THE PATH TO END CONFLICT

In a striking piece of poetry (Sn 4:15), the Buddha once described the sense of *samvega*—terror or dismay—that inspired him to look for an end to suffering.

I will tell  
of how  
I experienced  
*samvega*.  
Seeing people floundering  
like fish in small puddles,  
competing with one another—  
as I saw this,  
fear came into me.  
The world was entirely  
without substance.  
All the directions  
were knocked out of line.  
Wanting a haven for myself,  
I saw nothing  
that wasn't laid claim to.  
Seeing nothing in the end  
but competition,  
I felt discontent.

Rather than trying to solve the problem by looking for a larger puddle for himself or his fellow fish, he looked inside to see why people would want to be fish in the first place. What he found was an arrow embedded in his own heart.

And then I saw  
an arrow here,  
so very hard to see,  
embedded in the heart.  
Overcome by this arrow  
you run in all directions.  
But simply  
on pulling it out  
you don't run,  
you don't sink.

This arrow has many names in the Pali Canon—the oldest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—and one of them is *papañca*. *Papañca* is a type of thinking that causes conflict within those who think it, and leads them into conflict with people outside.

As a word, *papañca* is notoriously hard to translate. As one scholar has noted, the word changed meanings frequently over the centuries among Indian Buddhists, the only constant being that it was always regarded as something negative. Scholars trying to decipher what it means specifically in the Pali Canon

have proposed deriving a translation from the verbal root from which the word is derived, only to run into the problem that there is no obvious root that everyone can agree on.

Some have proposed that *papañca* derives from the root  $\sqrt{pad}$ , or foot, and so should mean something like “impediment.” Some have proposed that *papañca* is related to the root  $\sqrt{pac}$ , meaning to cook, and so means something “cooked up”: imaginary and sarcastic. Others have suggested that it comes from the root  $\sqrt{pañc}$ , or five, and so is a reference to the “fiving” tendency in some of the Upanishads, which see the world as evolving through a process of multiplying through categories of five. Still others, noting that the root  $\sqrt{pañc}$  can also mean “spreading” or “expansion,” have suggested that *papañca* should mean “conceptual proliferation.” It’s through this last interpretation that the word *papañca* has entered the vocabulary of modern meditation circles, to refer to the times when meditators suddenly find themselves overrun by thoughts that run riot, coming thick and fast, out of control.

Although some of these interpretations fit in with the way *papañca* was used in other texts in later centuries, none of them correspond to the way in which the Buddha actually uses the word in the Pali Canon. He doesn’t describe *papañca* as an impediment to progress; he discusses it instead as a source of conflict and pain (MN 18; DN 21). Nor does he describe *papañca* as sarcastic. As for “fiving,” the Upanishads employ many other numbers in addition to five to describe their various theories for the evolution of the world, and the Buddha himself makes frequent use of lists of fives, so there’s nothing inherently non-Buddhist or wrong with “fiving.” And the problem with *papañca* is not so much the amount or abundance of the thinking, as the type of mental labels—categories and perceptions—it employs. This is a point that the Buddha makes over and over again. The *categories and perceptions* of *papañca* are what cause conflict (MN 18; DN 22).

So rather than trying to understand the word *papañca* through etymology, it seems more useful to understand it through the types of mental labels that distinguish it from thinking in general. And on this point, the Pali Canon is very clear. The Buddha points out in Sn 4:14—the poem that the compilers of the Canon placed immediately before his explanation of his samvega, quoted above—that the root of the classifications of *papañca* is the perception, “I am the thinker.” In other words, *papañca* begins when your thinking takes you, the thinker, as its object. And as we will see, this object requires other objects in order to survive. This is why “objectification” seems to be the best translation for the word. It’s from treating yourself and the world around you as objects—rather than as events or processes—that the perceptions causing inner and outer conflict derive.

The Canon contains several lists of these perceptions, and in every case states that they ensnare the mind in conflict and difficulty. For instance, AN 4:199 lists 18 “craving-verbalizations” that derive from this perception, verbalizations by which craving ensnares the mind:

“There being ‘I am,’ there comes to be ‘I am here,’ there comes to be ‘I am like this’ ... ‘I am otherwise’ ... ‘I am bad’ ... ‘I am good’ ... ‘I might be’ ... ‘I might be here’ ... ‘I might be like this’ ... ‘I might be otherwise’ ... ‘May I be’ ... ‘May I be here’ ... ‘May I be like this’ ... ‘May I be otherwise’

... 'I will be' ... 'I will be here' ... 'I will be like this' ... 'I will be otherwise.'"

MN 2 lists 16 questions that grow out of the thought, "I am":

"Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future? ... 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?'"

MN 2 goes on to list six views that derived from these questions and fetter the mind:

*"The view I have a self arises in him as true & established, or the view I have no self... or the view It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self... or the view It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self... or the view It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self arises in him as true & established, or else he has a view like this: This very self of mine—the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions—is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity."*

These ways of thinking all qualify as objectification because they derive their categories—self/ not-self, existence/ non-existence, here/ there—from the mental label, "I am." The fact that the issues surrounding this mental label can multiply so quickly and spread so far gives some credence to the idea that papañca is proliferation. However, liberating insights can proliferate as well, as when an insight into one of the causes of suffering leads quickly to insights into other causes of suffering. So the question is, what is it about the thought "I am" or "I am the thinker" that leads to ways of thinking that cause inner and outer conflict?

The answer lies in the Buddha's explanation of what it means to be a being. The act of taking on the identity of a being is primarily a mental act. In other words, it's because you have passion, desire, delight, or craving for something that you identify with it (SN 23:2). In identifying with it, you become tied there. That's what makes you a being. Your choice of what to desire defines the type of being you are. This process happens both on the macro level—in the events leading from death to rebirth—and also on the micro level, as one sense of identity is shed for another on a moment-to-moment basis in the mind.

For instance, before you left your last body, you identified yourself as the thinker that craved continued existence. With the demise of that body, the craving born of the root of objectification-labels led to your present birth (SN 44:9). Your continued craving to stay here is what maintains your present identity. On the micro level, you identify, in your search for pleasure, with the desires for specific pleasures, as well as with the areas of your awareness that you can control—"I am this"—in the search for those pleasures.

The act of assuming an identity on either level requires looking for food—both physical and mental (SN 12:64)—for if you don't find food for that identity, you can't maintain it. In fact, the need to subsist on food is the one thing that

characterizes all beings (AN 10:27). This fact is so central to the Buddha's teachings that it's the first item in the catechism memorized by novice monks and nuns. It's also the fact that shows why the mental labels of objectification lead to conflict. As a being looking for food, you need a world to provide you with that food. Without a world to provide you with food, your identity as a being couldn't last.

From this observation about what it means to be a being, the Buddhist notion of "becoming"—a sense of identity in a particular world of experience—derives. Your sense of who you are has to inhabit a world that can provide for the desires around which you're defined. This applies both on the external, physical level and on the internal, psychological level. This is why the views and questions of objectification cover not only who you are, but also where you are, where you've come from, and where you're going.

Externally, as a human being with human desires, you inhabit the same physical world—the same puddle—as other human beings. When you think in terms of objectification and look for food in the human puddle, you inevitably run into conflict with other beings inhabiting the same puddle looking for the same sort of food. Thinking in terms of the categories of objectification spawns the desires that see your sources of food within that puddle as dear, and anyone who blocks those sources as not-dear. From this distinction come envy and stinginess, hostility, violence, rivalry, and ill will (DN 22). These attitudes, in turn, lead to the violence of "taking up rods & bladed weapons, of arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing, & false speech" (MN 18).

As for the internal conflict caused by objectification, when you focus on a particular desire, only certain parts of the external world are relevant. Your psychological world is configured around whatever will fulfill your desire, along with whatever gets in the way of that fulfillment. When you want some ice cream, you're interested only in where you can find ice cream and whatever might get in the way of your eating it. Everything else is either passively ignored or actively blocked out. Your corresponding sense of self is defined by its ability or inability to overcome obstacles and fulfill your desire in the world as you define it. For instance, if you want some ice cream, your body and your financial status are relevant. Your looks—unless you plan to use them in getting a cheaper price for the ice cream—are not. This is why we can live in the same world physically with other people, but entirely different worlds psychologically. It's also why we can change our inner sense of *who* we are and *where* we are from moment to moment.

If there were a world that could provide all beings with all the food they want, objectification might not be much of a problem. But our desires are so insatiable that, as the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough to fulfill our desires (Dhp 186). This is why the conflict between the fish in the Buddha's analogy can never be resolved by finding larger puddles, for no puddle could provide all the water we want. As a result, objectification inevitably leads to external conflict.

Internal conflict also inevitably follows from the thought that "I am the thinker" because when you define yourself, you limit yourself (SN 22:36). This may seem counterintuitive, for part of your sense of who you are revolves around the abilities you develop to get past the limitations standing in the way of getting what you want. But in doing so, you ignore the limitations that come

from feeling the need to have desires. To begin with, you limit yourself to the condition of having to keep finding food. That enslaves you to the conditions surrounding the type of food you want. If you want physical food, you have to submit to all the conditions required for finding physical food and fighting off anyone who might want the same food. You have to identify with a physical body that has physical limitations. Even if you aim for more rarified forms of food, such as the pleasure and rapture that can come from refined states of concentration, you run into the fact that concentration is conditioned and inevitably ends.

If these were the only forms of happiness available, and if we couldn't help but take on the identity of "being" in order to find happiness, we'd simply have to put up with these conflicts and to keep on fighting as best we can. But the Buddha discovered another form of happiness—*nibbana*—that can be experienced when the experience of the six sense stops. This happiness doesn't require taking on an identity, is not subject to conditions, is totally free from hunger, and so is free from conflict. It's so unobjectified that you shouldn't even ask whether anything is left over or not—or both or neither—once it has been attained (AN 4:173), for the very concepts of "left over" or "not left over" derive from the thought, "I am the thinker" who would or would not be or have anything left over with the attainment. The person who attains *nibbana* no longer has passion, desire, delight, or craving for anything, and so cannot be defined even as a "person" or a "being" (SN 22:36). This is why the Buddha said that arahants, after death, can't be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither, for whatever can't be defined can't properly be classified in those terms (SN 22:86). However, the unobjectified dimension *can* be described as the ultimate happiness (Dhp 203). In other words, not only is it totally free of suffering and stress, but after the experience of it, you can also come back to the world of the six senses and talk about it. That's the dimension in which all conflict ends.

Obviously, touching that dimension requires that you abandon objectification, and in particular the forms of objectification that would stand in the way of following the path to the end of objectification. For instance, if you define yourself as bad, there's no way you can help yourself out of the predicament of your suffering. You would need outside help to overcome your inherent badness. If, to avoid that problem, you choose to define yourself as inherently good, you also run into a problem: If you're inherently good, how did that goodness allow you to succumb to pressures to behave in unskillful ways leading to suffering? And if inherent goodness is something that can be lost, what's to prevent you from losing it again after you've reclaimed it?

So a necessary skill in the path to true happiness is learning step-by-step how to think in a way that avoids the categories of objectification. That requires a radical shift from the way people and religions ordinarily think. To begin with, it would mean thinking about experience without an "I am" imposed on it, without any reference to what objects might lie behind experience, either in the world "out there" or the experiencer "in here." Instead, you would have to look directly at the processes of experience simply as processes, explaining them only in terms of other processes that can be directly experienced.

Modern philosophy has a term for thinking in this way: radical phenomenology. The term “phenomenology” is a little daunting, but you probably had your first taste of what it refers to when you were small. At some time during childhood you probably stopped to wonder whether your experience of blue is the same as another person’s experience of blue. You and other people can point to an object and agree that it’s blue, but you can’t get into their experience to see if blue looks the same to them as it does to you. Similarly, they can’t check your experience of blue to compare it with theirs. And neither of you can get outside your experience to see what the blue object “really” looks like. You simply have to accept your sense of blue as the phenomenon it is and leave it at that. That’s phenomenology. In formal terms, it’s the analysis of how experience is directly experienced as phenomena, without getting involved with the questions of whether there is a world “out there” or a self “in here” lying behind those phenomena. It looks at experience “from the inside,” while making the fewest possible assumptions about what lies outside or behind it.

This sort of analysis would be something of an idle issue—how you experience blue is rarely a problem—if it were not for the fact that pain and suffering are also phenomena, and definitely *are* a problem. And it’s right here that the Buddha focused his attention. He discovered that if you adopt the phenomenological approach to the problem of suffering, you can bring suffering to an end. This is where his teaching differs from modern phenomenology. He doesn’t adopt this perspective simply for the sake of analyzing or describing the experience of phenomena. He puts this perspective to use, manipulating factors directly present to experience to provide a total cure for the primary problem of direct experience: suffering and stress.

The Buddha had two names for the type of thinking that adopts this non-objectified perspective. One is *dependent co-arising* (*paticca samuppada*): a sequence of factors, all of which can be directly experienced, leading to the experience of suffering. The nature of this sequence is that the factors themselves can be used to turn the sequence into the path to the end of suffering, at which point they all disband. The causal principle that underlies both sides of the process—the causation of suffering and the cessation of suffering—the Buddha called, *this/that conditionality* (*idappaccayata*). This name focuses on the fact that all the conditions in the process are events that are directly apparent to awareness as “this” or “that.” You don’t have to explain the causal sequence by assuming anything lying behind what can be directly experienced: either a world “out there” or a self “in here.” Everything in the sequence can be explained—and manipulated—by what’s right there in the sequence.

To adopt this sort of perspective, though, the mind needs to be prepared. That’s why the Buddha didn’t teach dependent co-arising to rank beginners on the path. Instead, he first taught them how to use the categories of objectification in a skillful way that would prepare them for stage when they no longer needed to think in those terms.

In other words, objectification is not always a negative thing. Although it inevitably leads to some level of conflict, that conflict is sometimes strategically necessary as you practice for the end of suffering. On the outside level, there are bound to be people who will try to prevent you from following the path. You need a strong sense of yourself to maintain a sense of purpose in the face of whatever obstacles they may place in your way.

Similarly, on the inside level, some forms of objectification are helpful as skillful urges do battle with unskillful urges in the mind. To begin with, healthy objectification can help fight off any emotions that threaten to pull you off the path. If you feel discouraged in your practice, you can use the thought of what you are and what you're capable of doing to give yourself encouragement: "Other people can gain awakening. Then why not me?" (AN 4:159) If you feel tempted to abandon the path, you can use the thought of what you are—and what you will become if you go back to your old ways, or worse—to remind yourself of the sufferings you'll face if you give up. You can also use the thought of what you are to remind you of the love and concern for yourself that inspired you to practice in the first place (AN 3:40).

The Buddha also recommends using objectification to become what he calls a person with a sense of yourself (*attaññu*): the ability to gauge how far you've come in developing qualities needed on the path—such as conviction, virtue, learning, generosity, discernment, and quick-wittedness—so that you can build on your strengths and focus your energies on the areas where you're still lacking (AN 7:64).

However, the type of objectification that the Buddha most frequently advises as a part of the path is derived from the teaching on rebirth. If you adopt rebirth and the power of actions to influence rebirth as a working hypotheses, it gives you a useful perspective on the choices you are always making. As you think about the possibilities of where you may have been as you've gone through life after life of stress and suffering, and of how much suffering you'll face if you don't take on the path of skillful action leading to release, you're much more likely to embark on the skillful path and to stick with it (MN 60). Also, reflecting on the universality of long-term suffering helps to induce the level of *samvega* needed to give intensity to your practice (AN 5:57).

There is even a discourse where the Buddha uses this sort of reflection to bring thirty monks to full awakening, reminding them that—in their many previous births as common animals and human beings caught breaking the law—they have lost more blood from having their heads cut off than there is water in all the oceans (SN 15:13). This was an effective use of objectification to get the monks to see the drawbacks of objectification so that they would abandon the objectification that would lead to further rebirth.

In most cases, though, the Buddha recommended using objectification primarily in the early stages of the path, and to develop types of thinking that avoid the categories of objectification on a higher stage of the practice.

This pattern follows the Buddha's own practice on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge he gained that night was an answer to questions of objectification: Was he in the past? What was he in the past? Where had he come from? Pursuing these questions in the clarity of his concentrated mind, he gained knowledge of his previous births. The second knowledge he gained that night, dealing in terms of beings dying from and being reborn to various worlds throughout the cosmos, was also a form of objectification. However, the third knowledge he gained that night—the knowledge that led to full awakening—abandoned the terms of objectification. This knowledge came to him after he reflected on the enormous sufferings of continual rebirth and redeath that he had seen in his second knowledge, and saw a need to gain escape from them. In the course of looking for that escape, he began to drop the categories of

objectification and looked at birth and death simply as processes, without regard to who they were happening to or where. This enabled him to trace the cause of birth and death to events appearing directly to his awareness in the present (SN 12:10). That's when he was able to abandon the ignorance underlying those events, and so gain release.

Dependent co-arising is a description of the line of thought and investigation the Buddha followed in going from the second to the third knowledge that night. Although even a rudimentary explanation of dependent co-arising would require at least a book, for our purposes here we can simply look at the list of factors in the sequence. In forward order they are: ignorance, fabrication, consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense media, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and then all the sufferings that follow on birth, such as aging, death, and grief. What's striking about this sequence is that none of the factors, even in their detailed explanations (SN 12:2), deal in terms of "I am," such as "my birth" or "my craving." And the term "being" doesn't appear until the end of the sequence, in the explanation of the factor of birth.

This means that the sequence of dependent co-arising is expressed in terms that sidestep the categories of objectification. However, the sequence can be used to explain how those categories arise. As Sn 4:11 points out, the categories of objectification come from the activity of perception. Extended explanations of dependent co-arising in the Canon show that perceptions play a role at two points in the sequence: prior to sensory contact, in the factor of fabrication (SN 12:2); and after sensory contact, following on feeling (MN 18). If these perceptions are conditioned by ignorance, they can be primed to read a sense of "I am the thinker" into sensory contact even before that contact happens; and they can feed on whatever feeling that contact gives rise to, to engender the views and verbalizations that cause the categories of objectification to ensnare them even further. It's because of these feedback loops—where one factor conditions a factor that in turn conditions it—that dependent co-arising needs no outside help to keep on going indefinitely. The factors are mutually sustaining.

However, this fact can also be used to end dependent co-arising from within. If the ignorance underlying dependent co-arising is replaced with knowledge of dependent co-arising itself, its factors turn into factors of the path. The acts of attention and intention, which come under name-and-form, can be used to direct perceptions away from objectification, and in this way the sequence that ordinarily leads to becoming and suffering breaks down. The sense of being a being is abandoned, and a sense of the world is no longer needed to provide food.

Ultimately, even the processes of dependent co-arising and this/this conditionality have to be abandoned. After all, they aren't the goal itself. They simply form a path to a goal. Total freedom from objectification comes only when *all* processes come to an end (MN 18). But learning how to think in terms of processes is the most effective way to reach that unobjectified freedom.

Because the habits of objectification are deeply ingrained in everyday thinking, learning how to think in terms of processes goes against the grain. We're so used to taking on the role of beings and looking for food that it's hard to break out of the pattern. This is why people ever since the time of the Buddha

have tried to fit dependent co-arising into the classifications of objectification. To allow this, though, would have made the teaching of dependent co-arising ineffective, so the Buddha consistently fought off any attempts to place dependent co-arising into the context of those classifications while he was alive.

One discourse (SN 12:12) tells of a monk who wanted to read an agent into the sequence, asking for each factor of the sequence, “Who is doing this?” For example, when the Buddha said that feeling leads to craving, the monk asked, “Who craves?” The Buddha responded that he hadn’t said, “craves,” and so the question, “Who craves?” is invalid. The appropriate question is: “From what as a requisite condition comes craving?” The answer is, “feeling.” And so on down the line.

Another discourse (SN 12:35) tells of a monk who wanted to pursue the question of whether there was someone to whom the factors of sequence were happening. He asked, for example, “Which is the craving, lord, and whose is the craving?” Again, the Buddha said that the question was invalid, but then he went further, saying that this question was another way of asking a question that he consistently put aside: “Is the soul the same as the body, or is the soul one thing and the body another?” In other words, is there something that possesses the body (or the craving, or any other of the factors), or is there not? These sorts of questions, the Buddha said, would make it impossible to practice the holy life. He didn’t explain why, but the reason is fairly clear: By trying to look behind the sequence and to engage in questions using the categories of objectification, you are not looking right at the factors of the sequence. You’re trying to peek around them. Only by looking directly at those factors, and by engaging in them directly, can you put an end to them and bring about the end of suffering.

The attempts to read the categories of objectification into dependent co-arising didn’t stop after the Buddha passed away. In the ensuing centuries, many Buddhist philosophers got into a long-standing debate over the time frame in which the factors happen: Do they all happen in an instant? Are they spread over time in a single lifetime? Or are they spread over more than one lifetime? To ask these questions, though, is to try to place the sequence of dependent co-arising into the framework of the worlds into which beings are born. The sequence itself, however, makes no reference to time frame, and so could be applied to any time frame. In fact, it explains how time frames are created as categories of thought, and how to gain freedom from the constraints of time and other dimensions of the world (Iti 63).

Similarly, when the idea took hold that the Buddha’s teaching on not-self was actually a teaching on no self—that there is no self—dependent co-arising was pressed into service as a way of explaining how experience can happen in the absence of a self. This too, however, was an imposition of the categories of objectification on dependent co-arising. As MN 2 points out, the belief “I have no self” is just as much a fetter as the belief “I have a self.” Both beliefs qualify as forms of objectification because they answer questions that derive from the categories of objectification: “Am I? Am I not?” Only if you abandon these issues entirely, and focus instead directly on the factors of dependent co-arising as they are immediately apparent, can you avoid the inner and outer conflicts that come with objectification.

The tendency to read the categories of objectification into dependent co-arising continues to the present day. Modern-day materialists—who reject the

idea that there is a self or soul in the body, and prefer to explain mental events as mere side-effects of biochemical processes—interpret dependent co-arising, with its lack of reference to a self, as compatible with their ideas. This, however, ignores the huge gulf that separates the factors of dependent co-arising from those of a materialist view of the world.

To begin with, the materialist view deals in the categories of objectification. It identifies a person as a being existing in a particular world. It takes the physical world “out there” as real, and regards the processes of the body that can be measured by people or instruments “out there” as the real causes for what is directly experienced to awareness. As for events as they are directly experienced to awareness, the materialist view relegates them to a purely subjective realm, in which the idea of causation from within awareness is regarded as purely illusory. You may think that you’re choosing one course of action over another, for instance, but the choice was actually determined by the chemistry in your body. What you actually *are* is limited to what people outside, along with their instruments, can measure. In terms of an old debate from the Buddha’s time, materialism maintains that the soul is the same thing as the body. When the body dies, that’s it.

What this means is that—unlike phenomenology, which looks at experience from the inside—materialism looks at it from the outside and holds as real only the aspects of consciousness that can be explained from the outside. This puts materialists in a peculiar position. On the one hand, because they hold that consciousness is simply the by-product of chemical processes, they call into question the idea that consciousness can have an accurate view of the world outside, for—after all—how can the occurrence of a chemical process guarantee that it conveys true knowledge of anything? Yet, on the other hand, they claim that their knowledge of those chemical processes is a proven fact. Where does this knowledge come from, if not from the world outside their consciousness? And when they convey this knowledge to us in their writings, what has it come through if not through their consciousness, whose reality and ability to know they have called into question?

Dependent co-arising, however, takes a very different approach. Instead of taking a stand on whether the soul is the same as the body or something different, it explains experience in terms of processes “right here.” For instance, it sees the experience of the world “out there”—which the Buddha equates with the processes of the six sense spheres (SN 35:82)—as the result of mental processes such as ignorance and fabrication as they are immediately experienced. And as for the experience of the material body, dependent co-arising shows how that, too, depends on mental processes. Even the birth of this body, it describes in non-objectified form, not as requiring a soul independent of the body, but as the result of acts of craving and clinging, which feed acts of consciousness at the same time they feed off acts of consciousness, as they pass from the experience of one life “right here” in consciousness to the experience of the next life (SN 44:9), also “right here.”

In other words, from the point of view of dependent co-arising, consciousness is not merely the result of physical processes. It’s what allows the experience of physical processes to occur. At the same time, the craving and clinging dependent on acts of consciousness are what allow for acts of consciousness to experience those processes in a new body after an old body dies.

What's more, dependent co-arising focuses primary attention on a problem that cannot be detected by people or instruments "out there": namely, the problem of suffering. No one outside can detect your mental pain. They may know that certain physical processes are accompanied by pain, but only if you report the pain to them. The actual pain is a phenomenological issue.

At the same time, dependent co-arising treats suffering as a problem that can be cured in a phenomenological way: not through the manipulation of biochemical processes, which can't be directly experienced—you can't directly detect which chemicals are combining in your brain—but through mental factors such as intention, attention, and perception, which *can* be directly detected, or as the Buddha says in MN 18, "delineated" as steps in a process. This is a fact of great consequence. The main problem of experience—the suffering that comes from craving, clinging, becoming, and birth into one confining puddle after another—is caused by factors directly present to experience, and can also be solved by factors directly present to experience, without having to look outside of direct experience to material or other causes hidden behind it.

This is why the best-known anthology of the Buddha's poetry—the *Dhammapada*—begins with these lines:

Phenomena are        preceded by the heart,  
                                 ruled by the heart,  
                                 made of the heart.

It's right at the heart—right at awareness—where the causes and solutions to the arrow of suffering can be found. An important part of the solution is to recognize that the categories and perceptions of objectification are a major cause of suffering in causing internal and external conflict. While these categories and perceptions may have their uses, they ultimately have to be dropped. And the best way to drop them is to view them from the perspective of a way of thinking that can watch those categories and perceptions in action, as processes, without adopting them. To view them in this way gives rise to dispassion for them, and through dispassion they end. That's the role played by dependent co-arising. Its perspective forces a radical reorientation of how to look at experience—a lesson that was hard to learn in the Buddha's day, and is still hard to learn today. But the benefits that can come from learning it—in a way that brings total freedom from suffering—more than repay any difficulties involved.

— *Thanissaro Bhikkhu*