

THE BUDDHIST CAUSAL LAW OF INTERDEPENDENCY

Causality defines cause/effect relationships and determines HOW we see and respond to our world and others in it: independently or interdependently. Buddha's doctrine of "dependence on conditions" or interdependency (pratityasamutpada) is central to the Dharma, in spite of modern Buddhist attempts to diminish its import. (see Freiburger 2001) This popular dismissal of interdependency as no longer relevant today is a self-validating misconception that protects absolutisms, including the abusive conversion tactics of popular Buddhism today, which are unsustainable doctrinally. Madhyamika radiates from this original causal explanation which serves as an insightful map to guide us in our daily lives and practice.

"Since all things altogether lack substance (svabhava) either in causes or conditions [or their] totality or separately, therefore they are empty (sunya). Inasmuch as all things are empty of own-being (svabhava) the incomparable Tathagata [= Buddha] has taught this [interdependency] about things." --Nagarjuna, SS 3, 68 (in Lindtner 1982 35, 65)

"Simply put, interdependence means that nothing stands alone apart from the matrix of all else. Nothing is independent, and everything is interdependent with everything else. Logically, the proof of interdependence is that nothing can exist apart from the causes and conditions that give rise to it. But those causes and conditions are also dependent on other causes and conditions. Therefore, linear [= one-way] causality and isolating a single cause for an event gives way to a more web-like understanding of causality in which everything affects everything else in some way because everything is interconnected." (Gross 1997 337-338)

"Interdependency holds true of all events because for one event to even be unique, i.e., identifiable, it must be different from another event and it thereby depends on that other for its difference.... Thus no event can exist independently of another since it would depend on there being another from which it could differ. If the event did have independent existence (svabhava), it could not exist in relation (dependent on conditions) and so it could not exist at all." (McCagney 1997 60-62)

"As a social and linguistic convention, the notion of an 'I' is useful, but, if taken to represent a fixed or separable entity, it is a fiction. In systems terms it is a construct which is dysfunctional to the extent that it distorts the system's perception of its own relation to the external world. To the Buddhist, the belief in a permanent, separate self represents a fundamental error: engendering greed, anxiety, and aggression, it is an illusion basic to the suffering we experience and which we inflict on others." (Macy 1991 184)

"All of these phenomena have some mode of dependence; either they arise, change and cease in dependence on causes, or they are posited in dependence on a continuum, or in dependence on their parts and so forth. No matter what type of dependent phenomena they are, they exist only in dependence on another. Not even one among them is able to stand by itself. Therefore all of them are empty of their own inherent existence." (Dalai Lama 1975 32)

"Out of the fear of our self-need we tend always to perceive others in ways which will confirm

ourselves and so as to justify the ways in which we are often moved to treat them.... Our industrial materialist culture dehumanizes our experience of others and tends to reify or make things of them through many different forms of dominance, distancing, and depersonalization. How can our humanity truly flower unless we have dissolved the socially sanctioned exploitative and coercive relationships of wealth, power, sex and race?" (Jones 1989 326-327)

For more discussion on the doctrine of interdependency, see the .pdf files on our "Current Features" webpage:

The Two Truths

The Mutual Interplay of the Two Truths

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