

# ***The Central Concept of Buddhism: The Teaching of Interdependent Co-arising***

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With Buddha's Enlightenment day and the New Year approaching, our thought is drawn to the central conception of Buddhism and the contribution of Buddhism to world thought. The central concept of Buddhism is generally termed Interdependent Co-arising or Dependent Co-origination. Most people consider Buddhism as a religion. However, it also has a highly developed tradition of philosophical thought based on the principle of cause and effect (inga) and expressed in the principle of Interdependent Co-arising.

This teaching came to mind when I read a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the Abbot of the Nishi Hongwanji, Koshin Ohtani, in a recent issue of the Bungei Shunju (1-2008). In the dialogue, the issue of Emptiness, also a very important concept in Mahayana Buddhism, came up. The Dalai Lama explained that Emptiness is based in the principle of Interdependent Co-arising. The Abbot presented the East Asian view of Emptiness as an experiential awareness, achieved through the practice of meditation in Zen or other tradition. It is essentially the experience of non-duality. Perhaps we may distinguish the views as logical in contrast to mystical. While many people may not easily experience non-duality, they can understand the logical basis of Emptiness and through reflection become aware of its contemporary meaning and importance for our lives.

The Emptiness of things referred to by the Dalai Lama refers to the understanding that everything in our world is composite. All things can be analyzed into the components that make it up. The automobile is made of the various parts, wheels, engine etc. The engine, for example, can be further analyzed to its parts and the metals that make it up. The metals can be broken down to the elements, atoms, then neutrons and protons or particles that underlay our observed world. Finally the mind comes to a mystery as we are unable to penetrate the cosmic sources of the world of experience.

However, the conclusion of Buddhism is that nothing possesses its own irreducible self-nature but everything depends on something else for its existence. Therefore, all things are empty, empty of intrinsic reality and intrinsic value; all existence is relational. Whatever the ultimate reality of things, it is inexpressible and inconceivable; therefore Empty. All things arise through the co-working of many causes and conditions.

The understanding of the principle of Interdependent Co-arising has both religious and philosophical significance. Whether one views the process from the logical or experiential perspective they both, however, aim at the transformation of a person's view of the world and life.

The religious significance of the teaching of Interdependent Co-arising highlights the doctrine of karma which explains the basis of suffering in human existence and the world. On the positive side of Mahayana Buddhism, Interdependent Co-arising underlies the teaching of transfer of merit whereby each person shares the benefit of good deeds with others. The doctrine of karma means deed or act and explains our situation in the world, while Interdependent Co-arising motivates people to do good deeds in order to acquire merit to achieve better lives for themselves and others in the future in the process of transmigration. This teaching is reflected in the story of Dharmakara (Hozo) Bodhisattva in the Pure Land tradition. His Vows to construct a Pure Land where all beings can attain Enlightenment express the principle of interdependence. Each Vow indicates the relation of the Bodhisattava's Enlightenment to the attainment of Enlightenment by all beings. He cannot gain it unless they all gain it together with him. We are all interconnected.

The philosophical approach to the teaching of Interdependent Co-arising is also called the 12 link chain of causation. This chain analyses the existence of human or sentient beings as the result of a process of 12 aspects which describe the formation of a life or can view a life through three births. This perspective is important because it provides an understanding of the process of life and rebirth or transmigration, providing a basis for values and decision-making through understanding the various conditions involved a life stream.

The links are: 1) Ignorance is a fundamental blindness to one's true self and life condition. It is a lack of understanding which we call today "denial." 2) Volitional action includes our impulses and motivations which arise from our Ignorance in the form of hatred, greed, prejudice etc. 3) Consciousness which includes also the unconscious or the totality of the awareness of things. Through the many influences or seeds stored there we develop good or bad tendencies. 4) Name and Form are the mental and physical aspects of our being. That is, the physical body and personality or identity 5) The six sense faculties: the five physical senses and the mind. 6) Contact by the senses with objects. 7) Feeling or the awareness and experience of things. 8) Craving is the desire, rooted in our feelings, for repeated experience just as we cannot eat just one potato chip. 9) Clinging or grasping and attachment. We cannot let go. 10) Becoming is the deep desire for life, reflected in our efforts at self-preservation. 11) Birth or rebirth. 12) Old Age (Decay) and Death, the process begins at birth and becomes more evident as time –impermanence- proceeds.

According to this process, we are influenced by the fundamental Ignorance and Delusions that blind us to true reality. It is our inability to see things as they truly are. We know that our senses can be deceived as in optical illusions. As a result, we develop deep feelings of hatred, greed and prejudice, essentially our basic egoism. Through our underlying consciousness and the activities of our minds and the senses, we carry out actions in the world, creating suffering or good. We cling to those things which we think benefit our egos or preserve them. Consequently we give rise to a deep desire to continue our lives (Becoming). The karma generated through this process leads to successive rebirths and cycles of birth-old age and death. All sentient beings experience this process until they find their way out of the wheel or river of births and deaths known as Samsara in Buddhist teaching.

The teaching of the twelve links of Interdependent Co-arising motivates the quest for Enlightenment to realize emancipation from this process. The division into three lives: past, present and future, indicates that our spiritual bondage continues life after life in the Buddhist view of transmigration. In traditional teaching the cycles do not end with three cycles. Rather, as long as our passions and ignorance govern the character of our lives the process of suffering continues. The variety of Buddhist traditions offer paths to transcend this process and become Enlightened, attaining nirvana or Buddhahood.

It also gives a sense of urgency to our individual lives. Buddhism teaches that it is a rare event to be born as a human being with the capacity to make decisions and to practice the teaching and reach liberation.

The philosophical dimension of the teaching focuses attention that nothing has value in and of itself. Everything is composite and is impermanent. Everything undergoes a process of change, most evident in our own lives. Because things have no essential value, our desires and attachments cause us great pain when we encounter something we dislike or lose something we treasure. The understanding of the reality of change aids in establishing the spiritual life.

More philosophically, the teaching indicates the emptiness or voidness of all things. This teaching applied to history or nature indicates that we are all conditioned, historical beings, as are our cultures and civilizations. They are not absolutes to be uncritically valued and maintained. In connect with Nature, Buddhism is compatible with science, because it

understands the principle of cause and effect and the evolving nature of things. All reality is a flow whose essential quality is energy down to the smallest particle or wave in micro-scientific analysis or the evolution of life and the expansion of the universe in the macro-world.

In social life, this principle emphasizes the interdependent nature of social relations as well as the complementarity of all life and reality. In China, the Taoist Yin-Yang symbol also expressed this principle. With the complementarity of Yin and Yang, the Yang is also in the Yin and the Yin in the Yang, shown by a small dot in respective areas. The circular form shows each dimension flowing into the other, giving rise to the many transformations of reality.

Interdependence also points to the mutuality of necessary for fruitful and positive human relations. We are all interconnected. Buddhist teaching provides a foundation for social living and community, connecting the past, present and future. This process undergirds the reverence for ancestors and concern for future generations.

The imagery and understanding of dependent Co-arising would go far to reduce the distortions of our rampant individualism and overbearing, competitive perspective in Western society. It would also overcome the conflict image that has shaped western society. We must have an enemy and always have victory. The dualism of Western culture, good and evil, flesh and spirit are self-defeating in the end.

In conclusion, the importance of the principle of Interdependent Co-arising can be seen in various areas of application, religious, or philosophic. It is the basis of Buddhist thought. Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh has written: "All teachings of Buddhism are based on Interdependent Co-arising. If a teaching is not in accord with Interdependent Co-arising, it is not a teaching of the Buddha." (Thich Nhat Hanh: "The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching-The Two Truths.")