

Dependent Arising and Emptiness

Interview with Professor Jeffrey Hopkins – September 1980

Q: The Dalai Lama once said that if Buddhist had a motto, it would be dependent arising. Exactly what does that mean?

A: The Dalai Lama called dependent arising “Buddha’s slogan.” What it means is that if the Buddha had a slogan, or if he had a little red book or green book or whatever, that book would have as its title, *Dependent Arising*. Or if he had a political phrase, if he had an organization that had a motto, that motto would be Dependent Arising. It would be put on cloth; it would be waved in the wind; songs would be made up about it. It is the focal point, the corner stone, the inner structure, the center of all the Buddha’s teachings.

All the Buddha’s teaching is concerned with helping others. Therefore, all of Buddha’s teaching is concerned with individual beings attaining omniscience, so that they can effectively help others. This means that all of Buddha’s teaching is concerned with overcoming the obstructions to omniscience, whatever is in the way of becoming all-knowing. All-knowing specifically is to know what is appropriate to do for somebody else. This means that all of Buddha’s teaching is for the sake of wisdom.

In the first stanza of chapter nine of his *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, Shantideva says: “All these branches are for the sake of wisdom”. It is through this route that everything is concerned with wisdom.

Now, what does the wisdom consciousness realize? It realizes the emptiness of inherent existence. It, in turn, is proved by way of dependent arising. As yogis advance, they see more and more how dependent arising and emptiness of inherent existence are similar - the understanding of the one helping in the understanding of the other.

So you have to understand dependent arising in order to understand emptiness. And you need to understand emptiness in order to be wise, in order to have wisdom. You need wisdom in order to obtain omniscience. Specifically Shantideva was saying that all the factors of method – love, compassion, the altruistic mind of enlightenment, and so forth - go to enhance the wisdom consciousness so that it can overcome the obstructions to omniscience.

The wisdom of dependent arising itself is not sufficient. Wisdom must be enhanced by method, made more powerful by method. Through that combination, the wisdom-consciousness itself overcomes the obstructions to omniscience. So what does the wisdom-consciousness understand? Non-inherent existence! That is shown by dependent arising.

Q: Could you define exactly what you mean by dependent arising?

A: There are three types of dependent arising in the Prasangika-Madhyamika System (the final System):

1. One is that products, impermanent things, arise in dependence upon causes and conditions. This indicates that there is no separate creator or maker, that everything has its own particular individual set of causes and conditions.
2. The next is that all phenomena, both the impermanent and the permanent, arise or exist in dependence on their parts. This one I find very helpful. A table exists in dependence on its parts.
3. Then the third is that all phenomena arise or exist in dependence upon a designating consciousness. This does not mean that by designating or calling that chair an elephant, it becomes an elephant, but that nothing exists in and of itself. It must depend upon a designating consciousness even for its existence.

It seems that many people in the West think they already understand this third, most profound meaning of dependent arising. At least I can say I have not, and that is why I say that the middle meaning is so helpful and profound for me. It seems to mean something to me that the one that is actually more profound doesn't yet mean, though I'm sure eventually it will get through my thick mind. In the meantime, this middle one is very helpful.

Because impermanent things depend on causes and conditions, they do not exist in and of themselves.

Because any phenomenon exists in dependence upon its parts, it does not exist in and of itself.

Because any phenomena exists in dependence upon a designating consciousness, it does not exist in and of itself.

This existence 'in and of itself' appears to us all around. The Buddhists are not saying that phenomena appear to be permanent and appear not to depend upon causes and conditions.

They say that phenomena appear to exist in their own right, and, if they did exist in their own right, then, they would be permanent, they would not depend upon causes and conditions. It's quite different from saying that phenomena appear to be independent, permanent. Rather, phenomena appear to exist in and of themselves. Then you can say that if they did, then they would be permanent, etc. Therefore, since they are not permanent, etc., since they depend upon causes and conditions, they do not inherently exist.

Almost anyone can understand that an apple depends upon a tree, the growing process, light, and soil. Even though they understand that part of it, they do not understand this as contradicting the basic appearance of the apple as if it exists in its own right. Most people say that the Madhyamikas are trying to prove phenomena are not not produced in dependence upon causes and conditions. However, it doesn't take too much to understand that. If that were all the Madhyamikas were teaching, I don't know as it would be worth so much interest. It is the connection they make between these rather obvious truths about phenomena and the way phenomena appear that is so interesting.

By teaching dependent arising, Buddha is challenging the way things appear to us. It takes a lot of time to be able to sift out what is appearing to us. Very hard. We can use words very easily from the mouth: “They seem to exist in and of themselves, they seem to exist solidly.” But to actually catch that sense about phenomena (its inherent existence) and then use one of these reasonings to refute that, and to experience its refutation without going too far (nihilism), without going either too little (eternalism) or too far, that is very, very difficult – but it is well worth the attempt. There’s no choice without it.

Q: Using simple-minded reasoning, to me dependent arising means that when I see things and perceive them as concrete - if I’m aware of dependent arising - I begin to look at it in a different way. I recognize that there is more to what I’m seeing than this apparently solid, inherently existing object. Then I begin to break it down and think a little more about it.

A: It’s said to be like peeling away the layers of an onion. As you’re saying, when you think about dependent arising, it’s like peeling away one of those layers, you start seeing the object differently and thinking different ways about it. Apparently, as you study and look into it more and more, you peel away more and more layers. My own experience is that though you peel away a few layers, some of them come back; you peel it back, and it comes back, you peel back and it comes back. (Laughter) I’ve come to the point where, although I’m not happy with the fact that the layers come back, I understand how difficult it is to change my mind. And I have some patience with the fact it will take a long long time even to keep the layers pulled back that I sometimes seem to penetrate – never mind the further layers that are yet to be removed.