



Dependent Arising - Detailed Subject Knowledge

Extract from Chapter 10: “The Three Marks of Existence,” *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

The principle put forward by Buddhist thought here is called dependent origination, dependent arising, conditioned arising or interdependence (paticcasamuppada in Pali, pratityasamutpada in Sanskrit). All these terms mean that things arise or originate in dependence on causes. Nothing exists without a cause. One of the classic formulations of this idea in the scriptures is the following:

When this exists, that exists;
From the arising of this, that arises;
When this does not exist, that does not exist;
From the cessation of this, that ceases.

Nothing is unitary – nothing is just one single thing – everything is made up of numerous parts, so the existence of an object depends on the coming together of all its parts. This analysis makes us realize that the objects of our everyday world do not exist in the way we think they do, as substantially distinct entities. This is just how they appear to us, how we perceive them. This philosophical analysis enables us to make a distinction between the way things appear and the way they truly are. By reflecting and meditating on this, we mentally break down the phenomena that make up our world until we realize that they are as insubstantial as a dream, a mirage or a rainbow.

The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has coined a new English word to describe interdependence: he calls it ‘interbeing’. Things inter-are. In this passage he conveys the meaning of interdependence poetically.

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*