

Learning by Doing

January 24, 2022

When we look at the list of factors in dependent co-arising, they look very counterintuitive and very complex, but there are some basic observations you can make that are actually among the most important things to notice about this teaching. One of them is that there are a lot of factors before sensory contact. It starts with ignorance, and then there's fabrication, consciousness, name and form, then you get to the sense organs, and then you get to the contact.

This fact illustrates a principle the Buddha laid out in the first verse in the Dhammapada: *All phenomena are preceded by the mind*. It's what's going on in the mind prior to sensory contact that determines whether you're going to suffer from it or not. It's because of what's going on in the mind that you can suffer from really negative things, and even from really positive things that come into the senses. But when you get more sensitive to what's going on *prior* to sensory contact, you can suffer less, even when bad sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations come in. So you want to get to know those factors really well.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: You focus on the breath—that's bodily fabrication, and it's also part of *form*. It's part of the wind element. You think about the breath—that's verbal fabrication. And you hold perceptions in mind—that comes under both name and mental fabrication. You're trying to create a feeling of well-being—that comes under both name and mental fabrication, too. Underlying this, there's the fact that you're simply paying *attention* to the breath, and you have the *intention* to stay here, all of which come under name.

This is how you learn about these things—not by trying to watch them passively, because where are you going to go to watch them passively? You're in the midst of them. So what you have to do is to make something good out of them—a good place to stay, out of them. Keep everything on this level. And even though you're creating a state of becoming out of these things, you're doing it *consciously*. You're doing it with a sense of what they are.

This is how you begin to parse these things out, because when we try to step into the mind and start observing it without first getting it concentrated, things get very blurry. But as you get more and more skilled at settling down, things begin to separate out. You see the difference between an *intention* and an act of *attention*, and you begin to get very clear about what your perceptions are.

For example, the perception you have of the breath—how it comes in, how it goes out: You can change that perception to think of the breath as originating *in* the body. Where are the spots in the body where it originates? Is there just one spot, or are there many all at once? Look into that. As you do, you get more and more sensitive to see: This is how perception functions in shaping experience. You begin to see that some perceptions are better than others in terms of how much stress they create. The better ones, of course, are the ones that are calmer, that create less stress.

As you set up an intention to stay here in concentration, you're going to find that it runs into other intentions. This is where it's good to think about the committee of the mind: The members are embryos of all kinds of different states of becoming, and they have their desires. Some of them want to get the concentration out of the way so that they can think about other things. They want to talk to this person, they want to deal with that person, they want to fantasize about this, do that. They entertain themselves with these thoughts, not realizing that what they're doing is destroying your concentration.

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha said that respect for concentration is an important part of getting close to nibbana. You have to realize that a state of mind in which things are very, very quiet, very, very still, is not a state of mind in which nothing is happening—a lot of things are happening.

There's that passage in one of the suttas where the Buddha talks about how Ven. Sāriputta analyzed his states of concentration, and he could see that there were a lot of things going on. Not just the well known factors, say, of jhana, but also acts of decision, attention, intention, the whole gamut. He was able to see these things because he was using them to create the concentration and protect it from other intentions.

He began to notice the simple act of *attention*. Some people, when they start paying attention to the breath, get all tight. Simply the thought of paying attention to something makes them think they have to tense up around it. If that's what you do, you have to sort that out. There's the act of *attention*, but then the tensing up is something separate.

Is there a part of the body you can focus on and not tense it up? I knew someone once who found that the only place she could focus in the body without tensing up was down at the base of the spine, so she had to start there.

The point is, though, that as you create the state of concentration, you're creating a state of becoming—and you're very conscious about what's going into it: which actions do which function, and which actions are going to get in the way of the concentration. This is how you get more and more sensitive to the factors

that are there prior to sensory contact. You begin to see that there are more and less skillful ways of putting these things together—and you aim at the greater and greater skill.

This is how you really get to know them. This is a principle that applies to all the different ways of analyzing your experience that the Buddha talks about with reference to developing discernment. With the aggregates, it's the same sort of thing: How do you get to know the aggregates? Through making a state of concentration out of them. How do you get to know the elements—the four physical elements, plus space and consciousness? By creating states of concentration out of them.

It's the things you work with, the things that you make: Those are the things you know best. If you've ever looked at academic discussions, you notice that the writers can get very vague about the actual topic they're supposed to be studying, but they can get very detailed about *who* in their field says *what*. In other words, they're more aware of what they're doing than of the actual topic that they're trying to study. Which, in the case of academia, can actually get in the way of trying to know what actually went on.

I had a professor one time who was talking about a woman who'd come in to see him. She wanted to discuss Goethe. He taught intellectual history, so he told her, "Well, there's the Marxist view, and then there's the Freudian view..." and he went down the various views about Goethe. She responded, "I don't want to know about those views. I want to know the *truth* about Goethe." The professor was telling this to another group of professors, and they all laughed. That's when I realized that I had to get out of academia—people laughing at the idea of truth. But what it showed was that people really do know best what they do with their topic, what they do with their subject.

So, here we're taking that principle and we're actually getting some good use out of it. If you want to know the aggregates, make something good out of them. Not just any old thing, you make something good: a good state of concentration, deeper states of concentration. If you want to know the factors that come prior to sensory contact, make a state of concentration out of them. That's how you really get to know them.

So, when we say that concentration leads to discernment, it's not simply because it makes the mind still, although that is an important part. But in the course of creating the concentration, as you get the mind more and more still, you see what you're doing. You get hands-on experience, and that's what provides the basis for genuine insight.