

BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE

THE CONCEPT OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

Buddhism teaches that all life is interrelated. Through the concept of dependent origination, it holds that nothing exists in isolation, independent of other life; all beings and phenomena exist or occur only because of their relationship with other beings or phenomena. Everything in the world comes into existence in response to causes and conditions. Nothing can exist in absolute independence of other things or arise of its own accord.

Shakyamuni used the image of two bundles of reeds leaning against each other to explain dependent origination. He described how the two bundles of reeds can remain standing as long as they lean against each other. In the same way, because this exists, that exists, and because that exists, this exists. If one of the two bundles is removed, then the other will fall. Similarly, without this existence, that cannot exist, and without that existence, this cannot exist.

More specifically, Buddhism teaches that our lives are constantly developing in a dynamic way, in a synergy of the internal causes within our own life (our personality, experiences, outlook on life and so on) and the external conditions and relations around us. Each individual existence contributes to creating the environment that sustains all other existences. All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, a single living whole.

When we realize the extent of the myriad interconnections that link us to all other life, we realize that our existence only becomes meaningful through interaction with, and in relation to, others. By engaging ourselves with others, our identity is developed, established and enhanced. We then understand that it is impossible to build our own happiness on the unhappiness of others. We also see that our constructive actions affect the world around us. And, as Nichiren Daishonin wrote, that if you light a lamp for another, your own way will be lit.

There is an intimate mutual interconnection in the web of nature, in the relationship between humankind and its environment—and also between the individual and society, parents and children, husband and wife.

If as individuals we can embrace the view that “because of that, this exists,” or, in other words, “because of that person, I can develop,” then we need never experience pointless conflicts in human relations. In the case of a young married woman, for instance, her present existence is in relation to her husband and mother-in-law, regardless of what sort of people they may be. Someone who realizes this can turn everything, both good and bad, into an impetus for personal growth.

Buddhism teaches that we “choose” the family and circumstances into which we are born in order to learn and grow and to be able to fulfill our unique role and respective mission in life.

On a deeper level, we are connected and related not just to those physically close to us, but to every living being. If we can realize this, feelings of loneliness and isolation, which cause so much suffering, begin to vanish, as we realize that we are part of a dynamic, mutually interconnected whole.

As President of the Soka Gakkai International Daisaku Ikeda has written, an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life can lead to a more peaceful world:

“We’re all human beings who, through some mystic bond, were born to share the same limited life span on this planet, a small green oasis in the vast universe. Why do we quarrel and victimize one another? If we could all keep the image of the vast heavens in mind, I believe that it would go a long way toward resolving conflicts and disputes. If our eyes are fixed on eternity, we come to realize that the conflicts of our little egos are really sad and unimportant.”

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