

Jason Siff
Week 4, *Awareness of Thinking*
“Exploring Dependant Arising”
September 23rd, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Hello, I’m Jason Siff and this is the fourth week of Tricycle online retreat on the *Awareness of Thinking*. This week I’d like to talk a bit about the Buddhist teaching of dependent arising. I’m going to make this very simple; when talking about dependent arising, what we’re talking about is that nothing arises in isolation. We’ll start with that.

If thinking is viewed as something that arises in isolation, then it gets viewed as a particular self or ego. There are ideas about how it could be eliminated or uprooted. To consider then that the Buddhist teaching that nothing arises in isolation—meaning that thinking doesn’t arise in isolation—would indicate that thinking is *not* the self. It’s not the ego. What it is, is a mental activity that is connected to other physiological and mental activities. It doesn’t exist on its own. Thinking is interconnected with emotions. It’s interconnected with sensations. We know from brain science, it’s interconnected with brain function. It’s not operating as some kind of separate entity; it is embedded within our experience. We can’t just extract it.

The various ways of looking at thinking would have to take into account that it is connected to other things and look at that as actually a good sign—that when something is connected to other things it doesn’t have the same kind of power or authority. It doesn’t exist in the same way as it would when we consider it in isolation. In fact, then thinking moves from the top of the pyramid down to the bottom. It’s just something like sensations, brain function, or emotions. It is part of that world but it’s also different. It has a different flavor to it than the sensation. It has something else to it than how we might experience emotion.

To look at our thinking is to look at the various things it’s also connected with and not to get so focused on the thoughts themselves. This is where awareness of thinking practice comes back into the whole area of the body, feelings, and mood. You may find this helpful in locating this as a particular kind of meditation practice that—perhaps through

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the back door rather than the front door—gets you into greater awareness of your body and gets you into much more of a sense that when the thinking dies down in your sittings, what’s left? When your mind is empty of some of the thoughts that have been going on, you might find that it’s easier to be with your sensations. It’s easier to notice your posture or to hear the sounds in the room or for your attention to go to the breath.

This kind of practice is about not just getting narrowly focused on thoughts, but getting broadly focused on what your experience is in meditation and becoming familiar with the other aspects of your experience. As you are perhaps noticing other elements to your experience and seeing ‘thinking’ as connected with that, you might find that there are some subtle mind states also present within your experience. If these weren’t present, it may be very hard to do this kind of practice.

At the beginning of this retreat and throughout, I’ve been talking about things like kindness and patience. Those are two kinds of mind states that you may find that as you become aware of them during your meditation practice, there’s a way in which things can settle down or your mind can quiet down, or you can get a much better perspective on things. The notion that only one thing arises at a time also has to be reconsidered in this respect. Yes, you can have angry thoughts and you can also have a feeling of being patient and kind to those thoughts. That’s part of dependent arising. Not to consider that dependent arising is about only trying to get at what is suffering, but it’s also a way of understanding your experience to help you get free of suffering. To see that if your unskillful states of mind are also arising with other qualities present, such as patience or awareness or some discernment or some friendliness, you may find that is a skillful way to be with those experiences.

To do this though, we almost have to change our way of looking at how our experience progresses. Most meditation techniques actually start with the student learning that their experience is impermanent; that they’re to notice how certain sensations or feelings arise,

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how they are sustained and how they pass away. That type of causalities is very linear. It's all about how one thing moves and changes. With that, people often get the view that only one thing exists at a time. There's no possibility then for anything else to happen within your awareness; it's just the arising of that particular itch, how it persists, and how it passes away.

What I'm saying is to reconsider that. That may be one type of causality. There are other types of causality that aren't learned when you focus on your experience in that very narrow way. If you start to look at this particular itch as it arises, it also maybe arises with other things connected with it; wanting to scratch it, a dislike of it, or patience with being concerned about it, a willingness to sit more with it. These experiences may at times be able to be broken down linearly as one following another, but you also may feel at times it's happening pretty much together. It's not so strange to have multiple moods, feelings, or thoughts about a particular thing arise together and not be identified with any one of those necessarily—to find that's just what your experience is.

Some of what we're actually looking at here around our experience is that anything we're going through will have its own kind of configuration or construction. It's the way it's held together. When you're sitting in meditation and you're angry or upset with somebody, you'll find that it's held together in a certain way. You're locked into it. There are certain words that keep coming to your mind. There are certain ideas of what you should do or say that you just can't push away. Those are part of that experience. Along with that you might notice that there's a willingness to perhaps be patient with it, to be friendly around it, or to notice some things that are going on. The other qualities of mind that are skillful are coming up within that experience. If that weren't the case, if you were just getting angry or upset with somebody, having all these things you wanted to say and working yourself up into a real state of mind of having to go out and do something about it, you might find there's no patience or kindness there. There's very little awareness of

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that experience. The only awareness is on how I’m going to accomplish what it is I want to say to that person. At that time there’s a limitation. There are limited qualities present.

In this approach to being aware of thinking, what we’re doing around conditionality is starting to be aware that within our experience there are more qualities than we realize that we can actually start to become aware of. These will be helpful. There are beneficial qualities to them. We just may not notice them because they are subtle, or because we may believe that when we’re angry we are purely angry and there is nothing else. That’s where that belief does get in the way of seeing that there may be other emotions, ideas, or attitudes going on that are actually positive and could help in that situation. Getting back to dependent arising, an important feature of this approach is that we’re not trying to get back to some kind of pure sense experience. We’re not trying to stop a progression from a particular sensation; to liking it, disliking it, desiring it or having aversion. We are instead going back into this twelve link chain of dependent arising and looking at what is the nature of ignorance of our whole experience. What is going on that makes it so that when I do have a particular sensation it just shoots right into liking, desiring, and attachment? What is going on?

The whole area of ignorance may really come down to starting to look more at our thoughts and try to understand how they work, function and lead us into things. By staying with that, we in a sense have exposed our ignorance. We’ve noticed something about ourselves. When you expose your ignorance, you might not be able to go back so easily. Now you’re aware. This is the particular deception these thoughts create. I can’t buy into that so easily any more. I’ve already followed it and know something about it. It may come up and entice me for a little while, but my ignorance is less. That’s the direction of this kind of approach—not trying to stop thoughts. That’s not the end result. The end result is to become more aware of our whole experience, including thinking, and have it so that there are ways in which the fuel that keeps our unskillful ones going is actually less. There’s less momentum, less of a sense of being compelled to go in those

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directions. Dependent arising is a deep, profound, and difficult to understand teaching in certain ways. What I’ve given you is one perspective on it. There are many ways I could talk about it a bit differently. There is something around taking in the basic notion that your experience is constructed through causes and conditions. Anything that happens, even if you can’t see the connection, something else may be there that it’s connected to that you at some point can start to see.

That’s part of the development of this approach; the journal writing, the sitting and everything is going to enable you to look at more of the conditions around your experiences than you have previously been aware of. This approach is one that is a gradual approach. It goes on for a long time. It works, I believe, more effectively when done with a teacher or in groups. It can be done on your own, but it may be a hard approach to sustain. It’s one of those practices where you might feel at times that you doubt it or that it’s not working for you. It doesn’t make sense, even though one moment it did and another it doesn’t. That’s fine. Doubt around a practice is essential. If we can’t experience some of our doubts and confusion about the meditation practices we see, we won’t develop our own independence and practice. We’ll find that we’re still dependent on a particular teaching or tradition instead of finding out for ourselves what this path to freedom from suffering to liberation is about.

What I would like to say at the very end of this is to invite you to be able to contact me, or any of the other teachers that I’ve trained, to feel. You do have support in this and you can continue. Along with that, I also want to say that I am very grateful for this opportunity to talk to you and give you these teachings. My intent in this teaching has been for you to develop your meditation practice and Dharma study and for no other reason.