

Our Interdependent World

OUR WORLD IN THE twenty-first century is smaller than it used to be. People from widely dispersed societies are in closer contact than ever before, and just as importantly, we are more aware of our closeness. In this age of information, experts and ordinary observers alike can identify many ways that actions in one part of the world have far-reaching effects elsewhere on the planet. Awareness is growing that we live in a world where all of us, and the natural world that sustains us, are profoundly and radically connected.

This interconnection has long been described in Buddhism as *interdependence*, and that term now forms part of conversations far beyond Buddhist contexts. Professionals in diverse fields increasingly find interdependence to be an important framework for explaining what they observe. Environmental scientists find it indispensable for understanding ecosystems, economists apply it to international trade, and social theorists use it to chart the systems that reproduce racial and gender injustice, just to name a few.

Interdependence may be used to explain a great many systems, from the relationships among natural phenomena to groups of people

and nations—in other words, the world around us. But I believe that an understanding of our deep interconnection can do far more than that. Interdependence is not a mere theory or interesting philosophy. It impacts our lives directly every single day. By deepening our awareness of interconnectedness, we can create a far more harmonious and healthy society and live far more satisfying lives. For that to happen, we can't just stop our analysis at the interdependence of the physical world. The human heart and mind—what we might call our inner world—form an integral part of these webs of interdependence.

Inside each of us is a complex constellation of perceptions, ideas, feelings, and intentions that mutually affect one another. Our inner worlds interact with outer conditions to shape the world around us. We respond to external circumstances, but we also create them. In other words, our inner worlds and the outer world are intimately connected, and that interconnection is part of interdependence as well. Recognizing the full extent of interdependence will lead to a fundamental rethinking of who we are as human beings and of our place in the world we help create.

Our inner world is the pivotal domain for bringing about real change in the world that we all share. Neither social nor environmental justice is possible without significant changes in our attitudes and the intentional behavior they give rise to. The transformation of our social and material world must begin within us.

The intellectual awareness we are gaining about interdependence is an important first step. The next—and crucial—step is to gain an emotional awareness of interdependence. We need to *feel* our profound interconnectedness and not just know about it. We have within us numerous qualities that help sustain such an emotional engagement with our interdependence. By enhancing our understanding of the interdependence of our inner world, we become better able to cultivate such qualities.

Once we do, the emotional awareness we have gained will pro-

foundly reorient our relationships to others and our ways of being in the world. We will begin acting in ways that truly reflect our interdependence. When our understanding of interdependence has moved from head to heart and into action, our lives become fully effective and meaningful.

WHY (AND HOW) INTERDEPENDENCE MATTERS

Our interconnectedness matters in all our relationships and in every aspect of our lives. Interdependence is a definite force in the world. It has great value for us. Because of it, we can respond and adapt to circumstances. We can change. We can work toward our goals by gathering the conditions needed to accomplish them. If we were not interdependent, we would be unable to do any of that. Understanding how this fundamental principle works in our lives enables us to consciously reorient our lives and to change the world itself.

Interdependence describes our deep connectedness, but it also explains why and how we are interconnected. We can start by observing that everything in life happens due to various causes and conditions coming together. Interdependence reveals the profound implications of this simple fact. It shows us that everything that exists is a condition that affects others, and is affected in turn, in a vast and complex web of causality. As part of that web, we ourselves are a condition that impacts those around us. That means if we change, so do others.

As we can see, not only is the physical realm intimately interconnected; social systems are also subject to interdependence. So is our emotional life; so is everything, material or immaterial. Once we begin to look for it, we find interdependence no matter where we direct our gaze: from the largest astronomical systems to subtle shifts in our sensations. Interdependence has practical consequences in virtually every sphere of life on this planet. In fact, it has environmental,

economic, social, psychological, and ethical implications that we as a global society have only just begun to fathom.

In the broadest view, the health of our planet depends on our recognizing how interdependence works in the natural world and especially how human actions—greatly amplified by technological advances—are interacting with other forces. On a personal level, our ability to find lasting happiness also depends on understanding how interdependence works within our own life and relationships. In short, the well-being of our global society as well as our individual happiness both depend on our learning how to live fully in tune with our interdependence.

To recognize the workings of interdependence in our inner as well as in the outer world, we must ask some basic questions. How would the way we relate to others change if we began to *feel* our interconnectedness? What human values come to the fore when we acknowledge our interdependence emotionally as well as intellectually? What would a global society that fully embraced interdependence look like? What can we ourselves do to help create that society?

WHAT IS TRULY YOURS?

In Buddhism, applying the view of interdependence leads us to examine the nature of the self, and it challenges how we see ourselves in relation to others. That rethinking transforms how we engage with others, emotionally and in our actions.

We can start by observing our own experience. From the vantage point of interdependence, we can begin to see that our connections to others cannot be severed. Our happiness and suffering are so closely connected to the happiness and suffering of others as to be inseparable. This means that no individual is fully self-sustaining or divisible from others.

To see whether this rings true, reflect on what you are referring

to when you say “I” or “me.” Most likely you will find that you are thinking of yourself as solid and separate, as a truly independent entity. But is there such a thing? When you say “I,” if asked to specify what exactly you are referring to, you will invariably point to your own body. Where else would you point? But this body came from others. Your body developed from cellular material provided by your two biological parents. Without them, it would not have come to exist.

After those cells began dividing, your body formed and grew based on all the nutrients you received. The physical form you have today is the product of what you first received in the womb, followed by a whole lifetime of meals. Those meals were mostly prepared by other people and made of ingredients that come entirely from resources outside of yourself, namely plants and animals. Since there is no such thing as a living body that did not grow based on what it takes in from its environment, nor any human being that did not come from parents, your body is not in reality a separate *you*. It comes from others. Your body exists because of many factors that you think of as other than you. Therefore it is not entirely correct to call it *me*. But neither is it someone other than you.

In my own case, my father is named Karma Dondrup and my mother is Lolaga. My features bear some resemblance to theirs, as my body originates from the combination of their DNA. Basically, I was produced by them, much as a product is produced by a company. You could even say I bear their mark. Unlike an industrial product produced in a factory, our parents do not literally stamp a label or a brand on our body, even if parents do act sometimes as if they held the copyright to their children!

If you cannot point to your body as *me*, what about the other things you think of as *mine*? There is the clothing you wear. It was made by others and acquired from others. Before it was *yours*, you either had to purchase it from somewhere, or someone had to give it to you as a gift. None of us was born wearing clothing. Cotton comes

from plants, wool comes from the body of sheep who had to be forcibly parted from it in order for it to become yours, and synthetic fabrics are produced in factories. Many other human beings and even some animals have a hand in the clothes you now think of as *yours*. Every time you put on clothes, or enjoy a cup of tea or a plate of food, you are witnessing this display of your interdependence, for these are all prepared and served to you by others, directly or indirectly.

All of these things that we think of as *me* and *mine*—our bodies, our clothes, our food, and all our material possessions—come from others. So where is this *I* that is exclusively me? We seem to be left with nothing that is uniquely our own. Yet we still continue to say “I” when it should be evident that 99 percent of what we call *I* is not really I. It is what we usually consider “other.”

The 1 percent you might quibble about is your consciousness. Yet you would have a very hard time arguing that your thoughts are wholly unconnected to others, unless all your thoughts are absolutely original and you think in a language that is unique to you. Not only our ideas, but a great deal of our emotional life and our psychological makeup is very clearly influenced by others and impacted by what goes on around us.

Even were it the case that our basic awareness or consciousness were truly and exclusively ours while perhaps the other 99 percent is not, it is not that 1 percent that we are thinking of primarily when we say “I.” When we say “I,” we mean the entire complex of body and mind. We are referring to the whole package, as it were, and we have seen that 99 percent of that package is what we normally consider to be other—coming from plants and animals, and deeply marked by the presence of many other human beings. After thinking about it in this way—from the viewpoint of interdependence—ask yourself whether there is such a thing as an entirely independent you.

What you think of and hold onto as yourself is actually a product of others; many causes and conditions contributed to the creation

of who you are. But it is not sufficient to simply acknowledge this. Understanding the fact of your interdependence intellectually will not transform your experience. But reflecting in this way deeply is a starting point for cultivating the feelings of our connections to others.

The aim is to be able to feel the extent to which others are extremely important and integral to you and also to gain an emotional awareness that you are never, ever really separate from them. Others are part of you, just as you are part of them. You exist in connection with others. When you see this, you can also see that your happiness and suffering depend upon others. If you think solely in terms of yourself and your own happiness, it simply does not work. There is no happiness without relying upon others.

Once we deeply understand that self and others are not two entirely distinct things—that we are not really separate—many things can change. We will feel a sense of profound connection to other beings, and we will experience their contributions to who we are with gratitude and goodwill. We will see and feel that we simply must consider others’ well-being.

THE WONDER OF BREATHING

We can also extend these feelings of intimate connectedness to our natural environment. Turning our attention to the most basic condition for our life on this planet—the air we breathe—we see that we cannot be separated from our physical environment. Even if we could manage for some time without food or clothing, we cannot survive more than a few minutes without oxygen. A vast number of conditions need to come together to yield the uninterrupted supply of oxygen that is indispensable to keep us alive, yet we ourselves make no conscious effort to bring those conditions about. Contemplating this basic fact can spark a sense of wonder and gratitude toward the planet itself.

What’s more, we ourselves form part of this vast system of