

DEPENDENT CO-ARISING  
Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, April 29, 2018  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

The Buddha originally didn't want to teach. Under the Bodhi tree, there was one aspect of awareness that came clear to him. It was so unique and so profound, he actually felt two things about it. The first was that he had worked so hard for it, perhaps he was now entitled to simply live in his own awareness. In relationship to that thought, he said to himself:

I have penetrated this truth, deep, hard to perceive, hard to understand, calm, sublime, beyond logic, subtle, intelligible only to the wise. But this is a race devoting itself to the things to which it clings... And for such a race this were a matter hard to perceive, to wit, that all co-arises interdependently... and if I were now to teach the truth and other[s] did not acknowledge it to me, that would be wearisome, that would be hurtful to me... This that through many toils I've won – enough! Why should I make it known? <sup>1</sup>

This most profound truth, which most significantly distinguishes Buddhism from other traditions – did you catch it? It is simply this, and yet not at all simple: all co-arises interdependently. **All. Co-arises. Interdependently.**

This truth was the kernel from which Gautama Siddhartha's enlightenment arose. It is easy to say. It is not easy to understand or integrate as a foundational principle for life. All - not some things, but all, everything from thought to action to experience to what we call physical matter - all co-arises. Not one thing causes another, and then that causes something else. No. All co-arises. The Buddha described it like this: "This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that becomes not; from the ceasing of this, that ceases." <sup>2</sup>

We are so used to thinking in terms of causality. Because this moved, that is moved. Because this, that. This is not dependent co-arising. Joanne Macy explains the distinction like this, "...things do not produce each other or make each other happen, as in linear causality; they help each other to happen by providing occasion or locus or context, and in doing so, they in turn are affected. There is a morality here, a reciprocal dynamic. Power adheres not in any entity, but in the relationship between entities." <sup>3</sup>

This came clear to me one day, when someone I was close to in seminary said to me, "Our relationship is its own thing. It isn't the sum of what you do and what I do; it's what happens between us." Suddenly, I understood the distinction. Not me alone and him alone, trading and acting and reacting, but each inter-acting, and then the relationship is formed and transforms each of us. We are affecting and affected, and between us, something new is formed that affects not merely us, but also our community, our studies, the future itself. All. Co-arises. Interdependently.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Macy, Joanne. *World as Lover, World as Self*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, Ca., 1991. P. 97

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

Modern systems theory in science proves this out. We have been so steeped in thinking dualistically and mechanically that it can be hard to shift. What we've discovered is not that things arise independently or exist in a simple chain, but they quite literally co-arise. Donella Meadows, the ecologist and author, put it this way, "You think because you understand one you must understand two, because one and one makes two. But you must also understand and."

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Wheatley, author of the transformative book, *Leadership and the New Science* says:

The quantum mechanical view of reality startles us out of common notions of what is real. Even to scientists, it is admittedly bizarre. In the quantum world, relationship is the key determiner of everything. Subatomic particles come into form and are observed only as they are in relationship to something else. They do not exist as independent "things." There are no basic "building blocks." Quantum physics paints a strange yet enticing view of a world that, as Heisenberg characterized it, "appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole ." These unseen connections between what were previously thought to be separate entities are the fundamental ingredient of all creation.<sup>5</sup>

To my mind, there is no theological point I could make that could possibly be more relevant to us. All. Co-arises. Interdependently. What we do and do not do matters. How we love, our anger, our joy, our relationships with one another and the world we live in matter. If we are non-theist, this is just as important as if we believe that God is. In either case, we matter, what we do and how we do it matters, and our relationships with the living world matter.

Let me give you an example of interdependent thinking and design in action. One of my great heroes of our age is William McDonough. His company is based in Charlottesville, Virginia, so he was a next-city neighbor when we lived in Roanoke. But he is also one of the most important thinkers alive on the planet today. McDonough has understood interdependence for many years. As a designer and architect, he has fully integrated the idea of interdependent co-arising into his work. One of his first process designs was at a Swiss carpet manufacturing plant. You may already know that the production of traditional carpets is one of the most toxic we have. Here's how McDonough described what happened:

[At the Rohner textile plant in Switzerland] we designed a fabric safe enough to eat. The manufacturing process uses no mutagens, carcinogens, endocrine disrupters, heavy-metal contaminants or chemicals that cause ozone depletion, allergies, skin desensitization or plant and fish toxicity. We screened 8,000 commonly used chemicals and ended up with 38. When inspectors measured the effluent water, they thought their instruments were broken. The water was as clean as Swiss drinking water. A garden club started using the waste trimmings as mulch. Workers no longer had to wear protective clothing. And it eliminated regulatory paperwork, so they've reduced the cost of production by 20 percent. Why spend money on paperwork, when you can spend it delivering service or paying your workers a living wage?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science*. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, Ca, 1999. p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> From "Designing the Future," *Newsweek Magazine*, May 16, 2005.

McDonough and company are currently working with China on new living systems:

The China Housing Industry Association has the responsibility for building housing for 400 million people in the next 12 years. We're working with them to design seven new cities. We're identifying building materials of the future, such as a new polystyrene from BASF [with no noxious chemicals]. It can be used to build walls that are strong, lightweight and superinsulating. The building can be heated and cooled for next to nothing. And it's silent. If there are 13 people in the apartment upstairs, you won't hear them. We've designed a luxurious new toilet. The bowl is like a lotus leaf—so smooth, axle grease slips right off. Nothing sticks to it, including bacteria. A light mist when you're done will be enough to flush it, so you won't use lots of water. We'll have bamboo wetlands nearby to purify the waste—and the bamboo, which grows a foot a day, can be harvested and used for wood.<sup>7</sup>

Design that respects the interdependent nature of reality extends to every level in McDonough's design: healthy people and living systems, thriving economies, just politics and abundance-orientation. McDonough loves to point out that nature is extravagant and prolific; he believes that with the right orientation, we can be, too, and in harmony with living systems, not destructive of and to them.

In the end, the Buddha's great compassion compelled him to teach the truth of co-arising interdependence; and his first convert was Kondanna, who "got it." By great effort in spirituality or science, the truth emerges. As a biased observer, I would like to point out that the Buddha figured this out about about 2500 years before science "proved" it.

So what does all of this mean for us? It means we should attend carefully and intentionally attend to our relationships; our relationships with one another and life itself. Each small part of our living system exists within the context of larger patterns; each action has not a linear but rather a ripple effect. Let me pause here and share a few images that illustrate different ways of considering co-arising interdependence and the holistic nature of reality – the all in One and the One in all. If we think beyond ourselves and our narrow focus on our own joy and suffering, if we reach out and engage one another creatively, with a goal of creating good for "all the children of all species for all time," as McDonough says, we can embrace dependent co-arising with joy, make it a living principle in our own lives.

Our relationships matter. We co-arise interdependently. What we pay attention to, honor, embrace, celebrate makes a difference, just as does our disregard or carelessness toward one another. So, it matters that we choose to care deeply about one another. It is strengthened when we begin any gathering in this church with a chalice lighting, with listening deeply to one another about how we are doing in our lives, when we keep in mind that even the work we do is, in the most important sense, spiritual development and the creation of Beloved Community. From choosing how to arrange a room to calculating a budget to deciding what to teach our children, the work we do is meant to help us love one another and live out the true gifts of our hearts. All the rest is just detail. Maybe important detail, but it is not the meaningful heart of the why we are working.

Co-arising interdependently. Understanding "and." This idea was so significant that the Buddha almost chose not to teach. He felt he would despair if people could not recognize that all is

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 58

interdependent; that in what happens between us all possibilities come into being and pass from being. Quantum physics, which is the science, which reflects on this great truth, is so complex that very few study it. But we have the capacity to understand and embrace this great truth. What we love, how we commit, who we are together does matter. Whether we show up to gather with others or remain alone matters. Whether we tend to the interdependent web of life or ignore it, matters, it has effect. Let us choose to rise together in love, in respect, in gratitude for work given and received.

*Namaste, amen, ashe, blessed be.*