

Why is Insight into Dependent Origination and Emptiness Important?

Please bear with me as we try to approach this topic by a somewhat round-about route, going via what I believe are some first principles. This approach not only gives a plausible overview of how I think we got to where we are, but also indicates that there is nothing strange or really unexpected in the difficulties we humans find ourselves in. It points to the need to urgently re-assess our beliefs and our thinking - or more accurately, to reflect on the degree to which we take them to be the truth and consequently act with a feeling of impunity that is actually based in ignorance...

My potted view of how we got here

We are told the pace of change is increasing - technological change, fast evolving (or devolving) societal mores, medical and scientific knowledge are all growing exponentially. Most of us don't need to be told about this change. We feel either excitedly swept up in it or reluctantly swept along by it – often an anxious mix of both.

We can feel both connected to more people than was ever possible before - but may also feel more isolated in the midst of a society that perhaps seems alien, superficial and unwelcoming. Many of us, in this affluent western culture, are better off and more secure than humanity has ever been. Yet, for many, there is a deep sense of foreboding and a sense also that some essential humanness of scale and warmth of fellow feeling is unnourished and withering.

Moving at the speed of modern life there is hardly time to look beyond the immediate consumer horizon and ask where we are progressing to – let alone enquire into what is urging us on. Many people recognise this finite world has reached the point at which it can no longer meet the increasing human demand for resources without compromising the equilibrium of the whole biosphere upon which we depend. Still, to a greater or lesser degree you and I, along with the majority, are pressed forward by the hype and hollow promise that more acquisition means a better life with greater security.

What is happening? Will the ancient scourges of famine, war or pestilence reappear to reap a grim retribution as the delicately balanced networks supporting modern civilisation come under increasing pressure? And if they do come again, or even if there is a reasonable

possibility of their return, what does that say about our notions of human progress, this vast knowledge and power that we have placed so much faith in?

Hasn't humanity, society, always been like this? Has not each individual, apart from a few exceptions, always been driven by a blind grasping for greater self security through possession and power? The focus of that striving is always self-centred; me, my family, my tribe or group, my country... Even though we know we must share this small planet with many other sentient beings and that most of them have less resources and power than we have, still we are not satisfied and content with the bounty we possess.

Inevitably, I think, we must be drawn to the conclusion that the nub of the problem lies with us: with you and me. It is a factor of the 'human condition': our basic instincts and psychology. Even with enlightened leadership, political solutions to the many problems we face rely on the support and far sightedness of the individuals within the society - because in democracies we do, for the most part, get the politicians we deserve.

I mentioned above that there were some people who were exceptions to the rule of being governed by a self obsessed, greed-bound approach to living; there are others who relish it and immerse themselves in it totally. We are all on this spectrum somewhere and probably at different places at various times throughout our lives. Human action is conditioned by, and in spite of, underlying biological tendencies. I do not believe these tendencies inevitably rule the actions of any intelligent individual: we always have the capacity to reflect, to grow and to change our thinking and actions. As it is individuals that make up our society and this human family, a personal shift in values and priorities inevitably influences society as a whole. Therefore we each have a responsibility to consider our intentions and whether or not the way we conduct ourselves is contributing to a more sustainable and harmonious world.

Let me speculate somewhat on two fundamental motivational influences, still with us today, that could be called the nature and nurture of human behaviour:

Nature

We can think back to what it may have been like for our ancestors to live in hostile and unpredictable environments in an extended family or a small tribal group. Family and tribal loyalty would have been of great importance. But, ultimately, to be a fully contributing

member of the group you would have to prioritise your own health and fitness. Personal and cooperative aggression in hunting, in defence of kin and protection of hard won resources would have been vital and survival paramount. People with initiative, cleverness, even cunning would have been important and perhaps genetically favoured. Caring and benign characteristics would have been extremely valuable too – but I think it most likely that, as still very evident today, energetic self-interest would determine many actions.

Humans are not particularly strong or fast, thick skinned or protected, we have no camouflage and our bodies sport no formidable weapons - but our big brain has given us unique advantages including the ability to remember, conceptualise, label, categorise and therefore to reason. The application of that reasoning has delivered immense power. To reason is to think in abstractions which are, necessarily, concepts and ideas: a story that is trimmed to a shorthand form – and therefore a distorted version – of what we are actually present to. Reasoning, as abstract thinking, needs a container to hold the concepts and some kind of assumed static focus around which these concepts can be ordered or laid out in a logical and essentially linear way. This is in contrast to perhaps the more expansive thinking processes that can be expressed in the creative arts. The containers we use for reasoning and communicating the resulting beliefs and views are words. In order to wrangle the many ideas and nuances contained within the storm of ideas as words into a coherent and convincing narrative, there is a need for a ‘lingua franca’ or consensus reality, and some central focal point around which the narrative can revolve. These references - which are typically taken for granted - make up a compound containing a ‘me’ entity, a time framework and a mutually agreed ‘world view’. They form a platform giving us the unquestioned ground upon which our mind(s), individually and collectively, can build a whole edifice of apparent certainty and security. We consequently put enormous effort into maintaining and grooming our sense of self and our perceptions of the world. Likewise the passage of time further locates us in the mind’s image, confirming our identity by giving us seeming continuity and, vitally, promises us a future where we will continue to exist.

Subconsciously aware of our physical fragility, our aggressive nature, and the potential for harm that resides in others as well as in the unpredictable world around us, we carry around an inherent fear and the need for some sense of security to relieve that fear. We cannot feel relaxed or content when this fear, expressed as anxiety, pervades our mind. We go to extraordinary lengths to find respite, not just from the big fears but also the very minor ones

which are experienced as the smallest discomfort. Biologically we are attuned to feel the slightest pleasure and pain and to move toward or away in response – most of the time not knowing that we have moved or what the prompt was. So on we go endlessly controlling as many facets of our environment as we can. This is all very natural and probably played an important role in our evolution and continued existence as a species. But times are changing. So well has this stance served us that we are rarely aware of it running in the background – even more rarely do we question where it is taking us. At this point in human evolution, we need to be examining to what extent this fixation on personal security has indeed lead us astray and what is a path that now would better serve us – us, and our environment.

Consideration should also be given to what perceptive price is paid when, through assumption and habit, we elevate our familiar mental abstractions into the dominant, or only, paradigm through which we are comfortable relating to the world. Creation of unchallenged mental abstractions means that basic information from our senses is mediated and interpreted, labelled and categorised, and then fitted into our preconceived world map – again mostly without us being aware this is taking place. The opportunity to see clearly and understand afresh is lost. Here many potentially harmful distortions of view can arise. The world appears populated with things and dualities including that most primary ‘self / other’ duality. Having been mentally separated and fragmented, things are conceptually drawn back together into a familiar pattern that has meaning for us or fits with the conventions to which we subscribe.

Once integrated into this map of the known, we feel on steadier ground again and can act with some certainty. This condensing but distorting process has the advantage of allowing fast judgements of a given situation so that we can quickly respond from a range of learned or habitual patterns to protect our self-interest. However there is also a narrowing of view and nuance that binds the mind and our actions. Sometimes we hold so tightly to the known that we cannot recognise a novel situation demanding a new response. We may feel paralysed or agitated, fearful or filled with anger. To cope we may become aggressively reactive, detached and shut down or be neurotically goal-driven.

Our ‘natural’ way of meeting the world is partly via instinctive reaction and partly through conditioned thought processes, both of which normally manifest without our awareness or reflection. Both can also be easily overplayed to the detriment of ourselves and others - and can lead us, via rash and unskilful behaviour, into very dangerous territory indeed. Humans

are varied and complex and in this big brain many things are happening. I have focused on only some aspects of thought and behaviour and not followed where imagination, creativity and curiosity or other ways of connecting may take us. From the very beginning there must also have been these and other factors in play: factors that could either moderate or stimulate this deeply patterned way of being – sometimes reducing suffering, sometimes increasing it. Here I am talking about cultural influences, about nurture.

Nurture

From birth we are subject to the moulding and conditioning influence of others and our environment. Our parents raise us, not only providing for our physical needs, but also teaching us to function within and respond to the norms of the society. Likewise, adults are continually guided or, if necessary, forced into some semblance of cultural conformation. Laws and norms, at the cost of some personal expression, enable groups of people to live together and work towards common goals by sharing similar values. Culture also curbs ‘aberrant’ traits and behaviours so that the central cohesiveness of the society is not threatened or its energy dissipated. Differing societies have developed diverse ways of achieving these goals but they all result in a broadly accepted order that, to a greater or lesser degree, subsume the individual within the society and insist that transgressions carry a penalty.

I have spoken about the ‘self’ acting as the centre of reference for all thought and action and there are advantages and disadvantages that go along with this. Often in reaction to inner insecurity a strong desire for power and possessions arises. The resulting impulses and actions are moderated by having forceful cultural checks in place, checks that comprise not only explicit laws that could be secretly flouted, but also uncoded or implicit expectations akin to an accepted natural order. Like the echo of a parental voice, cultural expectations gradually become part of the character of a person and impose a form of self-censorship.

In times past these checks were very strong and multilayered. They may be hierarchical like religious edicts, class or educational snobbery or a sense of position and place based on wealth and occupation. In a less fluid and more predictable world order they also, in themselves, gave some basic sense of security and the sense of having a rightful place in which one could take some pride. Ambitions were constrained by money, knowledge and

literacy. Of course not everyone was sufficiently constrained to keep the lid on things entirely. Wars, crime and inhuman treatment of the others were still rife - indicating that although guidance through nurture may reduce misdirected self-interest, it certainly does not eliminate it, or address its causation. Further, cultural limitations do little to engender human freedom of either body or mind, offering little more than a veneer of security behind which people attempt to live tolerably at ease and without too much reflective thought.

Coming to the present time we find many of the old cultural checks severely weakened or gone altogether. Past societies, like the Romans, have fallen victim to their own affluence and excesses but surely modern western culture must be in a class of its own here. Self interest and a sense of personal entitlement without effective ethical limit courses through the veins of this society and is eagerly grasped after by other 'less fortunate' societies across the globe. They - like us - are pumped up by reckless marketing and the promise of a consumerist utopia. Understandably, in this globalising village, they also want the creature comforts, the feeling of material security that we have taken for granted in recent years. Everyone (almost) wants access to the latest technology, to social media, to travel and opportunity, to the world market of goods and labour. The catch cry of the modern day could be: forget hierarchy, forget religion and constraints, forget even close personal relationships and commitment – give me freedom of choice, give me unbridled self expression, give me self indulgence! Seemingly we are becoming more precious about 'me' and 'my image', more intolerant of the slightest discomfort - and much less capable and resilient. Instead of developing the expected wisdom of adulthood, there seems to be a pernicious regression from reason and tolerance to adolescent impetuosity.

Like our forebears, we are acting from an unquestioned belief in a core self and the resulting thirst to make 'myself' as secure as possible is our primary driver. Unfortunately these drivers play out as intolerance, aggression and suffering. They are ecologically devastatingly when let loose by a modern society with its riches and so many players in the game. Is there really security in self-indulgence? Can we ever indulge enough and gather to ourselves sufficient 'stuff' to finally rest and say 'at last I am home'? Desire of this type is like an addiction, the more it is indulged the greater the need becomes and the more people commit to the endless striving. The more we become trapped in the unhappiness and suffering generated by unbridled grasping, the more fragmented the human family and the more precarious the future becomes – for ourselves and the all creatures. Again, remembering those basic human urges,

this trend is not really surprising - but, now more than ever as this horror unfolds before us, we need to reflect upon our personal views and actions and how well they are serving us and the other sentient beings with which we share this planet? Governments that are constituted to act wisely on behalf of the people are trapped in short-term thinking and their own partisan agendas. They are also being pushed to the margins by financially massive and increasingly politically powerful multinational interests. We cannot rely on governments alone to save this fragile environment from buckling under human pressure, to resolve the resource conflicts that will arise, or avert a climatic catastrophe. We must also overcome our own inertia, move out of our comfort zones, and look inwardly as well as outwardly for guidance along a skilful course of personal actions.

Dependent Origination and Emptiness

Now, I want to look into where the notions of, and the need for, insight into dependent origination and emptiness fit into the quest to live an ethical and skilful life that minimises suffering.

I have painted a largely pessimistic picture of the modern personal and collective state of being. These conditions have been brought about by a way of thinking and understanding that cannot fully address the problems before us. However, let me reiterate that I see this way of thinking and being as entirely unsurprising – it is dependently arisen. There is no need to get into a moral panic or to judge ourselves harshly for past actions, but there is a most urgent need to review our patterned thinking and behaviour and act appropriately now.

It seems alternate ways must be found to constrain our egotism and that those methods must be largely self-constraints. Founded on external injunctions, the nurture path to restraint - while having a real role - has been tried over and over in many guises and has proved wholly inadequate as a complete solution. The Buddha spoke of these matters over 2500 years ago. He wanted to reduce suffering (dukkha) in the world then, and it is the fundamentally unchanged human thinking is the root of our suffering today. One reason we are facing such similar human issues today as the Buddha confronted - despite the plethora of laws, rules and regulations - is that most people will rationally change anything external and go to great lengths to modify their behaviour if the pressure is high enough, but they are unable to penetrate to the core of the problem within their own thinking and perceptions.

Consequently people may create wonderful intentions, plans and strategies to change themselves and address the woes of the world, but at some point these will conflict with the deep self-motivated urges that arise again and again. A mind that is divided cannot rest - and even with the most determined force of will, good intentions are eroded over time. We become exhausted with internal struggle and mostly give in to habit and some version of our old way of being - however inappropriate the fit with current circumstances may be. The dualistic notion of 'me' and the 'world as I perceive' is maintained within us as the default view. It is an absolutist view based in the unquestioned, or at least unchallenged, notion of the rigidity of boundaries and the consequent separation of all that exists into a world of things. The gap between what I have and what I want remains as wide as ever. And the insatiable desire to be rid of that gap - which is our suffering - hounds us relentlessly. Driven in this way by ignorance, generations come and go: millennia will pass with no real changes at the deepest level of the human psyche. We, and this earth we cherish, are running out of time. How can we find release from this destructive way of thinking? What insights are needed to see through the ignorance and come to an understanding - where the sweetness of peace of mind can be found? Not yearning for a utopian blissed-out-forever-after state of mind, but an understanding that frees us of those ancient shackles and enables us to meet life fully - and act skilfully in a way that meaningfully reduces suffering, regardless of whether any final goal is ever reached. All genuine efforts to make the world a better place are valuable, but I think it is toward this most fundamental level of reflection and inner reimagining that those who feel drawn should apply themselves.

We must release ourselves from the obsessive preoccupation of securing the 'self' – this over wrought image of who we are and its primacy. There are two crucial understandings that melt away distorted notions of 'myself' and the assumptions typically built into the way we perceive the world. Expressed from a Buddhist perspective these are the Dependent Origination and Emptiness teachings.

Understanding Dependent Origination facilitates change in view at a deep level by revealing how our conventional perceptions are generated. In particular it demonstrates that they are rooted in a fundamental ignorance of the true nature of things ... and takes us on a journey that shows how this ignorance then generates a cascade of feelings, assumptions and beliefs that produce a distorted, dualistic view of who 'I' am and 'my' relationship to all around

‘me’: a view that deludes us into mentally solidifying that which is impermanent and ever changing, inevitably producing a fear of loss and reactivity at its core.

Insight into the Empty nature of things in some ways follows from an understanding of Dependent Origination and but may be misunderstood as a mere abstract idea. This would be a mistake: emptiness is not an abstraction or any other form of conceptualisation. Rather this understanding offers an infinite container in which all may float, the conceptual and the ineffable, without a shadow of conflict. Our mind made substance and meaning is revealed as just that: ultimately mind-made and utterly insubstantial. There need be no dismissal of, or friction with, the conventional relative world populated with things. But grasping - caused by beliefs about the gaining, retaining or loss of material and non-material ‘things’ - is ultimately completely burnt away and the age-old striving to become, assert and defend fades away also.

At times it may well be confronting and difficult to question basic notions and conceptual beliefs around the nature of this entity ‘myself’ in relationship to the objectified ‘other’. However it is through a compassionate yet thorough exploration of our views and what we are holding on to, that can bring about a loosening of personal attachments. Often inner work at this level is hard going, requiring courage and persistence in our practise and in our daily lives. However I am not encouraging engagement in some battle here – that would only amplify the ego and its judgements further and cause more fragmentation. The courage and persistence asked for is in the bringing of love, compassion and a lightness of touch - thereby letting go of harsh judgements when difficulties arise. Maintaining the conviction, enquire deeply - while cultivating a quality of mind that supports curiosity, experimentation, humour and playfulness. This helps loosen any fearfulness and clinging, so creating spacious mind states in which deeper insights can manifest. After all, the purpose of this work is to tangibly reduce inner and outer suffering, and avoid falling victim to apathy or tying ourselves in knots of despair.

Insights into how things dependently arise and into their empty nature are not mere spiritual concepts or intellectual trophies, but can reduce suffering in a real way. They bring a freeing of the mind as well as an openness and pliability of response to any situation. They can bring much peace of mind, joy, kindness and love into daily life.

I contend that if this world is to really change for the better, then acknowledgement of and insight into harm-causing behavioural patterns and their compassionate redress are vital: a very different and less harmful resolution of the yearning for security needs to be discovered within each of us and made foundational to our lives. And so it behoves us all who have an interest or inkling of awareness around these matters to continue to develop still deeper insights and use those understandings to guide our speech, actions and livelihood.

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