



Dependent Arising and Coronavirus

By Dhivan

It has been hard to avoid war metaphors in relation to COVID-19. We're *at war* with the virus; everyone is enlisted in the *fight*, to help those at the *front line*. There is no easing of restrictions while we have not yet *won the battle*. We pay tribute to the *fallen*; let's not squander the *sacrifice* of those who have died; we gird ourselves against *defeat*. War metaphors are potent and stirring, and easy to reach for in times such as these. But they are completely inappropriate. Coronavirus is not an enemy but a pathogen. This will be no comfort for the ill or bereaved, but our metaphors are the mood music of our thoughts. It would be better to imagine COVID-19 as a *natural disaster*, like a storm or a flood, and as deadly and dangerous. You don't fight nature, but learn to live with it.

In April I was supposed to lead a study and practice retreat on the theme of Dependent Arising, at Dhanakosa retreat centre in Scotland. As I walked in the woods instead of leading that retreat, I've thought about the dependent arising of coronavirus. The Buddha's teaching of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, or 'dependent arising', mainly concerns the way experience works: how unsatisfactoriness arises, and how it ceases through the practice of the way to awakening. But dependent arising is, more broadly, a naturalistic principle, explaining the way the world works without recourse to God or fate. How does a viral pandemic fit into a naturalistic Buddhist worldview? Is coronavirus some kind of karmic consequence of human hubris?

Not at all. In the ancient Indian context in which the Buddha's teaching arose, philosophical discussions about how the world worked revolved around the nature of the relationship between action (*karma*) and result (*phala*). Based on observation, inference and speculation, some held to determinism (*niyativāda*), the view that what happened in the past determines destiny. Others held to indeterminism (*yadṛcchāvāda*), the view that things

happen by chance, without reference to the past. The Buddha explicitly positioned his teaching of dependent arising between these extreme views. It is the teaching that what happens is neither determined by past actions, nor without a cause, but instead that everything happens due to causes and conditions. We could call this view non-deterministic conditionality.

It is relevant for considering a broadly Buddhist view on the very possibility of a coronavirus. According to the best explanation now around, self-reflexive human consciousness, capable of love and wisdom as well as much worse, has evolved through natural selection over millennia. The web of conditions at work in the world is evidently capable of producing something as miraculous as the human brain. Likewise the coronavirus. I would speculate that it is the very same creative openness in the fine weave of conditionality that makes room for the blind half-alive striving of a virus to survive, as it makes possible the dense folds of the cortex that somehow give rise to mind.

For this kind of reason, the Buddha taught the first noble truth, that there is unsatisfactoriness (*duḥkha*). The situation is such that conditioned existence is imperfect. There is this precious human existence and there are viral pandemics. But this is not the end of the Buddha's teaching. The second noble truth is that this unsatisfactoriness has an origin, which is craving (*tṛṣṇā*). This little word 'craving' does a lot of work in Buddhist doctrine. It stands for everything that goes on in experience which takes for granted that there is an 'I', a 'self', a 'me' and a 'mine', a really existing subject of experience, who believes in his or her own thoughts about what is going on. The word 'craving' also stands for the root afflictions of greed, hostility and confusion, which are evolved emotional and cognitive distortions of our experience. According to this way of thinking, the problem with reality is how to relate to it based on a distorted perspective.

Egocentricity and distortion manifest in thoughts about how lucky one is not to have the virus, or how unlucky one has been to catch it. They also manifest in frustration at no longer being able to do what one wants, and also in the idea of waging a war against germs. The third noble truth is that things that arise on causes and conditions cease when their causes and conditions cease. The fourth truth is the eightfold path. The first part of the path is right view. This might mean paying attention to the way the creativity of life, the very source of this conscious awareness that can appreciate beauty, is at the same time the source of the virus leaping from bats to pangolins to us. There is room for some insight here into the contrary tendencies of our untamed emotionality and raw egotism. Such insight can bring letting go, and letting life be. Then there is room for compassion for all beings, all striving for happiness in the same mixed conditions as us.

Up against a deadly virus, we may fear for our lives. The Buddhist attitude towards the situation is illustrated in a contrast between two poems. First, Dylan Thomas' famous villanelle, 'Do Not Go Gentle'. The poet stands firm in the land of the living, evoking a heroic resistance to the dire threat of death:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

It's brave and somehow honourable, but it has made death into an enemy. The other poem is Rumi's 'What Have I Ever Lost By Dying?', in a version by Robert Bly:

I lived for hundreds of thousands of years as a mineral,
And then I died and was reborn as a plant.

I lived for hundreds of thousands of years as a plant,
And then I died and was reborn as an animal.

I lived for hundreds of thousands of years as an animal,
And then I died and was reborn as a human being.

What have I ever lost by dying?

Rumi's attitude is one of an ecstatic self-surrender to a bigger process at work. This is no excuse for passivity. Rather, it is a call to ride the creativity of the situation into whatever comes next.

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