Awakening to the Interconnectedness of Life

SGI-USA August 2020 Discussion Meeting
The Buddhist View on the Interconnectedness of Life

When individuals cannot grasp or appreciate their connections with others, it gives rise to a sense of isolation, mistrust, hostility or apathy. It leads to a society based upon fragile human relationships ...

Discrimination in any form can be seen as a symptom of what Buddhism regards as the human tendency to create division and fractures based on superficial distinctions.

- August 2020 Living Buddhism, p. 14
“In its essence, discrimination is the act of throwing up barriers of difference among the phenomena that fill the universe and establishing a hierarchy of value, thus breaking the bonds that link and connect all things. This is then used to justify oppression and exploitation; as such, it must be condemned as a desecration of the sanctity of life itself.”

- Ikeda Sensei, 2001 Peace Proposal
Key Points

1. What is the Buddhist view on the interconnectedness of all life?

2. The "greater self" comprehends being an integral part of the web of life.

3. We restore the dignity of life through dialogue.
The Buddhist View on the Interconnectedness of Life

The fundamental Buddhist concept of dependent origination teaches that, at the most profound level, all life is interconnected—that nothing exists in isolation. Simply put, it means that the real nature of individuals or events can only be correctly understood in the context of their connections with others.

- August Living Buddhism, p. 14
The Buddhist View on the Interconnectedness of Life

“One of the most important Buddhist concepts, dependent origination, holds that all beings and phenomena exist or occur in relation to other beings or phenomena.”

“No person or thing exists in isolation. Every being functions to create the environment that sustains all other existences. All things are mutually supporting and interrelated, forming a living cosmos, what modern philosophy might term a semantic whole. That is the conceptual framework through which Mahayana Buddhism views the natural universe.”
The “Greater Self” Comprehends Being an Integral Part of the Web of Life

Breaking free from patterns of division, hatred, discrimination and mistrust requires a strenuous spiritual effort. ...

Buddhism teaches that because of life’s profound interdependence, the sufferings of others are also our own. Thus, the work of helping others develop their highest potential is integral to developing this potential in ourselves. Conversely, by harming others, we also harm ourselves. This view of life makes it impossible to build our happiness on the suffering of others.

- August Living Buddhism, pp. 14–15
Restoring the Dignity of Life Through Dialogue

“Dialogue starts from the courageous willingness to know and be known by others. It is the painstaking and persistent effort to remove all obstacles that obscure our common humanity. Genuine dialogue is a ceaseless and profound spiritual exertion that seeks to effect a fundamental human transformation in both ourselves and others. Dialogue challenges us to confront and transform the destructive impulses inherent in human life.”

- Sensei, Sept. 28, 2007, World Tribune, p. 2
Most needed today is dialogue that helps us to reflect on our own beliefs and presumptions, and challenges us to transform the inner biases that make it easy to identify people as “the other,” as separate or different from us. Through such discussion, we break barriers and develop a new level of humanity.

- August 2020, *Living Buddhism*, p. 16
Brief Experience in Faith
The Bodhisattva Way Enables Us to Benefit Both Ourselves and Others

“When we look after and care for others—that is, help others draw forth their life force—our own life force increases. When we help people expand their state of life, our state of life also expands. That is the wonderful thing about the bodhisattva way. The practice for benefiting others is one and the same with the practice for benefiting ourselves.”

Discussion Questions

1. How can the Buddhist principle of dependent origination change our perspectives through times of divisiveness and disunity?

2. Sensei says that true dialogue helps us reflect on our own biases and prejudices, which results in the fundamental transformation of both ourselves and others. What prevents you from connecting with those you feel are different from yourself?

3. Can you share about a time when you were able to have a dialogue with someone you felt was different from you or held different beliefs? What did you learn?
August 2020 Discussion Meeting Presentation Notes

Theme: “Awakening to the Interconnectedness of Life”

Slide 1:

- Welcome and thank you for joining today's meeting!!
- The theme for today’s discussion is “Awakening to the interconnectedness of Life.”
- Given the divisive nature of the times and the prevailing tendency to separate and treat people differently based on race or other aspects of their identity, today, we will discuss the Buddhist view on the interconnectedness of life and the implications of living with this belief.
- I believe this is a pertinent topic for today and I hope we can all share openly and honestly during the discussion part of the meeting.
- Now, let's get started!

Slide 2:

- First, let's begin by sharing the importance of understanding the concept of the interconnectedness of life (dependent origination) by asking, what happens when we do not see all things as being interconnected?
- When individuals cannot grasp or appreciate their connections with others, it gives rise to a sense of isolation, mistrust, hostility or apathy. It leads to a society based upon fragile human relationships ... Discrimination in any form can be seen as a symptom of what Buddhism regards as the human tendency to create division and fractures based on superficial distinctions.

Slide 3:

- Expanding on discrimination, Sensei explains: “In its essence, discrimination is the act of throwing up barriers of difference among the phenomena that fill the universe and establishing a hierarchy of value, thus breaking the bonds that link and connect all things. This is then used to justify oppression and exploitation; as such, it must be condemned as a desecration of the sanctity of life itself.”

Slide 4:

- We have 3 key points for today's presentation.
• They are:
  1. What is the Buddhist view on the interconnectedness of all life?
  2. The “greater self” comprehends being an integral part of the web of life.
  3. We restore the dignity of life through dialogue.

Slide 5:
• What is the Buddhist view on the interconnectedness of life?
• The fundamental Buddhist concept of dependent origination teaches that, at the most profound level, all life is interconnected, that nothing exists in isolation. Simply put, it means that the real nature of individuals or events can only be correctly understood in the context of their connections with others.

Slide 6:
• Ikeda Sensei elaborates on the Buddhist principle of dependent origination during his lectures at Harvard University in 1991 & 1993.
• He says: “One of the most important Buddhist concepts, dependent origination, holds that all beings and phenomena exist or occur in relation to other beings or phenomena.”
• And “No person or thing exists in isolation. Every being functions to create the environment that sustains all other existences. All things are mutually supporting and interrelated, forming a living cosmos, what modern philosophy might term a semantic whole. That is the conceptual framework through which Mahayana Buddhism views the natural universe.”

Slide 7:
• If we believe in the interconnectedness of all life, we can see other people’s suffering as our own. Yet, to comprehend the web of life, we must put in serious focus on our Buddhist practice and functioning from our “greater self.”
• “Breaking free from patterns of division, hatred, discrimination and mistrust requires a strenuous spiritual effort. ... Buddhism teaches that because of life’s profound interdependence, the sufferings of others are also our own. Thus, the work of helping others develop their highest potential is integral to developing this potential in ourselves. Conversely, by harming others, we also harm ourselves. This view of life makes it impossible to build our happiness on the suffering of others.”
In summary, it can be said that I owe my existence to your existence. I could not be here without your existence. Furthermore, it tells us that my happiness depends on your happiness and vice versa because we are interconnected. Buddhism teaches that I can never become happy just by taking care of myself, or, conversely, by hurting you. This is why Buddhism rejects racism and any form of denigration of human life based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, etc.

Slide 8:

- In Buddhism, we emphasize dialogue as the means through which we can restore the dignity of human life. Dialogue is a practical tool we can use to actualize our belief in the interconnectedness of all life.
- About dialogue, Sensei says: “Dialogue starts from the courageous willingness to know and be known by others. It is the painstaking and persistent effort to remove all obstacles that obscure our common humanity. Genuine dialogue is a ceaseless and profound spiritual exertion that seeks to effect a fundamental human transformation in both ourselves and others. Dialogue challenges us to confront and transform the destructive impulses inherent in human life.”

Slide 9:

- What kind of dialogue is needed today?
- Buddhism teaches that in these crucial times, the most important thing is to unite and bridge the divisiveness that exists between people.
- The dialogues that we need to have are perhaps difficult dialogues with people of opposing views, but this is the only way to transform the division, hatred and mistrust that lies within the human heart. Sensei teaches us that true dialogue results in the transformation of both parties involved.
- “Most needed today is dialogue that helps us to reflect on our own beliefs and presumptions, and challenges us to transform the inner biases that make it easy to identify people as “the other,” as separate or different from us. Through such discussion, we break barriers and develop a new level of humanity.”

Slide 10:

**optional slide, please share a brief experience related to this topic.**
Slide 11:

- Because of the interconnectedness of life, we gain tremendous benefit from supporting other people.

- Sensei says: “When we look after and care for others—that is, help others draw forth their life force—our own life force increases. When we help people expand their state of life, our state of life also expands. That is the wonderful thing about the bodhisattva way. The practice for benefiting others is one and the same with the practice for benefiting ourselves.”

- At this crucial time when so many people are seeking, the greatest way we can contribute to their happiness, and our happiness too, is by sharing this hope-filled philosophy of Buddhism with them.

Slide 12:

- Now let’s discuss!! (please feel free to use the Zoom breakout rooms)

- Please use these questions as a starting point.

- Thank you!