

Nurturing the Intelligent Heart | Part One

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Absolute Bodhicitta

Absolute bodhicitta refers to the sixth paramita of wisdom, which specifically means seeing the nature of reality without mistake. This isn't something philosophical or highfalutin; it has to do with being realistic about the ways of the world and who you are in it.

At the dawn of the Buddha's awakening he said something curious and potent. He said: "This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that becomes not; from the cessation of this, that ceases." A simpler way to frame this is to say that everything arises, presents itself, and falls away due to infinite causes and conditions. In the sutras the Buddha used the analogy of two bundles of reeds leaning up against each other to illustrate that if one were to knock over one bundle, the other would, as a result, fall to the ground. Everything "stands" by virtue of something else. In essence, everything leans. This being, that becomes—and because this falls, that falls.

The Buddha referred to phenomena's mutual dependency as *pratityasamutpada*: "dependent arising," "the nature of contingency," or "dependent origination," among other translations.

At first glance, dependent arising sounds simple and obvious, but it has deep implications. The Buddha is saying that what you call "experience" or "life" is generated by the activity of causes and conditions—infinite elements bumping up against, interrupting, and influencing each other. If you were to explore dependent arising in a nuanced way, as is done in the Mahayana tradition of analytical meditation, you would find that there is no singular thing that is whole and not made of parts. You would also find that because everything shares a relationship of mutual dependency, inertia is not possible. It is because everything leans that movement, perception, and creative expression can even happen.

For a moment, try to imagine the world: perhaps

you envision the earth as seen from space or recall images from the morning news. But you would be hard pressed to find "the" world, because "it" is not a singular, permanent, or independent "thing." We all perceive life differently depending on our mood, physical constitution, cultural background, and beliefs. There are as many worldviews as living beings, but who could possibly verify if any one of them is "true"? Yes, you have views—everyone does—but life will always continue to burst from the seams of your ideas.

To the degree that you assume things exist as you think they do, you will also walk through life with less and less sense of wonder. In contemporary culture, capturing truth is paramount; we don't put a lot of value in wonder and awe. You might appreciate those moments when you look up at the stars and feel amazed by the mystery of what might lie in such a vast expanse. But you might also think that the mind of humility and openness have little practical purpose amid the gritty realities of daily life where you have to make serious decisions to work and survive.

The teachings on absolute bodhicitta, however, suggest otherwise. Awe and humility actually provide a critical function when it comes to our own and others' wellbeing. When you deprive your mind of curiosity and openness, even your noblest endeavors become militaristic and righteous.

Because we misunderstand the open-dimensional nature of contingent relationships, we at times try to fix the world. You might sweep into a situation in order to put things in order with a strong conviction that you know what's going on and how you will change it. Perhaps you think you've got all the players pegged and already know what motivates them. But when all of your ideas congregate around the truth of your own hypothesis, it won't even occur to you that someone may have something else to offer or that there is something you yourself can learn.

The flip side of thinking you can fix things reveals something altogether different. In your failed attempt to change a situation, you might fall into despair. Suddenly, the world and all its problems overwhelm you. You only see things in a singular way and feel

doomed. In forgetting that life is far from singular, you will miss the beauty of an autumn leaf falling from a tree, or fail to notice someone courageously risking her life to help another. You will forget about the laughter that comes from seeing the irony of things and of the resilience of others despite their challenges of being alive. Absolute bodhicitta reminds us that the world is many things—as many things as you can possibly imagine it to be. The practice of absolute bodhicitta is to bear witness to this infinite complexity, and to allow the beauty, poignancy, and pain of it all to touch you.

The practical nature of awe allows the mind to bear witness to the fathomless nature of contingency without shutting down around definitive conclusions. Such a mind is humble and curious, poised to recognize the nature of reality and protected from fundamentalism and doubt. You will recognize the practical nature of awe when despair becomes compassion; righteous indignation transforms into openness and humility; and the tendency to want to fix things turns into a natural, unhindered longing to respond.

Bodhicitta is the path of understanding who you are in the fathomless nature of infinite contingency, and then developing the skills to navigate this reality—your life—in a way that is awakening for both yourself and for others. If you understand that everything leans, you will also understand that everything you do matters. This is why the bodhisattva engages in a fierce commitment to serve others, by doing so emerging from the confusion of a separate, confined self.

So you might ask yourself, as a citizen of the great nature of infinite contingency, what might you do with your life? How can you utilize it in a meaningful way? How will you burn with love in this unfixable world?
