

Dependent Origination Jeffrey W. Dawson

A question that used to bother me as a young child was “How can anything exist? If the world started with nothing, how could something come into being?” This does not bother me now because I learned that there are some things we humans are stumped by. But I am going to speak of spiritual, rather than material, matters. Those who believe our minds are solely electrochemical reactions—that we are not spiritual beings—might not find much here of interest, but keep an open mind.

Buddhist theory asserts that we (our spiritual selves) have existed since beginningless time and will always exist (hence the Tibetan proverb, “Everyone dies, but no one is dead.”). Buddhist theory also asserts we don't have a “self” that is independently existing, often said as “the self does not exist.” Yet digging more deeply, Buddhist theory admits that our “self” exists, albeit dependently. A term used is “dependent origination.”

We arise due to causes and conditions, dependently. Our parents had sex, and here we are, which accounts for the physical side of things. On a deeper level, Buddhist theory asserts that where we are born and the conditions we are born into depend on karma—our past speech, actions, and thoughts. The causal connection to parents is clear. The causal connection with karma is vague, although some sages claim to understand its subtle workings. I've sure seen karma work in my own life: you end up where you are because of your own actions, ultimately. In the long term—more than one lifetime (if you believe in reincarnation) or after-death judging (if you don't)—karma's workings are unclear. Just because we don't see it, does not mean it does not exist (think of radio waves). Karma can be defined as psychic imprints on the mind, which I won't attempt to tackle here.

Buddhists don't believe in God, but they don't disbelieve in God either. If God shows up and starts talking to a Buddhist monk, no doubt scriptures will be rewritten straight away. But let us take the premise that God exists (the mathematical argument for intelligent design is cogent). Further, take a second premise that God made us. Then, we have dependent origination of a divine nature.

Either way, Buddhist or Christian, we are dependently arising. Where we end up depends on our own actions—our karma. If you clear out all the mythology and silly add-ons from various sects, Christianity and Buddhism are remarkably close in many ways. When it comes to right living advice, they are almost identical.

The concept of dependent origination is profound. We exist (pinch yourself—it hurts), yet we arise dependently, either made by God or simply by causes and conditions (depending on your viewpoint). Even intelligent design does not rule out a person being born based on karma, dependently. Since we arise dependently, our existence depends on causes and conditions and the actions of other spiritual beings.

I find the interrelatedness of all beings humbling, and our dependent origin enlightening. We all should have a valid sense of self, yet in a way, that self is a fiction. One might say, “Look what I've done,” yet one did not get there totally on one's own. A profound paradox—something the world is full of.

Think about this Zen koan: “What was your face before your parents were born?” © Jeffrey W. Dawson