

## Interdependence Day

Dharma Talk, July 4, 2009

My first Zen teacher once said on the 4th of July, "We don't celebrate Independence Day, we celebrate *Interdependence Day*" Today, July 4, reminded me of that saying.

Why would he say such a thing? Zen sees interdependence as the truth of life is as it is. The Zen way of saying this is "co-dependent arising"—which explains that everything depends on everything else and all things arise together. You can't have one thing without all the other stuff that surrounds it and creates it. Every thing is what it is because of its context.

This way of seeing things is quite a contrast with American culture because we place so much emphasis on our independence--both that of our country and of our citizens. We have a loner, individualistic strain in our culture. A superficial look at our world suggests that everything *is* independent and separate. The trees are over there and the houses are over here. We reinforce that conventional view of things by living it in our heads; we separate ourselves with our minds. Here at the zendo, at the end of each meeting, we do a chant which talks about "the self-centered dream"--self-centered here doesn't necessarily mean what we generally mean by selfish. It means caught up in our own heads, centered in ourselves. And that, of course, mostly leads to ordinary selfishness.

It's this way of thinking that makes us feel we're distinct and separate from everything and everyone else even though Zen tells us that we're interdependent--that everything is one, that nothing can exist except within the gestalt of the whole.

If we look more closely, which is one of the things we give ourselves a chance to do in zazen, it's easy enough to see some aspects of the truth of interdependence. Just take the breath we center in when we sit. We're constantly exchanging air from inside and outside. So are we separated from everything around us or interdependent with it when we inhale air from the room and expel it again into the environment?

Another example of how we can't remain separate is the food we eat. Where did that food come from? From the earth, the rain, the sun. Without food we wouldn't exist. At what point does the carrot stop being outside and become part of the inside? The moment we eat it, the moment we digest it? And if we ingest the food, don't we ingest the earth, sun and rain? So can they be said to be separate from us?

Another example of interdependence becomes obvious in crime reports. When we have a heat wave, the police report that the crime rate spirals upward. Why is that? Because people can't separate themselves from really high temperatures. It makes them grouchy and cranky and pushes some of them to their limits. We may be about to test this interdependence with our climate to the max because of global warming and if we don't take care of it, perhaps we are going to create a planet on which we cannot live. Then, unfortunately, with our last breath we'll know that we were interdependent with the earth. I think there's a movie like that. I didn't see the movie but saw previews of it. Will Smith was the last man on earth or something like that. The film shows him wandering over the rubble of Manhattan. He has a dog, but there are no people left. There may be some of us—on a bad day—who would think this situation is ideal: a world with no people, just dogs. But the fact is it's questionable whether a lone, person could survive for long, because we are social animals; we know that prisoners who are kept in isolation for long periods of time go crazy. So to be the last human, even with a dog, might not be a viable thing.

Every day we depend on literally hundreds of people, the bus driver, the gas station attendant, the guy who works in the coffee shop, the grocer, the farmer, the Philadelphia Water Bureau which gets the water to our house, PECO who provides our electricity. It takes hundreds and hundreds of people to support us for even one day.

This is what our Oryoki chant during sesshin is getting at. When it says, "Seventy-two labors brought us this food; we should know how it comes to us." It's a way of saying we should be aware of our interdependence. Aside from the semi-strangers who support us in so many ways, there are all those we are close to and depend on for support and companionship. I depend on you. No students, no teacher. I could set up a zendo, but if nobody came would I be a teacher? This is actually what my teacher said to me when he gave me permission to teach. He said, "We'll send you out there and run up a flag and see if anyone salutes." Well, if nobody saluted would we now be a sangha? We depend on each other. You can't be a student if you

don't have a teacher, and I can't be a teacher if I don't have students. So a little examination shows us we are interdependent in many ways.

Psychiatrists have learned that one of the hardest issues most people have to work out in therapy are the issues of dependency and independence. These are hard issues to work on because we have to find a balance, because all of us are necessarily both dependent on each other and yet have to stand on our own two feet and at times not to be dependent on others. So we have to find some kind of middle way between being the kind of person who never wants to ask for help and the kind of person who wants to be a child and constantly be taken care of and supported by everyone else.

I was talking to a student about this issue in interview recently. The student was proud because of asking for a ride to the airport which was a hard thing for that student who doesn't like asking for help. The student said, "I feel I should take care of things by myself if I can." People have very different takes on how much help they should get and all of us tend to lean unhealthily one way or another. Either we don't like to ask or we ask too much. It's hard to find a mature balance. We are lucky because we're in a practice that has taken a very close look at these issues of independence and interdependence. Our practice should help us grow.

When we talk of interdependence in Zen, it's another way of describing oneness, identity or wholeness. So how do we get from interdependence to oneness? If we are, interdependent with others then we can't be separated from them. Interdependence is the same as being inescapably a part of something else and so it is one aspect of oneness, identity with, wholeness.

Zen interdependence is based on several ways of acting and experiencing that result from our practice; it is not some theory that Buddhists sat around thinking up. It's something that Buddhists came to know on the cushion. They experienced it first, and then they described it in words.

One thing we often stress in our chants is that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, that they are identical. Another way of talking about this is by calling it the relative and the absolute. Again we're told that the relative and the absolute are ultimately not different. They're identical. And this is what we perceive through our sitting practice, what we eventually come to observe from watching our own minds. The world can be looked at from two different points of view. We can look at the universe as the 10,000 things. In that view we see a multitude of different entities and each seems utterly distinct and independent. This is the world of the relative--the world of form. This aspect of things is easy to see; it's the conventional everyday world we exist in.

The other way of looking at the world is the world as Indra's Net--the metaphor that Buddhism uses for interdependence--a vast net of interconnected, inseparable things. It's a whole. Each thing in the Net is influenced and influencing everything else. The image of the net is that every place two strands of the net cross is a diamond. And that diamond is multifaceted so that at each juncture of the strands, every other juncture is reflected. Everything is reflecting everything else and there's no way to separate them. All of this vast Net is constantly moving, constantly changing, and yet it's a whole, it's one system.

An easy way to look at it is like an ecosystem. We know that if we change one little thing in any environment it affects every thing--we dam up a river, the salmon die. We change the temperature of the ocean, the polar ice cap melts. Everything is connected.

In our lives there's a vast web of influences and connections and it's not as mysterious as it sometimes sounds. The most interesting thing about these two different images of the world--the relative and the absolute, the dependent and the interdependent--is that neither side of the pair is the correct version. Both sides are correct, because to see life completely, you have to have both views in your mind at once. You have to balance those two ways of seeing.

For example, if you have a relationship and you think you and your beloved are completely one, you're going to be in terrible trouble soon, because when you have an argument it will become apparent you're not always one and you'll be disillusioned and hurt. But if you're in a relationship where you see each person as totally separate and independent, then you're not going to have much of a relationship at all--nothing much to speak of is going to be going on there in terms of relationship.

Zen stresses that one side can't exist without the other. Form can't exist without emptiness. Emptiness can't exist without form. There can't be any emptiness floating around as a kind of vaporous essence in the world. It has to be the emptiness of a form. The two are totally enmeshed. There can't be any form without emptiness because all forms have to exist in interdependence with other forms. They all exist as an

impermanent, constantly changing whole. That's why we call them empty--because they're not permanent and they're not unchanging. We call it *emptiness* because things are empty of essence, empty of stasis. In Zen language we'd say "no inherent self nature."

It's good to study sutras and to read Buddhist books about these issues, though often they are explained in a obscure ways. They're hard to wrap your mind around because they're not ideas; they're experiences, ways of seeing, ways of being and it's not good enough to try and grasp them as ideas. What our practice calls on us to do is to live out our interdependence--to live as though we really experience the earth we live on and everyone on it as part of a whole, as though they are one with us, not separate.

So how do we do this? It can't just be adding this way of thinking to our repertoire. You can't get there by sitting around on your cushion chanting to yourself- "I want to be one with - I must see the whole - I'm interdependent." Trying to paper a new idea over what's already there doesn't work.

The truth is we don't have to add interdependence. We already know it in our deepest hearts and minds. We know this truth. So we don't have to find it. The way to make it operable in our lives is by working through those things that keep us from remembering it and expressing it. It's always there, but it's often blocked. What keeps us locked in a world of independence not balanced by interdependence? Whenever separation is present, it's because we created it. We're the ones who separate ourselves. We separate ourselves from the present moment, from our own lives and from others.

We just go AWOL into our heads busily thinking instead of experiencing. When we do this, we're not connected. We separate ourselves by rejecting things and people, by deciding what life has offered to us at this moment, is not something we want. We separate by picking and choosing--pushing some things away and grabbing for other things we do want. We separate ourselves by hatred, judgments, pride, jealousy, hurt and anger.

What we need to do is to notice when we're creating separation and notice what's creating the separation, what's behind it. We need to look at what's scary and distressing at times when we don't want to connect to our lives or with others. Always at the bottom of separation we find anger, fear, hurt. Attempting to avoid these feelings is why we see things as separate in the first place. If we can do the hard work of shining a light on the situations in which we feel separate, then we can be more comfortable with our inborn interdependence. This is how we begin to live as one with the universe.

So on this Independence Day, let's not forget the sister to independence--interdependence. Let's see if we can bring more balance to our point of view and include both independence and interdependence in our way of seeing the world.

When we do this, that is seeing life as it is--both sides--and it's our birthright as human beings to live in this balance. This is how we heal ourselves; this is how we heal our world.