

Quick Dharma Series

Blue Butterfly

by Gyoshin

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term "Interbeing" to more fully express the concept of interconnectedness expounded throughout the sutras. One of the clearest statements of this concept is found in the Avatamsaka Sutra:

Everything in the universe comes into being as a result of the union of certain causes and conditions. Likewise, all things pass away as these causes and conditions change and cease to exist.

Suffering also has certain causes and conditions, and suffering also passes away as these causes and conditions change and cease to exist. Rains may come and go, winds may blow, flowers bloom and wilt, green leaves turn to rainbow colors to then be blown away: all of these changes are due to the changing of causes and conditions.

Humans are born through the causes and conditions of parents: the body is developed by food, the spirit by community. Accordingly, both the body and the spirit change as causes and conditions change.

Everything in this universe is enmeshed together like the lines and ties of a fisher's net. To think that any part can stand alone is as foolish as it is to think that one small knot in a fisher's net can catch a fish.

Flowers do not bloom, nor does a leaf fall independent of causes and conditions. All things in the universe are interdependent in this ocean of constant change. This is the one thing that does not change.



R. L. E. Ford, a British entomologist, in his book "Studying Insects," tells the story of the attempt to save the Large Blue butterfly from extinction. It seems that there are certain rather narrow ecological conditions necessary for the survival of the Large Blue. First, the Large Blue is so particular that it will lay its eggs only on the wild thyme bush. In turn, the wild thyme is so specialized

that it requires anthills on which to grow. The most suitable anthills are those that are made by the small yellow ant *Donisthorpea flava*. Also required are two other species of ant, *Myrmica scabrinodis* and *Myrmica laevinodis*. All three species of ants are so compatible that they take up residence close to each other. Before the harsh winter sets in, *laevinodis* and *scabrinodis* ascend the stalks of the thyme, remove the butterfly eggs, and take them below ground. This, of course, serves to prevent the eggs from freezing.

Sheep, or rabbits, are also required in this community in order to keep the surrounding grasses under control so that the wild thyme can flourish. Too many rabbits, however, are undesirable since they are fond of using the anthills for their natural functions which will, in excess, kill the Large Blue's eggs and young larvae.

Ford continues to go on and describe the potential threat from gorse bushes. These bushes tend to grow rapidly and kill off the butterfly colonies. Local farmers, however, would burn off the gorse to improve the grazing opportunities for their sheep. Usually this destruction of the gorse led to an increase of the butterfly population. Unfortunately, the burning might not always be done in the winter when the eggs were safely underground. The fires would get too hot, killing the eggs, the ants, and everything else.

Understanding this problem, Ford worked with C. W. W. Hulse on a project in Cornwall to burn the gorse in strips alternating with unburned strips. This careful burning experiment was an overwhelming success and it was reported that the Large Blue appeared "in unbelievable numbers."

In ending his notes on this subject Ford said, "...unfortunately, when matter had reached a climax, Hulse died suddenly and the area became neglected again." Such a cliff-hanger in the saga of the Large Blue leaves us with many questions about interconnectedness. For example, what was most important to the Large Blue's survival: Hulse's untimely death, too many rabbits with overactive bladders, or improper burning? On the other hand perhaps Hulse would have died sooner if he had not had the Large Blue to give meaning to his life. And what are we to say of the neighborly ants?

Ford's narration of the plight of the Large Blue has at least led me to one conclusion. It would seem difficult to find evidence, in nature, of the peculiarly human conceit that we are all independent of each other. Think "Interbeing."