

Blue Butterfly

Causes and conditions

"Everything relies on everything else in order to manifest."
~Thich Nhat Hanh

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 does not change.



R. L. E. Ford, a British entomologist, in his book "Studying Insects,"² 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, safe from freezing.

Sheep or rabbits are also required to keep the surrounding grasses under control, allowing the wild thyme to flourish. Too many rabbits, however, are undesirable since they are fond of using the anthills for their natural functions. In excess, this activity will 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 bushes to improve grazing for their sheep. The destruction of the gorse bushes led to an increase in the butterfly population. Unfortunately, the burning was not always done in the winter when the eggs were safely underground. The fires would kill 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 bushes in strips alternating with unburned strips. This careful burning experiment was an overwhelming success, and the Large Blue appeared in unbelievable numbers.

In ending his notes, Ford said, "...unfortunately, when the 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 the Large Blue had not given 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 led me to one conclusion: In Nature, there is no evidence to support the human conceit that we are all independent of each other. On the other hand, keen observation of the natural world provides ample evidence to support the teachings of the *Sutras* that we are all interconnected.

¹ <https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/blog/insight-of-interbeing/>

² Ford, R.L.E., *Studying Insects: A Practical Guide*. London, Frederick Warne & Co., 1973.