

Cause & Effect

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When the Buddha boiled down the message of his awakening, it came down to a principle of cause and effect: “When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that.” It sounds pretty dry and formal. And as the Buddha said, it doesn’t convey the totality of his awakening, but it was the most important part of the message: the part most worth conveying to other people.

Things arise because of causes, and it’s a little complex, because sometimes the relationship is immediate: When this is, that is. They coexist. Other times it’s stretched out over time: From the arising of this, comes the arising of that. It could happen at *any* time, even after the initial cause has stopped. But it’s because it’s complex that we have free will, that there is a practice, that we can explain suffering, and also explain an end to it: There are patterns to discover, patterns we can then manipulate and shape into a path to the end of suffering.

The practice is not simply a matter of simply following instructions. There’s a lot you have to discover through experimentation. Look at the Buddha’s meditation instructions: In some cases, they’re pretty general, and it’s up to us to fill in the blanks. This is where our own powers of observation, our own ingenuity, play an important role. After all, we’re after insights into the mind—insights into our desires, insights into our ways of thinking—and insights don’t come simply by being obedient and following instructions. They come from looking on your own, seeing unexpected things—and in particular, seeing what you’re doing, and what the results are.

Because when the Buddha talks about the four noble truths, he’s not talking about something abstract and far away. It’s something extremely personal: the fact that our unskillful desires give rise to suffering; skillful desires can bring an end to suffering.

Our desires are about as intimate a part of ourselves as you can imagine. Yet we often don’t examine them carefully. What the Buddha is asking us to do is to look specifically: When you desire something, what are the results? Does acting on that desire result in the happiness you wanted or not?

Most people spend their whole lives desiring this, that, and the other thing, and then coming back to this, that, and the other thing—over and over again. They hardly learn from the last time they went after this, that, and the other thing. There’s something in us that resists having our desires inspected. But there’s another part of us that wants to find happiness, and is not satisfied with the way things are. Otherwise, we wouldn’t desire anything.

So we're caught here. We often desire things in unskillful ways. Part of us doesn't like it, but part of us is stuck in our old ways. The way out is to learn to come to our senses and realize we've got to look at this process in terms of cause and effect. If we can't do that, there's no way the practice is going to get anywhere.

So, one: It does mean accepting that you have certain desires that you'd rather not admit to yourself. This is where the role of acceptance comes into the practice, but that's not the whole story. Once you've admitted what kind of desires you have, you look at what happens as a result. You've got to see things in terms of cause and effect, and particularly the causes generated in your own mind, because those are the ones that are causing the main trouble.

This is why when we meditate it's not simply a matter of just watching, watching, watching. If you're going to see cause and effect, you have to fiddle around with the causes; otherwise you can't be sure which effect is connected to which cause. As that principle tells you, sometimes the causes arise at the same time as the effects, and sometimes the relationship stretches over time. And only by manipulating the causes, playing with them, can you connect the cause with the effect. In that way, you can learn: You can learn which of your desires actually are skillful and which ones are not.

What you're doing is opening up a dialog inside, but the mind already has its inner dialogue. A lot of times, one part of the mind yells at another part of the mind, gets its way simply through force; other times through subterfuge. But we're now opening up the mind to a different kind of dialogue, where everything has to be related to cause and effect. That's why the Buddha stressed this as his most central teaching.

Do you really want to be happy? Well, look at what you've been desiring, the way you've been doing things: It's been causing suffering. How much longer do you want to keep at it? That's the question you've got to ask.

At the same time, you have to offer the mind different kinds of pleasure, to pull it out of its old desires. This kind of pleasure is there to provide a new type of desire, or to strengthen certain desires that are already there in the mind that tend to be weak—especially here in this society, where so much emphasis is put on physical pleasure, sensual pleasure. But it's not an issue just in our society, it's everywhere—people identify with their sensual desires, and they define themselves by their sensual desires. So it's hard to change until, one, they can clearly see the drawbacks of their unskillful desires, and two, see the benefits of cultivating skillful ones.

This is why, when we meditate, we focus on developing a sense of ease, a sense of rapture. It's not simply a matter of being able to do it once and say, "Okay I'm no longer attached to that, I'm no longer excited by that. I can move on to other things." These are your basic nourishment as a meditator.

You've got to look at the breath. See how the breath is comfortable, see how it's not. See what you're doing to make it comfortable, and see what you're doing to make it not. That way, the meditation becomes more of a skill.

And it gives you the energy you need to do the right thing. Because so often we know what's right and yet we can't do it because we lack the strength. There's just too much for us. But when the power of concentration gets developed, when it gets stronger and stronger, you find that you do have the energy: This is the right thing to do, it makes perfect sense to do it—so why not do it?

The Buddha says to abandon sensual craving, to abandon craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming or for annihilation. When you directly see that these are really unskillful desires and you have an alternative and you've got the strength to follow that alternative, it's a lot easier to do the right thing so that the results you get are the ones you want.

So this simple practice of focusing on the breath, making it comfortable, and once it's comfortable allowing it to spread throughout the body, so that that sense of comfort saturates the body: It's basic instruction in cause and effect. And it's pursuing this practice to ever subtler levels of refinement that leads to the kind of insight that we want.

Insight is like physical strength: The more you exercise, the stronger it's going to be. You've got to use it to gain it. You can't sit and just wait for it to happen by following rules, or sitting very still. You've got to look at what you're doing, and be clear about what you're doing, and then change it a little bit to see if you get better results. Then, as the mind gets more sensitive to what it's doing and what the results are, that's how you follow the principle of cause and effect all the way to the kind of awakening that makes a big difference in the mind.

A big shifting of underground plates, geological plates: That happens when you start seeing connections that you've been hiding from yourself all along. And once the mind has begun to see that difference, it really appreciates it. This is what the practice is all about—this is what makes it rewarding.

It requires a big shift because as I said, we *define* ourselves by our desires, and here we are in the process of changing them, which means changing our sense of self. We have to learn which ones we want to hold on to, which ones we want to let go—which parts of our sense of self we want to hold on to, and which ones to let go. It's a combination of a self strategy and a not-self strategy. Things you used to hold on to, you begin to realize there are good reasons not to, because the principle of cause and effect in operation there leads to suffering.

You don't want the suffering, so why hold on to it? Why claim it as yourself?—that kind of activity, feeling, or perceiving, or constructing thoughts, or being conscious in that particular way. So you let go, let go, let go, as you're holding on to other things that are more and more refined, more and more skillful. Without good things to hold on to, you couldn't let go.

It's like climbing a ladder. To let go of one rung, you've got to hold on to a higher one. This is how you get up to the roof. Once you're on the roof, then you can let go of the ladder entirely. You don't need any of these desires, because you've opened to the experience of the

deathless that comes as you let go, let go of everything that's unskillful, and you finally get to what's called *non-fashioning*. When that opens up, then it's not a question of whether you like it or not. It simply creates a new dynamic—desire is no longer needed there. There's no lack, there's no limit. That's when both your self strategy and your not-self strategy have done all their work, and there's no need to define you. There's nothing really that needs to be described as self or not-self—it's that radical.

But in the meantime, we've got work to do. We've got to use our imagination. As I said, the Buddha's instructions are general. They point out the general guidelines. But you have to use your own ingenuity, your own powers of observation to play with the principles of cause and effect, to see how they apply to the most intimate parts of your mind: your desires for happiness, sorting out which ones are really skillful, and which ones are not—and applying all of your mental powers to understand how cause and effect are operating in your search for happiness.

Until someday you'll see: You'll have your own awakening, and you'll see why the Buddha put so much emphasis on that principle of cause and effect. Not that it's the whole of the awakening, but it's the essential part that *gets you there*. Once you've gotten there, as I said, the Buddha didn't have to describe the rest of it. He described only the part that was necessary to bring you to that place where things open up. Beyond that, you'll know for yourself what the rest of that experience is like.