

## *Cause & Effect Right Now*

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I read an article one time where the author expressed some disappointment in the descriptions of the Buddha's awakening that we find in the Pali Canon. Apparently he was expecting the description of a cosmic light show, with the enlightenment beams coming from all directions and revealing visions of the cosmos.

But instead, all you have is some pretty bare-bone stuff: the Buddha talking about realizing four truths—that there's stress and suffering, that there's a cause, there's a cessation of suffering, and there's a path to the cessation. When he boiled it down even further than that, it was a principle of causality, which basically comes down to the idea that some causes have an effect immediately and others have an effect over time.

Now, the reason the Buddha talked about these things is because they would be useful to the people who listened. Hearing about the cosmic light show doesn't really do anything for you. Learning about a principle of causality that you can apply to the problem of suffering, especially the suffering that you're creating for yourself: That's very useful.

You get the same lesson from the *ajans* in Thailand. Their students had visions. They'd say, "Don't go into the details of the vision. Ask yourself, 'What's the Dhamma lesson here? What's something you can take from it as a guide to how you're going to develop your mind?' And particularly how you're going to understand how the mind creates a lot of unnecessary suffering for itself." Now that's something that's really useful.

Because that principle of causality: If you sat down and tried to trace out everything that you're experiencing right now and asked yourself, "Which things come from which past actions? And which things come from present actions?" you'd never be able to sort everything out. But you *can* use this as a guide to your practice when you get the mind to settle down and things are very, very still. If there's any appearance of stress, particularly more stress happening in the mind, ask yourself, "Can you see what you're doing right now that's causing that stress?" This requires that you be very observant. Because all too often all our attention goes to the stress and we miss the action. We're looking in the wrong place.

This is one of the reasons why when awakening comes it does come suddenly but it's not totally sudden. The Buddha compared it to the continental shelf off of India: There's a gradual slope and *then* a sudden drop. The reason for the gradual

slope is that it takes a while for you to develop your powers of observation. There are many layers of action going on in the mind at any one time. You can catch a few things that will lighten the burden of suffering you're creating for yourself or lighten the burden of stress, but only when your discernment is really well-trained can you catch everything.

So it's bit by bit by bit. You begin to see, "Oh, I'm doing this and I don't have to." It's the "I don't have to" that's important there. Often we think in certain ways and believe that we *have* to think in those ways. A thought comes up in the mind and we feel compelled to run with it, or to complete it, or to figure out exactly what it's all about. But because there are a lot of thoughts that aren't worth following that way, you have to learn how to sort them out. And when there's a pain in the body, it's sometimes hard to separate which part is the physical side of the pain and which is the mental side. That requires that you get the mind really, really still.

Which is another reason why the path is a gradual one, because your skill in maintaining stillness is something that develops over time—if you devote yourself to it, if you work at it. Use your powers of observation. It's in using your powers of observation in getting the mind to settle down that you develop the discernment that you're going to use in order to drop any of your attachments, clingings, ignorance, cravings—whatever it is that's contributing to that burden of stress that you keep churning out for yourself.

So when the Buddha taught that causal principle, he was teaching you the most important thing you need to know: that the stress that's weighing down the mind is something you're doing right now, it's your added intentional element to what you're experiencing right now. As the Buddha pointed out, we don't get our experiences handed to us ready-made. The mind is a pretty active shaper of its experience of pleasure, its experience of pain, its experience of the world as a whole. And you want to catch it in the act of shaping. That's how you begin to see through the ways in which it's shaping things in an unskillful way, in a way that's awkward, in a way that's piling on more unnecessary stress. And you can learn how to undo that.

So whenever the mind feels burdened, ask yourself, "What am I doing that's contributing to this? What am I doing right now?" There may be things from the past that are contributing to the added stress, particularly habits you've built up, but to undo those habits you don't have to trace them back to childhood or back to a previous life. Just keep asking yourself, "What am I doing now? *Why* am I doing this now? What's necessary about this now?"

You have to keep your attention focused right here in the present moment, not because it's a wonderful moment, but because what you're doing right now to create stress right now in the mind is happening right now. And you can take it apart bit by bit by bit right now.

It's a little like a large tapestry. You can pull out a couple of the threads of the tapestry and the tapestry will still be there. But every now and then you find a thread that, if you pull it, the whole thing collapses. And you never know beforehand which one it'll be. But what you do know is that you're looking at the right place if you're looking in the present moment to see what you're doing.

So try to develop the habit of doing things in a skillful way. So you can begin to see the difference. When you slip back to your old unskillful habits, you'll notice. If you don't try to change your habits, you'll never see anything, because everything is just the way it was.

This is why when we work on the mind, we really are working on the mind. I've been reading a lot about the Romantics and the psychologists who took their thought from the Romantics. And so much of their attitude was just, "Well, accept everything as it's coming up because if you aren't open and accepting and receptive, you're not going to see anything in the deeper layers of your mind." There's a level of truth there, but there's a level of not-truth, too. You also need to know, once you see those things, what to do with them.

This is where those four noble truths come in, because each of those truths has a task: stress is to be comprehended; the actions you're doing that are causing the stress have to be stopped, abandoned; and you develop the path so that you can realize the end of suffering. These are four different duties: comprehending, letting go, developing, realizing. And they give you guidance.

It's the same way with the teachings on mindfulness. The Buddha lists all the different types of mind states, not because he wants you just to note them and leave them as they are. He wants you to know what you've got so that you can put these things in their context of which duty is appropriate. After all, these things aren't being presented to you ready-made. You're making them already. And if you catch yourself in the act of doing something unskillful, you want to stop. If you're not sure, well, try to notice: When does the level of stress in the mind go up? When does it go down? And to see that, you've got to develop mindfulness, concentration, all the qualities of the path.

Your mind's already active in shaping your experience, and so the Buddha gives you an active path to learn how to shape it in a more skillful way. In the process of doing that, you begin to see the difference between what's skillful and what's not, and gradations of skillfulness in between. It's in developing that

sensitivity that you learn how to take everything apart. You develop the four noble truths to the point where, as Ajaan Mun says, they all become one. In other words, there's just one duty: Everything gets let go. But that can happen only when you've been working on developing the path all the way.

And where do you do that? You do it right here, right now, so that you can learn how to watch the mind as it shapes its experience right here, right now. And then you can catch yourself in the act when you slip off and do something unskillful.

So this is how you apply that teaching on causality. It's very basic and sounds pretty abstract, but it's not. It's talking about something you're doing right here, right now—pointing your nose right here, right now.

It's like when you train puppies. They make a mess in the house, you put their nose in the mess and then you take them outside, so that they understand the connection. The Buddha's trying to put your nose in the mess that you're making right here, so you can recognize it as a mess and learn that you don't have to do it anymore.