Cause & Effect

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The Buddha was that best kind of teacher, the sort of teacher who doesn’t just give you information. The teacher who teaches you how to learn for yourself, giving you a sense of how to ask questions and how to look at what you’ve done. That’s where his teaching is to keep focusing on what you’ve done, what you’re doing, and how to monitor the results. Sometimes you can monitor them while you’re doing things. Other times you have to look back on them. But the important thing in our lives is to learn to look at what we’re doing, not just our ideas of what we’re doing or what we would like to have result from what we’re doing, but what we’re actually doing, what the actual results are, and how to measure those results, how to judge the results in such a way that you can learn and do better next time. This element of feedback is essential in all learning. Someone once conjectured that if people didn’t act, if they were just totally passive observers of the universe, they wouldn’t learn anything. They wouldn’t know anything at all. They’d have no idea of how cause and effect act. They’d simply be watching a passing show. But it’s because we’re participants, because we shape things, that we begin to get a sense of cause and effect. You do this and that results. You stick your finger in a flame and you burn it. Those things are easy to notice. Other things require more attention. Sometimes we may get results we think that we like, but over time they begin to show that they’re not such good things after all. The Buddha teaches us the attitude we should have. One is that he cautions that when you make a mistake, don’t let yourself get tied up in feelings of remorse or guilt. There’s one sutra where he talks about people who’ve heard the teaching that when you do something, when you kill or when you steal, when you do anything else unskillful like that, there’s going to be bad consequences. You’ll get all bound up with remorse. The consequences of our actions oftentimes depend not only on what we do, but also on the state of mind that follows on what we’ve done. Remorse is not a good state of mind. Compassion is the resolve not to make that mistake again. Compassion is a compassionate intention, both for yourself and for the people around you. It works to mitigate the results of your past mistakes, if it’s genuine. So that’s the first line of instruction, not to feel remorse, but simply to notice your mistakes and have the goodwill and have the compassion not to want to do them again. Then learn to follow through. As the Buddha pointed out, simply because you have good intentions are not enough. You have to learn how to make them skillful in how you implement them. And then watch the actual results. This requires honesty, learning how to notice your mistakes, admit your mistakes, and then try to figure out how to do things different the next time. There’s a story that tells of a school of medicine, very highly regarded. People were coming to study brain surgery. You could assume that everybody who applied was smart. The question was, would they make good brain surgeons? Just because you’re smart doesn’t mean you’re necessarily a good brain surgeon. They cast around and tried various ways of finding the questions to ask in interviews that would ferret out the people who would not make good surgeons. One of the most effective ones they found was the question, “Do you ever make mistakes?” And the candidates who would say, “Well, no, not really.” Those are the ones who were struck out. The ones who would say, “Yes, I make mistakes all the time.” Then they’d ask, “Well, can you tell us about a mistake you made recently and what you did to correct it, or what you would do to correct it the next time around?” The candidates who showed that they had thought about their mistakes and had made plans for the next time around, those are the ones who were admitted to the school. The same principle applies to your meditation, noticing when you make a mistake, what works and what doesn’t. Then, if it doesn’t work, having the ingenuity to figure out something, another approach, another way of doing things the next time around. This is where real insight develops. What is insight? Insight into cause and effect. We often hear that the three characteristics—impermanence or inconstancy, stress and suffering, and not-self—are the substance of Buddhist insight. But if you look a little bit deeper, when the Buddha talks about discernment, talks about insight, it’s always a question of cause and effect. The very first question he says that leads to insight is the question, “What if I do it, will it lead to long-term happiness? What if I do it, will it lead to my long-term suffering?” Within that question, all the seeds for insight are already there. One is the notion that what you do is important for happiness and suffering. Two of those last three words, “my long-term happiness,” “my long-term suffering,” if you look at them, they correspond to the three characteristics. “My,” of course, corresponds to questions of self, not-self. “Long-term” refers to questions of permanence and impermanence, constancy and inconstancy. And “happiness” and “suffering,” that’s the issue of stress. These are the things by which we judge successful actions. In other words, if a happiness is not long-term, if it’s going to turn now, it’s nothing that you would want to claim as your own. And if something is suffering, obviously suffering, that immediately alerts you that it’s not something you’d want to claim as your own. Unless it’s something that you do, you don’t like doing it, but when you get the results, they do lead to long-term happiness. So that’s when you have to develop wisdom, have to develop patience. But you use these criteria as ways of judging your actions. When you do this, does it lead to happiness? Yes, no. Is the happiness lasting? Yes, no. And to begin with, you’ll find that the question of lasting is relative. Sometimes there’s a happiness that’s short-lived. Other times there’s a happiness that lasts for a while, but eventually it runs out as well. But at least it’s heading in the right direction. Ultimately, of course, the whole purpose of the practice is to get a happiness that is so unaffected by space and time that the word “long-lasting” doesn’t even apply. And questions of “my” don’t even apply anymore. But it is a happiness. That’s where we’re aiming. But we use these criteria as ways of judging our actions. So this is where the three characteristics come in, in judging this process of cause and effect in terms of what we do and the results we get. If things don’t measure up to what we’d like, there are two resources for you. One is the experience of other people, and two is your own ingenuity, your ability to imagine alternative ways of doing things. You’re asking the right questions. “What would happen if I did it this way? What would happen if I did it that way?” Sometimes, in your imagination, you can figure out the results because you’ve had enough experience with life. You’re not totally green. Other times, you have to put things to the test. But either way, it’s that ability to ask that question, “What if I did it some other way? What would that be? What would that result in?” So it’s a combination of many faculties in the mind. One is your honesty. The second one is your ability to admit mistakes without getting tied up in remorse or regret. And the third is your ingenuity. The fourth is your willingness to listen to the advice of other people who’ve practiced. There’s that famous passage in the Kalama Sutta where the Buddha says, “Don’t go by texts. Don’t go by traditions.” Everybody thinks it stops right there, but it doesn’t. He says, “Also, don’t go by your own opinions. Don’t go by reasoning things out through logic.” In other words, you can’t give final authority to any of these things. When you know for yourself that something is skillful, praised by the wise, then go ahead and do it. Notice that you know for yourself, but you also take into consideration the advice of other people. People who are experienced. You have to learn to balance those things in as well. Ordinarily, we think it’s a question of either listening to other people or just listening to ourselves. The Buddha is basically saying, “Well, you can’t trust either, totally. You have to check things out in the laboratory of your actions. When you do something, what happens as a result?” You can’t simply fall back and say, “Well, that’s the way I always do things. That’s the kind of person I am.” Well, that’s the kind of person who doesn’t learn anything. It’s a person who’s willing to change when necessary in order to do things more skillfully. That’s the kind of person you can turn yourself into. That’s the kind of person you can make yourself be. If it weren’t for that ability, there’d be no point in the Buddhas having taught us anything anyhow. We’d all be set in our ways and it would just be a dull and idle exercise to teach people. But everyone’s capable of changing. It’s best if you don’t look at it through that framework of, “Well, this is the way I am,” because that tends to tie you down. Look at things simply in terms of action and result, with a question of who you are put aside for the time being. If you don’t get tied up in the idea, “Well, this is my action, my way of doing things,” which is a form of clinging, you find that you’re freer to learn, freer to change, freer to become more and more skillful. This is how we learn. The ability to admit our mistakes, learn from them, and just put them aside. Having the right criteria for judging what is a mistake. If it’s harmful to ourselves and harmful to others, it’s obviously a mistake. If it’s harmful to either one, it’s also a mistake. Learning how to check for what exactly is harmful, what is helpful, that requires that you be observant. It’s a combination of both doing and not doing. And watching, that allows us to learn. And having the ingenuity to do things in new ways. And the sensitivity to watch for the important signs of having done things right, having done things skillfully, and having done things unskillfully. This is what learning means. As we apply it more and more to our meditation, more and more to our lives as a whole, we find that it brings real results in changing our lives, all for the better.

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