Causal Chains

August 17, 2004

When you meditate, you have to judge things by their results. It’s a principle the Buddha brought to all of his teachings. Everything that comes in the mind is part of a causal chain. It comes from causes and it leads to results. It’s a basic principle. It sounds like it makes sense, and yet we don’t live by it. We don’t check the results of things very often. We do what we want, focus on what we want, and ignore the actual results that we get. We tend to misrepresent them to ourselves and to other people. Sometimes we don’t even have the results yet. We anticipate that this is going to lead someplace, that we think it should lead or we want it to lead. And many times we ignore where it’s actually going. So the double bind you are in the meditation is, one, to commit yourself to a particular path or practice, and at the same time to be wary of where it’s going to take you, or to be not totally committed to the idea that it’s going to take you where you want to go. But you have to commit yourself to doing it. In other words, you have to be willing to experiment, to put yourself on the line. Fortunately, with the meditation, the things that come up in the meditation don’t do permanent damage if they turn out to be wrong. And we don’t have to wait until the very end of the path to be able to check the results. We can check them along the way. You focus on a particular topic, you focus on a particular sensation in the body, and while you’re doing it, you give yourself, give your all to it. You’re going to stay with Bhutto. Your whole body is with Bhutto. You stay with the breath. That’s the term for it. Samgaya kathasati, mindfulness immersed in the body. You’re totally surrounded by the body, and the mindfulness totally surrounds the body. It’s only then that you can be sent to give the technique a fair test. So whatever task you have for your meditation tonight, give yourself to it 100%. If it’s simply keeping track of the breath, whether it’s long or short, deep or shallow, just really be with it. This is called citta, in what they call the basis of success. It’s an element of commitment. It’s an element of full attention to the practice. And it builds on the other two of the basis for success. There’s the desire to do it, and then there’s persistence. You really stick with it, and you give it your full attention. These are the qualities that are essential to any state of concentration. And then you occasionally step out a bit to check how things are going, to see what effect the practice is having on your mind, what effect it’s having on the body. If there’s a sense of balance, a sense of well-being, you’re doing fine. If not, you can change. This is a quality that’s called vimamsa, discrimination, not in the negative sense of being discriminated, but in the positive sense of being really clear about what’s happening. So you can make adjustments in time. Because no teacher can sit inside your brain and tell you, “Okay, now you do this, now you do that.” You’re the one who has to give yourself the instructions. And the instructions have to be based on what? Partly on what you’ve heard, but also partly on what you’re actually observing. So keep this in mind. You’re responsible for the meditation. But to say that you’ve given it a fair test, you really have to give yourself to it. It’s this combination of commitment, and yet non-complacency, that should govern the whole practice. In other words, you have confidence that this is a path that can lead where you want it to go. But you can also be a little bit wary of the fact that you don’t really understand the path. Or to put it in other terms, you’re confident that you have the ability to put an end to suffering. You’ve got to have confidence in that. But at the same time, you know that there’s ignorance in the mind. It’s going to get in the way. So you have to keep checking things to make sure that you’re on the path. This way, you test both the teachings and you test yourself. This combination of trust and wariness is what underlies the Buddhist teachings. The word he uses is appamatta, which can be translated as heedfulness, non-complacency. In other words, you have trust in the fact that your actions really do make a difference, and they really do have the potential to put an end to suffering. That’s where the element of conviction comes in. The element of wariness comes in when you know that many times your actions are motivated by elements in the mind that you’re not too familiar with. They may be skillful, they may not. You’ve got to check. And either the teaching of God may be a misguided teaching, or you may have misunderstood it. So you’ve got to check that as well. Years back, when I was first practicing with Ajahn Phuong, he would always say, “Catch hold of the breath. Catch hold of the breath.” So I tried to catch it, and my idea of catching it was to tense up around it a little bit to make sure it was very clearly defined when it started and when it stopped. I found I was just getting more and more tense around the breath. Until one day I said, “This is stupid. I’ve got to let go.” So I let go, and the breath flowed very nicely in and flowed out. I had my first good meditation in a long time. So of course I went back and I complained to him that I was teaching the wrong thing. He laughed and laughed. He said, “That’s not what I meant by catch. Catch means simply catch sight of it, keep after it, not that you tense it up.” So the problem was with my understanding. And on one hand I felt a little embarrassed, but on the other hand I felt it was a good thing I brought it up. Otherwise I wouldn’t have known. This is why we have the interviews. This is why we talk things over. You’ve got to learn how to interview yourself. Talk things over with yourself as well. When something doesn’t go right in the meditation, just stop and look at it for a while. Then see if you can think of another approach, another way of tackling the problem. And if you can’t, then you can go talk it over with someone else who’s practicing. But this principle of combining your commitment to the practice with a willingness to check it, to be willing to ask questions about it. This is important. When you read your teachings about Buddhism, either they emphasize the questioning side or they emphasize the faith side. The real trick is to combine the two. In the principle of karma, what are you asked to believe? You’re asked to believe that your actions really do make a difference. One, you’re responsible for them. Two, they are real. Three, they really do make a difference in your life. If you can’t believe in this, life is hopeless. So it’s something you’ve got to believe in. The question is, do you believe it to the extent that the Buddha says? He says you can follow this principle all the way to the end of suffering. It’s something you want to believe, but you haven’t seen it happen yet. So you have to take that much on faith. Then the next question is how you take your ignorance and apply it to the practice, how you train your ignorance to get rid of the ignorance and bring it into knowledge. As the Buddha said, people’s reactions to suffering follow two channels. One is bewilderment, and the other one is a quest for someone who knows the way out. What he’s offering is a path that takes advantage of those two channels and points them in the right direction. The bewilderment, he says, leads to questions. You’ve got to learn how to ask the right questions about the issue of suffering. What’s causing it? What are you doing to bring it on? What can you do to not bring it on? What can you let go of? The next part, of course, is to search for the right people to give you this advice. In the beginning, you have to depend on instructions from outside, but as part of the training, you have to get more and more able to apply that principle to yourself. In other words, learn how to ask yourself questions and then learn how to look, how to gauge things. When thoughts come up in the mind, they take over. You’ve got to question them, especially thoughts that pull you away from the practice. When a feeling comes up and says, “I feel this way about the practice, I feel that way about the practice,” question the “I.” After all, it is a thought that comes in the mind. You don’t have to identify with everything that comes up in the mind. Sometimes it’s just the bubbling up of old karma, particular patterns of behavior, and then you latch onto them. All of a sudden it becomes you in the present moment, then it becomes new karma. You have that choice not to take it on, and the best way to tackle it is right there. “I feel this, I feel that,” question the “I.” Otherwise, once you identify with something, you can’t really understand it. You’ve got to step back. Other times the issue is not thoughts that pull you away from the practice. It’s thoughts that pull you in a particular direction. A particular state comes up in the mind and you plow into it, thinking, “This must be it. This is got to be the path.” Then you anticipate where it’s going. Well, watch out. You have to question your anticipations. You can follow it, but then when you come out, ask yourself, “What were the results of that?” Because sometimes our anticipations are correct, and sometimes they’re wrong. What seems promising turns out to be a dead end. That’s a lot of the story of the meditation right there. So as with so many other issues in the practice that require balancing, it’s not so much going halfway between faith and doubt, but it means learning when to have faith and when to question. When you’re doing a practice, give yourself to it. When it’s either obvious that something’s going wrong, then you can pull back, or just pull back at the end and say, “Okay, what happened? What went right? What went wrong?” This way, you start becoming your own teacher. There was a period towards the end of my time with Ajahn Fuhrman. Being his attendant, I had to come up the hill every day to clean his hut. For a long time, I’d have a question for him. There were several questions about the practice during the day or other issues that came up in the running of the monastery. But in terms of practice questions, I found that towards the end, I could begin to anticipate his answer. If I asked this, I knew what he was going to say. If I asked that, I knew what he was going to say. I mentioned that to him one time. He said, “I can’t think of any new questions for you right now. Because as soon as a question comes into my mind, I know what you’re going to say.” He said, “At last, now we understand each other.” That’s not so much a question of reading the teacher, but also learning how to read your own mind. That’s important in learning how to get better and better at judging the results of what’s happening, even the feelings of pain and pleasure that come up in the practice, physical or mental. See what they’re good for. When pleasure comes, what are you going to do with it? Simply wallow in it? Or is there some use to which you can put it? Same with the pain. What uses does pain have? Sometimes it has very good uses. It’s probably one of the Buddha’s more radical insights. You don’t just stop with pain and run away, or stop with pleasure and grab onto it as an end in and of itself. What can be done with it? Once you learn to start seeing everything as part of a cause-and-effect chain, then you find that everything is raw material for your meditation. And the more you exercise your powers of judgment in this way, the sharper they get, the more reliable they get. Because it’s only that way that you’re going to finally reach the point where your doubts are put to an end. Your questions. Did the Buddha really know what he was talking about when he said there’s an end of suffering? That there is an unconditioned, that there is a deathless, there’s something you can touch in your experience that’s unfabricated. It’s through developing your powers of testing things. That’s how you get there. So doubt is overcome, not by ignoring your doubts, but learning how to deal with them intelligently, testing them, to the point where you reach something that’s totally unquestionable.

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