When This Is, That Is

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They say that after the Buddha’s awakening, he spent seven days experiencing the bliss of release, and then six more weeks contemplating the ramifications of what he’d learned. So, obviously, there was a lot going on. But then what he talked about, what was really worthwhile in his awakening, that was really worthwhile to communicate to other people, came down to some very simple things. Four Noble Truths and a principle of causality. When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. It all sounds very technical. And I’ve heard of people being disappointed, saying, “Where are all the grand visions?” But reading about the Buddha’s grand visions doesn’t give us grand visions. Or, if it does give us grand visions, we’re probably deluded. The Buddha was right. What’s really important in his experience is the principle of causality that allows us to understand how to go about the practice and get the same understanding. Why is it important? Well, some people, both then and now, teach that everything is totally determined. The way the universe is going to go has already been set up. It’s been set into motion from some sort of prime mover way back in the past. And even though we think we have free will, there’s really nothing we can do about it. That’s one extreme. The other extreme is that everything is chaotic. There’s really nothing you can do to gain awakening. If you’re lucky, it’ll come and whack you upside the head. And the best you can do as a meditator is just kind of sit around and wait for that accident to happen. Because, as you can imagine, both ideas about causality really make it impossible to do anything. But Buddha’s main message was that it is something that you do. You work at it. The path is something you develop. These are activities you do. Some things you develop, other things you let go. In the developing and the letting go, it’s really important to understand what you’re doing right now, because that principle of causality says that some things give their results right in the immediate present. When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that isn’t. Other things you do give their results over time. From the arising of this comes the arising of that, that can be in any time. It could be immediate or it could be over the next five minutes or over the next five lifetimes. But there is causality over time, and there is also instantaneous causality. What you experience at any one time is a combination of results of what you did in the past, your current actions, and then the results of your current actions. The results of things coming in from the past can’t do much about that, which means that some of the things you run up against in your meditation are things you really have no control over. Certain thoughts will arise, certain physical states will arise, and you’ve got to learn how to live with them. However, you do have your choice in the present moment of how you’re going to react, and there are a lot of other things that you do have power over in the present moment. One of the basic questions in meditation is how to figure out which is which. What are the things you don’t control and what are the things you can control? This is why it’s important that you learn to be an experimenter in your meditation. Give things a try. There are two ways of doing this. One is just sticking with the same steps that you followed the last time you meditated. If things come out differently, you realize that part of that difference is based on things that changed. Either you weren’t aware of the change, or else it was something that was based on past karma. Or, if you’ve got a particular problem in the present moment and one approach doesn’t work, you can try another approach. This is how scientists experiment. After a change in the present moment, changing various approaches or holding to one approach in different circumstances, you begin to get an idea of what you can affect and what you can’t affect, what you can control and what you can’t control. On that one end, this is why we have a technique. You sit down, you focus on the breath, you do specific things step by step by step. They get some sort of constancy into your actions in the present moment. But it’s also why that technique involves some experimentation. There’s room for play. There’s room for adjusting. So that you can get a better idea of exactly what you’re doing in the present moment. This is probably the most important area where our ignorance keeps covered. What are you doing? What are your intentions? We learned as little kids to hide this from our parents, and after all, we start hiding it from ourselves. All of our savage intentions are savage drives. After all, we get so good at hiding them that we ourselves don’t see them. After all, all of our intentions get hidden. Because our intentions play such a huge role in shaping our lives, this means that the most important power in our lives is hidden from us. So the purpose of the meditation is to bring it out into the open. As you meditate, focus all your energies, your desires, and your expectations on what you’re doing. As for the results that will come out, you have to realize that they’re going to depend on a few things that are beyond your control, which is why the desire for results can get in the way. For two reasons. One is that it’s keeping you from actually doing what you’re supposed to be doing. You sit here and instead of focusing on the breath, you focus on your desire. That’s not in the meditation instructions. And then when the desired results don’t come, then you start getting frustrated, disappointed, impatient. But if you focus your desire on the breath, on the causes, there’s no problem. Make up your mind. You’re going to stay here with every breath. And if you slip off, just very patiently bring yourself back. Allow the breath to be comfortable. This is where there’s room for experimentation. It can be long breathing, short breathing, deep, shallow, fast, slow, broad, narrow. You can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body from any place. On a hot evening like this, you can ask yourself, “Where are the cool spots in the body? Let’s focus on those.” And let the coolness spread throughout the body, wherever it’s going to spread. There’s lots to play with, but you stick with the basic principles. Get the breath comfortable first on whatever spot you find it easy to focus on the breath, and then start doing your spreading. Don’t spread a tense breath. It just makes things worse. And have an open mind about where the breath energy can come in and out of the body. It can be any place. So you can experiment with that. As you do this over time, you begin to get a sense of what causes lead to what results. If you just sit there and try to be equanimous about whatever comes up, what happens is the mind’s fashioning of things in the present moment goes underground. Where it’s been all along, it keeps hidden. What you’re trying to do is be more and more conscious of how you shape things right now. Because when you learn how to change that, you start getting more and more sensitive to your impact on the present moment, your power over the present moment. You get more and more sensitive as to how you can apply that power. You can turn your present experience into the path. Your sense of the form of the body becomes the object of your meditation, the feeling that arises from the breath when it’s comfortable. Those can be a part of right concentration. The perceptions you have can be part of right view and, again, right concentration, right mindfulness. The thought constructs you have—directing your thought to the breath, evaluating it—these become part of right concentration. Your awareness of all this becomes part of the path as well. In other words, you take all the aggregates, which normally you lug around as your sense of self, and you turn them into a path by the way you use them, by the way you shape them. It’s up to you. That is the power you have. So as we meditate, we’re learning how to get a sense of our powers and how to exercise them for the sake of putting an end to suffering. And then, when you can do that, you begin to get a sense, in your own experience, of what the Buddha awakened to, which is why the Buddha focused his teaching on just this issue, as he said, suffering and stress, and the end of suffering and stress, in a principle of causality that enables you to reach that end of suffering and stress yourself. That’s why the Buddha focuses his teaching right here. So pay attention right here. If you pay attention to what you’re doing, the things you want to see eventually will appear right here, right at the point where you’re aware of your intentions and their effects.

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