Explaining Cause & Effect

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When we meditate, it’s always important to remember the Buddhist framework for understanding what this is all about. We’re trying to learn about the actions of the mind, because the actions of the mind are what cause suffering. They keep us bound. There are all kinds of limitations, but they don’t have to. There are also actions that can free us. So we have to learn the difference. The Buddha gives us some general guidelines. He just doesn’t throw us out into the sea without a map or a compass. He points our attention in certain directions, at certain spots, and recommends that we focus on trying to develop certain skills, like the one we’re working on right now, how to get the mind to settle down in the present moment. But what we’re going to see in some cases is very particular to us, and in other cases falls into some general patterns. But even the general patterns are things that we’re going to have to learn for ourselves. In particular, the pattern of cause and effect in the mind. We start out with a very general idea of what this is, and then we find ourselves running into it again and again, that we mix up the cause for the effect, or take the effect for the cause. Or we totally forget to think in these terms. I remember hearing about someone who’d been on a meditation retreat, and they’d had a really blissful experience, but they couldn’t understand how it had happened, or where it had come from. So they went and mentioned it to the teacher, and the teacher said, “Ah, yes, that’s grace.” That’s one of those teachings that totally misleads you. We’re not here just waiting for grace to happen. There will be times when we bump into sudden pleasant experiences, or experiences that we’ve had in one way and then they turn out another way this time around. And at first we don’t understand them because we haven’t been really attentive. We don’t fully understand all the implications of this principle. We don’t fully understand the principle of cause and effect, but keep it in mind. So when something really good happens in the meditation, after you come out of the meditation, ask yourself, “Well, what happened before that?” This is one of the reasons why mindfulness is so important, why alertness is so important, so you know what you’re doing. Then you can begin to connect the cause and the effect. And while the pleasant experience is happening, remind yourself that you can’t grab onto it. Keep in mind the John Lee’s instructions that the pleasure and the rapture that can come from concentration are the effects, the causes are directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath. So that’s what you focus on. You don’t try to get your mind around the pleasure so you can contain it, because you can’t contain it. You just allow it to be there. It’s going to do its work, because this is one of the benefits of these things. The pleasure and the rapture arise not to give you something new to grab onto, but they have a good effect both on the body and on the mind. So you allow that effect to take its own course. Then you try your best to maintain the causes, which are keeping your mind focused on the breath and allowing the breath to be easeful, comfortable. Then after you come out, ask yourself, “What was the concept of breath you had? What was the feeling of the breath? What was the feeling tone of the breath? Where were you focused? How would you settle down?” In other words, always keep this framework of cause and effect, action and result. This framework governs everything in the Buddha’s teachings. In the very beginning, it teaches you to look at your thoughts and words and deeds in everyday life and look for the impact that they have, and then do your best to avoid harming yourself or harming other people. Then as you do this, you begin to get a sense that your actions really do have an impact, they really do have results, and you can change your environment through your actions. And you’ll also find areas where you can’t change your environment through your actions, which gives you a more precise notion of cause and effect. And then we bring this same perspective into our own meditation, practicing it in this activity of centering the mind, because it is an activity. We have a purpose in mind. I was talking today with someone who was planning to go on a retreat. And the retreat is billed as an insight retreat, but he was going to focus on trying to develop his concentration instead. And he started a sentence saying, “Well, my agenda is…” “Oh, it’s not really my agenda.” And I said, “Go ahead. Yes, it is your agenda. It’s okay.” And he said, “It’s really okay to have an agenda? It’s okay to say that word?” He was as if somehow not saying the word made the actual agenda okay. There’s a lot of this in Buddha circles. We’re not supposed to have desires. We’re not supposed to have agendas. We’re not supposed to have goals. And yet secretly we harbor these things. And because we harbor them secretly, they don’t come out in the open, and they don’t ever get dealt with intelligently or maturely. So yes, we do have an agenda. We’re here trying to get the mind to settle down. We want a sense of ease. We want a sense of well-being. But not just for their own sake. We’re trying to learn about this way in which the mind creates suffering for itself and the way it can also act in a way that doesn’t create suffering, that takes you away from suffering. We’re learning about the activities of the mind. This is one of the best ways of doing it, giving yourself a goal and seeing what works and seeing what doesn’t work. Otherwise the meditation gets aimless. And after a while you begin to wonder what you’re here for. It’s not going in any direction. And someone might tell you there’s no direction. That makes things even worse. There is a direction. And in the beginning we don’t have a very clear notion of what it might be, but we do have a general sense that we do want the mind to settle down. We want there to be a sense of ease in the settling down, so it’s not clamped down on. And you try to develop the patience to deal with whatever disquiet comes up, whatever unsettling things come up. This is the first kind of mara you might be dealing with. The mara that disturbs thoughts, the mara of defilements. And as in so many things in meditation, it doesn’t really matter whether there’s somebody out there causing it or not. The fact is that you learn how to deal with it from your perspective, inside your own mind. We’re talking today about the possibility of there being outside beings, outside maras. Go look at a Chan Lee’s talk on consciousnesses, where he talks about our karmic debt collectors, who might be having an influence on our thoughts. Chan Fung really liked this Dhamma talk. He liked it so much that he read it into a tape one time, because the original tape from a Chan Lee is pretty hard to follow. The sound quality is very bad. So Chan Fung read it into a tape, to make sure that students could hear it, take it to heart. But the important thing in the talk is, ultimately, it leaves open the question of exactly where these thoughts in your mind are coming from, these disquieting thoughts. And sometimes it’s useful to think, “Well, this is not me. It’s just causes that are beyond my control.” Not so that you allow the thoughts to continue, but simply so that you don’t think, “This is what I really think about these things.” A thought of boredom comes in. It’s not that you’re bored. It’s just a thought of boredom. And you don’t have to lay in clay into it. You don’t have to identify it as how you really feel. It’s just there. One possibility. And this opens up the question of the possibility that you could say, “No, I’m not going to take that on.” This right here is an important lesson. The realization that you do have a choice. It’s this choice that makes meditation possible. And then you remember there are lots of different ways that you can deal with these thoughts once you don’t identify with them. You can just change your mind. You can bring the topic back to your original meditation object. Or you can reflect on the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, why you don’t want to get involved. If that doesn’t work, you can just simply ignore it. In other words, you know it’s there, but you don’t have to pay attention to it. It can be kind of chatting in the back of your mind, but you don’t have to get involved in the conversation. Or you can look through the energy field of your body to see where there’s some tension that corresponds with that particular thought. Breathe through the tension so the thought can go away. Or you can just grit your teeth, press your tongue against your palate. This is the technique of last resort. And refuse to think about that thought. It’s kind of like the old days when you used to jam the frequencies of Radio Free Europe. One technique is just to repeat over and over in your mind, butto, butto, butto, really fast. So even though you’re not getting any great sense of ease and well-being in meditation, at least you’re gaining practice with the principle that you do have choices. You don’t just have to go slipping and sliding back into your old ways of following those thoughts wherever they took you. That’s one form of mara. The other form of mara, of course, is really nice experiences, the pleasure and rapture that can come, intense energy that can come up in meditation. And here, of course, there’s the difference between your tendency to want to grab hold of it. And again, think of it as not you, not yours. This is just a result of some action. And you can’t contain it and stuff it in a bottle and keep it. It’s going to come, and the extent to which it stays here is going to have a nice effect on the body and mind. But it’s not there for you just to indulge in. Your duty here is to think of it as just something that’s there in the mind, but it’s connected with a cause. And here your choice is staying with where you were when it started to happen. You were with the breath, you were with the sense of the body as a whole, whatever your focus was at that point. Try to maintain that focus because that’s the cause. Try to maintain the same sense of how much pressure you’re putting on the breath, how the breath tastes at that point. Try to stay poised, balanced. And if it slips away, well, at least you’ve started exploring it. And it’s not the case that once it’s slipped away it will never come back again. But at the same time, you don’t want to sit down and just hope that it’ll come back again. The next time you meditate, again, after you’ve come out of that state, try to ask yourself, “What was I doing when it came on? What was I doing when I went away?” Learn from that. So the next time around, yes, your agenda will be to try to get back there, but you can’t just will yourself back. Try to recreate the conditions and see what happens. Now, it may be that your powers of observation weren’t subtle enough, or that you were too focused. So you can’t recreate that particular state. And if that’s the case, just go back to the breath. Because wishing it to come is not the cause for it to come. The cause for it to come is focusing on the breath, getting the mind to settle down with your meditation object. And the next time it does come, try to be more careful in how you treat it. In this way, the feelings of pleasure are not a mara. They actually become part of your education, just in the same way that your distractions become part of your education, and in this principle of cause and effect, action and result. And the Buddha has you carry this same principle all the way through the meditation. As you go from one level of concentration to another, it’s when you see that the concentration is caused by a certain way of perceiving things, a certain label you put in the mind. And then you begin to realize that some labels are more subtle than others, or have a more subtle effect than others. Some labels are more disturbing, even though they’re labels of concentration, but relative to other types of concentration, they’re more disturbing or less disturbing. So you learn to see even really deep, spacious, formless states of concentration simply as action and result. The same with that sense of self you have as being the producer or the experiencer of these states, or your sense of the world as being the context in which all this is happening. The Buddha wants you to see these as perceptions as well. There’s a perception of self. There’s a perception of the world. He wants you to see these as actions too. This is why he tries to help us develop a sense of dispassion, say, for the body, a dispassion for thought constructs, a sense of dispassion for any kind of world, either the mental worlds we create for ourselves or the outside worlds that we might like to inhabit, so that you can get to this activity of perception and realize that this activity is leading you to experience of stress and suffering that you really don’t want. When you can see the perception of self or not-self or the perception of the world simply as that, simply as perceptions, without giving a lot of reality to where they’re pointing to, that’s when you begin to master the insight that can lead you to freedom. So what this is all about is simply seeing cause and effect in the mind, action and result, and learning to detect these actions on ever more subtle levels. So you can finally bring the mind to a state of subtlety, where it’s in perfect balance and doesn’t need to act in any way to do so. And that’s when things open up. So even though there may be disturbances in the mind or ups and downs in the meditation, remind yourself that this is an opportunity to learn about cause and effect, action and result. So even though there may be a whole meditation where it’s nothing but dealing with disturbances or some nice feelings of rapture that seem to slip through your fingers, it’s not all lost as long as you learn to take this as a lesson in cause and effect in the mind, and exploring the different ways in which this happens. Rapture will come in different ways. Pleasure will come in different ways. The maps give us a sense that there’s just one way that you can march the mind through concentration. But you begin to realize that there are lots of different kinds of pleasure, lots of different kinds of rapture. Hard, one-pointed concentration, which is useful sometimes. More open, spacious kind of concentration, where you’re aware of the whole body, which has its uses as well. So there’s a lot to learn. There are lots of causes and lots of effects to learn about. And when you can keep this perspective in mind, every kind of meditation is a step forward on the path.

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