Director, Actor, Audience

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When the Buddha would give the shortest synopsis of his awakening, he expressed it as 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 sounds pretty abstract, but it’s a very useful insight. A famous Pali scholar once wrote to me and said, “All the Buddha’s saying here is that there are all kinds of causality, which is not helpful.” He’s saying something more precise, which is that some things arise together and pass away together. In other cases, the connection is over time. The arising of this may lead to the arising of that sometime later, and the cessation of this may lead to the cessation of that sometime later. This is helpful because it points to what you’re experiencing right now. Some of the things you’re experiencing come from your past actions, and some of them come from what you’re doing right now. You can’t change much what’s coming from your past actions, but you can change what you’re doing now. In other words, the Buddha wasn’t simply teaching acceptance. He taught acceptance of this causal principle. But accepting that means that you have to take responsibility for what you’re doing now and ask yourself, “Is it the most skillful thing you could be doing?” He’s not placing this as a burden on you that you have to obey someone else. He’s asking it from the point of view of, if you’re suffering, why are you adding things to your suffering right now? Because the suffering that comes from the mind here in the present moment is what places a burden on the mind in the present moment. The things that come from the past don’t have to burden the mind. So if there’s suffering in the mind, you want to look at what you’re doing now. This is why we meditate. This is why we focus on the present moment so much in our meditation. First we try to get the mind solidly here. And if it’s not solidly here, we make it solidly here. As the Buddha once said, this is one of the duties of mindfulness. It’s not just watching things arising and passing away. It’s figuring out what’s skillful, what’s not skillful. And if something is not skillful, what can you do to make it pass away? If it is skillful, what can you do to give rise to it? So mindfulness basically directs you in your actions. It’s not telling you to sit back and just watch the passing show. Because it turns out it’s not a passing show. You’re an actor. You’re a director. You’re part of the audience. All in one. So what directions are you giving? Where do you want this to go right now? You’ve got a whole hour here. You could spend it just letting the mind wander around. But you’ve been doing that for who knows how long. You could make up your mind that you’re going to stay right here with the breath, learn the skills that are needed to get the mind to settle down, because it’s only when it’s really solid that you’re going to see things clearly. So you’ve got to create the conditions, develop the qualities of mind, and the qualities of action. These qualities of mind come from your actions, the way you deal with your actions throughout the day. This is why restraint of the senses is a part of the practice. This is why the precepts are part of the practice. As you go through the day, watch out for what you’re saying. In other words, watch out for what comes out your mouth. And also watch out for what comes in your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and your body. Because the way you manage these things is going to have a huge impact on the way you manage your mind as you meditate. So you want to be truthful in all your dealings and you want to be as skillful as you can in how you engage with your senses. At the same time, to do that properly, you need the mind to be well-centered. Because if it doesn’t have a good point of reference, it gets pulled out very easily without even noticing it. It’s like sitting in a boat on a very smooth but moving river. If you didn’t see the riverbank floating past, you wouldn’t know that you were moving at all. Sometimes the movements of the mind are that subtle. So work on the breath right now. Try to make it comfortable. Try to make it a place where you really can settle down and be at ease. As for whatever else comes up, the appearance of a distracting thought may be the result of past karma. But what you do with it right now is your present karma. So be very careful about that. Try not to get entangled. When you realize that you’ve started wandering off, then as soon as you have that realization, just drop it and you’ll be back with the breath. When you’re back with the breath, ask yourself, “Is the breath as comfortable as it could be? Is there part of the body that doesn’t feel nourished or refreshed by the breath?” Work on that and keep this up. The mind may be wandering off again and again and again, but you can keep dropping whatever it is again and again and again until it becomes a new habit. The director part, which is your mindfulness, keeps watch over the actors, which are the choices you’re making right now. This is what’s called having mindfulness as a governing principle. And as for the audience inside, ask yourself, “Do you like the way things are going right now?” Of course, there are lots of different audiences. Here we’re trying to appeal to the audience that seriously wants true happiness. Sometimes audiences need to be trained. So if you find yourself liking the wandering off, you’ve got to ask yourself about that. Is this what you want to do with your time? Because you don’t have much time. An hour may seem like a long time, but it’s very quick. As the Buddha says, even a hundred years can go very quickly. When they’re gone, they’re totally gone. So time passes, time is gone, but you want to have something good to show for it. So train the director, train the actors, train the audience so the audience gives good feedback. That’s why you make the most use of that insight into causality. It’s not just that there’s all kinds of causality. The important thing is that you do have choices here in the present moment. This was a point that was so important for the Buddha that it’s one of the few issues where he’d actually go out and argue with people. He’s not the sort of person to go out and pick fights. But if you learn that people were teaching that you had no choices, not that your whole life was shaped by either past actions, or total chance, or some creator god, you’d go and argue with those people. Because that, he says, is what makes the practice totally impossible if you hold to a belief like that. So it’s not that there are all kinds of causality. There’s a very specific causality. The choices you’re making right now are shaping the potentials coming in from the past. This is the teaching on sankhana, or fabrication. So take this knowledge and make the best use of it.

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