

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 had learned. So obviously, there was a lot that he had awakened to. But then when he talked about what in his awakening was really worthwhile to communicate with other people, it 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 people complaining that they feel disappointed. Where are all the grand, mystical visions? Where are all the bright lights? But reading about the Buddha's grand visions doesn't give us grand visions, or if it does give us grand visions, they're probably deluded. The Buddha was right: What's really important is experienced as a principle of causality that allows us to understand how to go about the practice and get the same understanding he did into the way to put an end to suffering.

Why is it important? Because some people, both then and now, teach that everything is totally determined: The way the universe is going to go has already 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 whatever's going to happen. That's one extreme. The other extreme is the teaching that everything is chaotic: There's really nothing you can *do* to gain awakening. If you're lucky, it will come and whack you upside your head. The best you can do as a meditator is just sit around waiting for that accident to happen.

As you can imagine, both ideas about causality really make it impossible to do anything. But the Buddha's main message was that the end of suffering is something that you *can* accomplish through your efforts. The path is something you work at, you develop. These are activities you do. Some things you develop. Other thing you let go. And in the course of the developing and the letting go, it's really important to understand what you're doing right now. Because the principle of causality says that some things give the 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, it could be over the next five minutes, over the next five lifetimes. But there is causality over time, and there's 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 the results of your current actions.

The results of things coming in from the past you can't do much about. 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. You've got to learn how to live with them. However, you do have a choice in the present moment in how you're going to shape them as you learn to live with them. 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 can't control? 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 sticking with the same steps that you followed the last time you meditated, and if things come out differently, you can conclude that at least part of that difference is based on things that changed: Either you weren't aware of the change, or else it's something that's 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 changing various approaches or holding to one approach in different circumstances, you begin to get an idea what you can affect, what you can't affect, what you can control, what you can't control.

This is why we have a technique. You sit down; you focus on the breath. You do specific things step by step by step, to develop some sort of constancy in your actions in the present moment. But the Buddha's principle of causality also explains why the technique has to involve some experimentation. There's room for play. There's room for adjusting, so that you can get a better and better idea of exactly what you're doing in the present moment and what the results can be.

This is probably the most important area that our ignorance keeps covered: what you're doing, what are your intentions. We learned as little kids to hide these things from our parents, and after a while, we started hiding them from ourselves—all of our savage intentions or savage drives. Eventually, we got so good at hiding that we ourselves don't even see them. And if all our intentions get hidden—given that 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.

The purpose of the meditation is to bring these things out into the open, so as you meditate, focus all your energies, your desires, and expectations on what you're doing. As for the results will come out, you have to realize that they may 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 which you're supposed to be doing. Instead of focusing on the breath, you focus on your desire. That's not in the meditation instructions. The second reason is that when the desired results don't come, you start getting frustrated, disappointed, impatient. But if you focus your desire on the causes, there's no problem. Make up your mind to stay here with every breath. If you slip off, just very patiently bring yourself back.

And allow the breath to be comfortable. This is where there's room for experimentation. There 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 at any spot, from any direction. 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 a lot to play with, but you stick with the basic principles. Get the breath comfortable first wherever you find easy to focus on the breath, and then start doing your spreading. Don't spread a tense breath. That 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 anyplace. So you can experiment with that. As you do this over time, you begin to get a sense of which causes lead to which results. If you sit there trying to be equanimous about whatever comes up, what happens is that the mind's fashioning of things in the present moment goes underground, where it's been all along. Hidden. You want to 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 to how best to apply that power.

This way, you can turn your present experience into the path. Your sense of the form of the body becomes the object of your meditation, along with the feelings that arise 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, but also right concentration and right mindfulness as well. The thought constructs you have, directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating it: These become part of right concentration. Your awareness of all this becomes part of the path, too. 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's 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. When you can do that,

you begin 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: suffering and stress, and the end of suffering and stress. Underlying those two focal points is the principle of causality that enables you to reach that end of suffering and stress yourself. That's why the Buddha focused his teaching right here.

So pay attention right here. If you pay attention to what you're doing, the things you want to see will eventually appear right here, right at the spot where you're aware of your intentions and their effects.