

In the Driver's Seat

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When the Buddha expressed his awakening in the shortest terms, it was as a principle of causality: “When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that. When this ceases, that ceases. From the ceasing of this, comes the ceasing of that.” It sounds pretty abstract, but it has lots of practical implications. For instance, while you’re meditating here right now, what it means is that there are some things you’re experiencing right now that come from your present actions. Other things come from your past actions. So you don’t have total control over what you’re going to be experiencing right now, but you do have *some* control.

The “some control” comes from the *when this is, that is; when this ceases, that ceases*. That’s causality in the present moment. What you’re doing right now is going to have an effect right now, so the way you’re focusing on the breath, for instance, will have an impact on how you experience the breath. Where you focus, how strong your focus is, what kind of image you have in the mind of how the breath is going to go—that will have an immediate effect on how the breath is experienced, so you want to take advantage of that.

As for things you can’t control, you may have some pains in the body that come from past actions, and no matter how you breathe around them or breathe through them, the pain is still going to be there. That’s *from the arising of this, comes the arising of that*. That’s causation over time.

So how do you know which is which? Some pains do come from how you’re sitting right now and how you’re breathing right now, and some pains are going to come from things you’ve done in the past. You figure out which is which simply through trial and error. You try to change things. Try to find a place in the body that is comfortable. No matter how bad your kamma is, there must be some place in the body that’s reasonably comfortable. After all, as Ajaan Lee points out, if there were nothing but pain in your body, you’d die.

Now, the comfortable places may not be all that impressive, but that’s simply a matter of giving them some time and some space. Let them be there. Let them be unsqueezed. In other words, don’t squeeze them as you breathe in; don’t squeeze them as you breathe out; don’t squeeze them in between the in-and-out breaths. Give them some space, and gradually the sense of well-being that’s there will begin to grow.

But more importantly, the question is, even with pains that come from your past actions, the suffering you're creating around them is something you're doing right now, which means you can change that. You can change the perceptions you have around the pain. You can ask yourself where the clinging is—because after all, the suffering is in the clinging. Are you clinging to a particular idea of sensual pleasure you'd like to have right now? Are you clinging to the idea of yourself as being the owner of the pain or the victim of the pain or yourself as possessing a space that the pain has invaded? Can you let go of those ideas? At the very least, can you question them? By questioning them, you get to step back from them, and the clinging is not quite so bad.

The important message here is that no matter how bad your kamma may be from the past, you don't have to suffer from it. There may be pain that comes from it. There may be illnesses in the body that come from past actions, but you don't have to suffer from them. So that's where you look at all times: the changes you make as you experiment. You're not simply on the receiving end of things, and you don't have to accept everything that comes up.

Now, if you were simply watching a TV show or watching a movie where everything was already planned out, already determined, then you would have to accept things, but here you're actually in charge. It's more as if you're driving a car, and the fact that the steering wheel will move back and forth on its own is not something you want to accept. You want to take control of the steering wheel and learn how to steer carefully to get the car where you want it to go.

This principle applies in meditation, and in life in general. You may look back at your driving record and realize you've got lots and lots and lots of accidents. Your car may be all dented up, but it's still drivable. It still goes. And simply the fact that you've had accidents in the past doesn't mean that you have to keep on having accidents in the future. You've learned some new things about driving now. Once you realize what it means to drive well, why go back to your old ways? And fortunately attaining a good rebirth and attaining nibbana don't require a perfect driving record. You simply make up your mind that from now on you're not going to change back to your old ways.

Sometimes we're told that Buddhism is all about accepting change, but there are some changes the Buddha says not to accept. They're not good things. The fact that the mind is so quick to reverse itself, he says, if it's been going in a bad direction, is a good thing. It reverses itself and becomes a better mind. Once you've got it in a good direction, though, don't let anything discourage you or influence you to change back. This is called mindfulness as a governing principle.

In other words, if there's something skillful that you haven't given rise to yet, you give rise to it. Once it's there, you maintain it. You make sure it doesn't fall away. This is different from the popular notion of mindfulness, which simply watches things arising and passing away. Mindfulness as a governing principle means, one, you keep things in mind—what's right, what's wrong, what's skillful, what's not. And then two, you're determined to remember: If something good has not yet arisen in the mind, you're going to make it arise. Once it's there, you're going to prevent it from passing away. And that's what counts as you continue to drive.

Think of Angulimala. He had murdered lots of people. According to the Canon, it was in the hundreds; according to the Commentaries, almost a thousand. Yet when he met the Buddha and had a change of heart, he was able to become an arahant. This is why the Buddha said if everything we did in the past had to yield the same result—in other words, if we've killed five people, we'd have to be killed five times—there's no way we'd ever gain awakening. He said the actions of the past give the same *kind* of result, which is something very, very different, because if you have a change of heart—which includes developing unlimited thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity; training the mind so it's not easily overcome by pleasure, not easily overcome by pain; training it in virtue and discernment—then the results of past bad actions are hardly felt, and even when they *are* felt, there's no suffering around them.

He said it's like the difference between a fine charged to a rich person and the same fine charged to a poor person. It's the same fine, but the rich person hardly feels it, whereas the poor person may not have enough money to pay the fine and may get thrown into jail. So when you have your mind set on the Dhamma, you become rich; as you develop more and more good qualities, you become richer.

So remember, you're in the driver's seat. What matters as you're driving is not your past driving record, except for reminding yourself that you've made those mistakes in the past and you don't want to make them again. What matters is the decisions you're making as you turn left, turn right, accelerate, put your foot on the brake right now. And given that the car may be bumped up a little bit, there may be some limitations on what you can do with the car, but you always want to drive as well as you can. After all, it is your life. Regardless of how you've made decisions in the past, the important thing is to keep making good decisions as you go on.

So when you think about your life in general and you think about your meditation, it's the same lesson: Look for where you can make a difference right now, and make it a difference in the good direction.