

# Mastering Causality

*May, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

They tell us that the heart of the Buddha's Awakening was discovering the principle of causality, how cause and effect work to shape your experience. It sounds pretty abstract but it's actually directly related to what you're experiencing right now. In other words, there's the result of past kamma, there's your present kamma, and there's the result of present kamma. Those are the three things you're experiencing at any given moment.

Of course when we start out, it all tends to be mixed together. It's just experience. We don't see these patterns, we don't see the component factors as separate and distinct, so things seem pretty random. But if you learn how to look at what you're doing right now, you come to see that you're not totally passive. The things you're experiencing are not just coming in at you. There's an active side to the mind that goes out and shapes them, adds a little here, takes away a little bit there. You're getting sensitive to that aspect of the mind, to what you're doing right now. That's a large part of the insight you need to gain in the meditation.

Most of us are like a man who goes storming into a room, acting in an offensive way, and then later complains, "The people in the room seemed awfully defensive, awfully unfriendly" — as if he didn't have any impact on the atmosphere of the room through his actions, through the way he entered the room.

So how are you storming into the present moment? One way to find out is by checking on the breath. Exactly what are you doing with the breath right now? Is the breathing a totally passive, automatic process, or are you doing something to the breath? Is there some level of the mind that's making decisions? One way to find out is to make conscious decisions about the breath, nudging it a little bit here, a little bit there. We're not talking about making huge differences in the breath, just making gradual changes in whichever direction seems most comfortable.

As you do this you begin to realize that your present experience of pleasure or pain depends on decisions you're making right now. You begin to get more sensitive to what the mind is doing, particularly in terms of its perceptions and thought-fabrications, and how these relate to your feelings.

Perceptions are the labels you put on things. For example, you may experience the body as something solid breathing in and breathing out. Well, you can change that perception. See everything you sense in the body right now as an aspect of the breath property. Look at it that way: every sensation as a type of breath sensation. See what that does to your sensation of the body, the way you relate to it, the way you evaluate it, the way you breathe.

And then your thought-fabrications: Use them to ask questions. How about breathing this way? How about breathing that way? And so you give it a try.

As you do this, you get a greater and greater sense of how much you really are shaping your present experience. Then you can take this insight and apply it to issues of pain, both physical pain and mental pain. Most of us tend to think of ourselves as passive recipients, victims of a particular pain attacking us. There doesn't seem much we can do about it. That's because we have a habitual way of reacting to pain. Unless we can change that habit, we're not going to see much improvement in the issue of why we're suffering, of how we suffer.

But if you really look at a physical pain, you realize that while part of it comes from something wrong with the body, another part comes from what the mind is doing to manage the experience of pain: the way it paints a mental picture of the pain, the way it latches onto that mental picture, what it's doing to maintain the pain in a particular way or to move it in a particular direction. That's going on all the time, yet we're not really aware of how much we're contributing to our own pain. That's the big issue. That's the first noble truth: the pain we're creating through our clinging, craving, and ignorance.

To see these things, you have to be very, very sensitive to the present moment and very sensitive to what your input is. This is why concentration is so important, getting the mind really still so that it can see these things very precisely. For instance, when pain arises we tend to miss the fact that the mind is constantly labeling it, "Pain, pain, pain, pain, pain." And in addition to the label of "pain" we sometimes paint a picture of it to ourselves. That act of labeling, if there's clinging along with it, contributes to the pain. And when you get really sensitive to the movements of the mind — and this requires getting the breath really still so that it's not interfering with what you're seeing — you see that there's a constant repetition going on in the mind. Sometimes the labeling, the clinging, and the repetition are so insistent that the physical cause of the pain has long since gone. The act of clinging is the actual pain you're experiencing now.

So when you learn how to see, "Oh, there's that mental label going again, there it goes again, there it goes again": Can you stop it? See what happens when you stop it, when you just drop it. You'll find that your experience of the pain changes. That's when you gain insight into the issue of what you're doing in the present moment, how you contribute to the shape of your experience.

That's a lot of the meditation right there — just sensitizing the mind to what it's doing. Most often that's our big blind spot: what we're doing right now. We're so conscious of what other people are doing — "They did this to me, they did that to me" — but we're not looking at what *we're* doing, which is why what they're doing causes us pain. Many times you can't avoid what's coming at you from the outside — it's past kamma — but you *can* avoid the unskillful ways you're reacting to it. Sometimes you find that the way you're reacting to the situation feeds back into the situation, influencing what those other people are doing and making the situation worse. But even when that's not the case, you find that your suffering really comes from the way you relate to the outside situation.

That's what the first noble truth is all about, clinging to the five aggregates: clinging to the form of the body, clinging to your feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, or consciousness. When you stop clinging to these aggregates, then even though they're still impermanent and there still may be some stress in them, it doesn't weigh on the mind. The bridge has been cut so that it doesn't connect. You stop lifting things up, as in Ajaan Suwat's image: The mountain may be heavy in and of itself, but if you're not trying to lift it up then it's not heavy for you.

So you've got to see where you're doing your heavy lifting and then try to understand why. Only when you understand *why* you're doing things can you really stop. Sometimes in the course of a meditation you can force yourself to stop, but if there's no real understanding, then as soon as the mind gets back to its old ways, it goes lifting things, picking them up, carrying them around again. But if you look into *why* you're lifting these things, what misunderstandings lie behind what you're doing, why you feel that you have to carry these things around: That's a lot of the insight right there.

It's an old habit, the way the mind contributes to things in the present moment, particularly the ways it causes itself unnecessary suffering. We think that an undercurrent of suffering is a necessary part of experience, but it's not. When you see it as stress, when you see it as a burden and you realize that it's not necessary, that's when you really let go.

So check on exactly where your clinging is right now, where you're contributing to unnecessary suffering. Try to make the mind as still as possible and then stay there to observe: "Is there still some stress here? Is there still a sense of burdensomeness here? What else is going along with that? Can you see any activity, any intention that's going along with that stress?" And if you catch sight of that activity, that intention, you drop it.

It's almost invariably something you didn't realize you were doing, something you were holding onto, in the sense of repeating it mindlessly. Sometimes you're aware that you're holding onto the act of intention, but you think you've *got* to hold on: "This is the core of my being, this is who I am, this is the way my mind has to work." Well, it doesn't have to work that way. Learn how to question those assumptions. Learn how to let go a little bit. This loosens things up in the mind. The things you never saw before, now you suddenly see.

This burden you create for yourself is totally unnecessary. What you thought was necessary, the way things had to be: They don't have to be that way at all. That's the whole message of the Buddha's Awakening: the principle of causality we've been talking about. He applied it to see how the suffering the mind experiences in the present moment is not necessary. That's why the principle of causality was so important. He realized the input he was putting into the present moment that was creating the suffering and he learned to stop.

And what happened when there was no input in the present moment? As we meditate we find that our input gets more and more and more subtle. Oftentimes we're not even aware of any input. We tell ourselves that we're sitting here perfectly peaceful, perfectly calm, nothing's going on, but actually there's a lot going on in the mind that we're missing. It's in a blind spot. When you begin to see that blind spot, begin to let go of what's in there, that's when things open up, that's when the meditation can really start making a radical change in the mind. A lot of the relationships in your mind — where you thought, "This is that way and that's this way" — you begin to realize are not necessarily so. And the realization that they're not necessary: That's where the liberation lies.

So a continuity runs throughout the whole process of meditation from the very beginning. If, while you're sitting here, the mind slips off, just bring it right back. If it slips off again, just bring it right back again. Even this much can make you more conscious of what you're doing in the present moment. You get more conscious of how the mind has its blind spots and you learn to make them more and more and more subtle, less dominant in the mind. In other words,

you try to cut through them as much as you can. What happens, of course, is that they find more subtle ways to hide, but at least you gain a measure of control over the mind and a greater sense of what you're doing in the present moment.

That's crucial to the meditation. You keep applying that principle to more subtle levels, for the same principle holds all the way through. It's just that as you keep working on it, it requires more precision. But that's something you can develop. After all, this is a skill. That's another one of the Buddha's great discoveries. The ability to learn the path to liberation is a skill you can master in the same way that you master other skills: looking at the results of your actions, reflecting back on what you did, and trying to adjust things so that they keep getting more and more precise, more and more subtle, less burdensome to the mind.

Awakening isn't something that just drops on people without their being aware of what they're doing. It's not an accident or something that comes from outside. It requires that you get really sensitive to this teaching on kamma: "I am the owner of my actions." You're acting right now, so be very careful about what you do, in the same way that you'd be very careful about building a fire, careful about sharpening a knife, careful about all the other skills you need in life. It's just that, in dealing with the mind, you need to be even more careful, even more precise. It requires more subtlety. But this simple process of just getting more skillful in how you relate to the present moment: That can take you all the way to Awakening.

And that right there is revolutionary.