

What Causes Suffering?

Class 4

May 31, 2021

Review: I am sorry if what we've been covering seems academic. The Buddha's teachings are indeed profound, and deep and difficult to fully comprehend, but we need them today. There are many reasons we as a society are so stupid. We need to get a lot smarter if we are going to meet the urgent crises we face right now, in our natural world, in our societies, and in our families and personal lives. To do this, we need to not only think about the issues, but we need to think about our thinking itself. Is it well-grounded? Is it wise? Is it clear? Or are the very foundations of our views and beliefs entirely wrong?

Please understand I am not criticizing or blaming anyone; the reasons for our collective stupidity are many: legacy stupidity from past history—stretching as far back as anyone can know—from our technologies, that give us the illusion of knowing and connecting, from our educational systems, which have been deliberately dumbed down, from the confusion of experts, from the willful misdirection provided by corporations, the military, and politicians. This is not a rant, our predicament is just an unfortunate confluence of confounding factors in our consciousness. We need to help each other discern wisdom from the proliferation of information and misinformation. But this will require us to really deepen our understanding, and it requires a bit of work. So let's dive in again.

We have been looking at the existing views of cause and effect and their origins in the West through some philosophical history, in our present moment experience, and in India at the Buddha's time. These views share a common feature: they are linear, proceeding from cause to effect. They may accept that a single effect might have multiple causes, but the direction of influence is always one-way, from causes to effect. It is this linear directionality that characterizes both Western and Indian models of causality, as well as our own "common sense". And on the surface our experience seems to verify this view. Time flies: an infant becomes a child and does not become an infant again. A broken glass does not become whole again. A car slowly depreciates, and it does not become new again.

But in observing time's arrow we confuse it with causal influence. We misunderstand the fundamental workings of cause and effect, and this would not be problematic, if it resulted only in our personal confusion and ignorance. But it has profound consequences for our relationships with others, our collaborative creation of a society, and our interdependence with all living being. We are seeing right now, in so many ways, the destruction our wrong-headed ideas about cause and effect, and therefore right and wrong, have wrought in our world. Mass

incarceration, destruction of our own habitat, a frayed social fabric, war, and the rampant greed, hatred, and ignorance that drive so much conflict are just a few examples.

The Buddha refuted the causal views of his time, as Macy notes, “because they provided neither desire to do, nor effort to do, nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed. So then, the necessity for action or inaction is not found to exist in truth or verity.” (in those views)

The existentialists noticed this absence, but because they were still grounded in linear causality, they were filled with despair; there was “no exit,” in a meaningless world. The experience of liberation becomes a nightmare of emptiness and alienation. This view is still captive of the linear model of cause and effect, even in their denial of meaning, possibility, and connection.

If cause and effect were linear, as we have believed, there would be a straight and inevitable line from cause to effect, and it would always hold true. We’ve been told that smoking causes lung cancer, for example, and this seems like a fact that has been well-proven by science. But some people smoke and live a hundred years without disease, and some people get lung cancer who have never smoked. We are taught that speeding causes car accidents, yet we know people who speed and never have an accident somehow. Drinking too much causes alcoholism we are told; yet there are people who can drink, a lot, and never become alcoholic—they are just heavy drinkers. We exercise, eat wholesome food, meditate, drive safely, and still get sick, still get hurt in car accidents. So these “causes” cannot actually be causes. Yet we know there is some real correlation: how can we best describe it?

If we are mindful, we can recognize that raising a child, owning a pet, driving a car in traffic, planting a garden are clear examples where simple models of cause and effect just do not seem to apply. Rather, they examples of mutual causality, where causes and effects seem to influence each other. And of course there are many other examples as well; in fact our whole life unfolds that way. Our conditioning and our tendencies respond by either magnifying or dismissing our influence and its effects and magnifying or dismissing the influence of others. Steve Jobs believed he was the sole driving cause for Apple’s success—until its Board fired him. When he returned, Apple was 90 days from bankruptcy, and Steve had learned a valuable lesson about mutual causality in leading a company. What unfolded from there is legendary.

Activity

You will need tools for writing.

Please take a few minutes to get mindful, and recall a time when you experienced the reality of “causes and effects arising together and influencing each other.” It may be something quite ordinary: driving on the expressway, for example, or cooking a meal. Describe that experience and what you recognized or now recognize about causes and effects.

[breakout rooms of 3-4 for 20 min.]

Part 2

What the Buddha realized in his enlightenment was truly revolutionary, and it remains so today. While a handful of contemporary scientists and philosophers have recognized the inadequacy of linear models of causality, and have discovered in complex systems the same insights about mutual causality, this discovery has had little impact on mainstream beliefs, including those that inform personal beliefs, our conventional collective wisdom, our public policies and social movements.

So let's look at the Buddha's description of his own enlightenment, and that phenomenal realization of *paticca samuppada*. *You know this story by now I presume!:*

[from In the Buddha's Words, edited by Bikkhu Bodhi]

Think about this: Settling into mindfulness of what was right before him, the Buddha considered his own life, right there, and back to its beginning. He was studying his own suffering, during his period of extreme asceticism, and wondered about karma carried forward from past lives having some influence on his life now. Past lives were a common subject in the teachings of his time, and in Indian cultural knowledge. He was seeking the origins of suffering: was it just fate? Was it caused by our will or behaviors? He was able, according to his account, to access his many past lives, searching for the connections to suffering in this life. When he had thoroughly reviewed those past lives, in which he had different names, families, food, and habitation, he understood how identities are constructed, arise, and disappear, lifetime after lifetime. He wondered about other people: they too seemed to suffer, get sick, grow old, fall ill, and die, and he widened his view to include all of humanity: they too, he saw, fared forward under all conditions, their lives were shaped by their karma and unfolded accordingly, from birth to death. But that karma was not the result of blind fate or accident. Nor was it entirely within their control. Somehow, though, the cumulative effect of moment by moment decisions and inclinations, meeting their various circumstances, creating new conditions and new reactions, was ever shaping the flow of their lives. In terrible circumstances, some found a joyful equanimity, others were crushed or anger festered in them. In ease and luxury, some were still bitter and unhappy.

Flint tells the story of going for brunch at the most famous restaurant in New Orleans, as a special treat. As he and Erin were shown to their place, they passed a huge table laden with beignets, bowls of fresh fruit, platters of ham and bacon, mounds of potatoes and plates of eggs Benedict. There were babies and toddlers, teenagers and parents and grandparents, all around the table, and at its head was the matriarch, regal and coifed, in her eighties, surveying

this splendid array. Looking down at her plate, with pinched lips, she said, "I'm not that happy with mine."

In observing the whole of humanity, the Buddha could see that these different lives were unfolding as a product of the karma resulting from each person's intentions and actions.

He wanted to investigate, and he continued to deepen in meditation. *What causes suffering? There were so many factors, so many forms of suffering. He began with the most extreme: death. Every living being eventually dies; this is a universal truth.*

What causes death? Hypertension, obesity, heart disease, cancer, COVID, car accident, murder, crib death, falls, hurricanes, wildfires, lions, bombs, despair, loneliness, poison, wars, old age, the list goes on and on. But at the bottom of it, there is only one condition that leads to death in every case, and that is being born. Everything that is born eventually dies, however that happens; birth is the condition for death. The Buddha began to work backward from this point to explore the chain of causes and conditions, the origins of the whole mass of suffering.

There's no simple term for the complexity of mutual causality, where effects influence causes, which in turn generate effects, and where the chain of causation is not linear. The Buddhist term for this complexity is "causes and conditions." By smoking, we create causes and conditions favorable to lung cancer. We live in a probabilistic universe. It is not a random or chaotic universe but a lawful one; that is the meaning of Dharma: lawful. But the laws are not simplistic. All we can do is endeavor to be wise about the causes and conditions we are contributing to and pay attention to how this influences the way our life and the lives of others unfold. It is a participatory universe. Being passive, sitting back in order to avoid risk, also creates causes and conditions and we need to be mindful of the healthy or unhealthy consequences that unfold from that. It is a learning universe: from birth to death we are in a training program, and in turn, our experience is how the universe comes to know and manifest itself. There is no way to avoid causes and conditions that are created by and radiate out from our every thought, word, and action. And that is why it is so important to build our capacity to be awake, attentive, wise, and compassionate for ourselves and for others and for our world. Meditation is the method par excellence for developing those capacities. This too the Buddha realized.

[notes: Macy 36:

The conditional factors enumerated in the Buddha's teaching of paticca samuppada came to be known as the nidanas. Macy points out that nidana denotes "basis, constraint, or occasion". Another term used synonymously is paccaya, translated as "conditioned by." The series

appears in a variety of forms and numbers, but the predominant form that became standard is twelvefold.: Connecting each is "conditioned by,"

avijja (ignorance): [the starting condition. We might also think of this as the unborn and uncreated]

sankhara (volitional, or karmic formations): [some impulse arises]

vinnana (consciousness or cognition) [the birth of awareness]

namarupa (name and form, or the psycho-physical entity) [a sense of self]

salayatana (the sixfold senses: [five senses plus the mind as a sensory organ])

phassa (contact) [sense organs in contact with the world]

vedana (feeling) [pleasant, unpleasant, neutral]

tanha (craving) literally: thirst

upadana (grasping) [reaching out for]

bhava (becoming) [from that reaching out, we come fully into being]

jati (birth)

jardamarana (decay and death)

The Buddha also worked this series backwards, as a check: here the term is nirodha, "with the ceasing of," with the ceasing of ignorance, sankhara does not arise, and so on, up to with the ceasing of birth, death does not arise. And thus the means of the ceasing of this heap of suffering.

Macy points out that the emphasis is on the conditional relationship of these factors, rather than the separate factors themselves. Emphasis is on the transiency and relationality which characterize them and which provide scope for meaningful change. The factors which we experience as basic to life and which give rise to our pain condition each other. All are linked, none are permanent, hence the possibility of release.

Macy 39: The teachings of paticca samuppada in the form of the nidana series occurs chiefly in the accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment and in passages where he distinguishes the Dharma from other views of karma and determinacy. In these early texts the series is not presented as a portrayal of rebirth or a sequence of lives. That interpretation... arose later with

the Abhidharma, or Buddhist scholastic thought. Nor is the series in the suttas and vinaya imaged in circular form. Only in later descriptions and iconography is it applied to the symbol of the wheel, which has featured in Indian culture since the time of the chariot-driving Aryans. ... the circle thus formed conveying the endlessness and beginninglessness of causal interaction.

Four-part formula:

imasmin sati idam hoti

imassupada idam uppajjati

imasmin asati idam na hoti

imassa nirodha idam nirujjati

(This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that becomes not; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.)

The conditionality...is that of a universe in process where all is interrelated and mutually affecting.) She notes: No mention is made of dukkha here, nor is this formulation tied in the texts to explanations of suffering. Rather it presents, simply and baldly, the interdependence of phenomena which the Buddha perceived. Paticca samuppada is frequently assumed to consist of an explanation of suffering alone. But that does not define or delineate the content of the insight that occurred in the enlightenment. It was not dukkha that the Buddha beheld beneath the bodhi tree—that fact he already knew, and it impelled his search. It was samudaya and nirodha, the conditioned arising and ceasing, that broke upon him there. Nor did this relation of arising and passing away come to be presented exclusively in terms of suffering. [Rather], the largest proportion of the ninety three suttas dealing with paticca samuppada, fifty-six, present paticca samuppada as the causal relation between all phenomena and the principle which all followers must master.]

Next class: Hakujo and the fox plus continuing

(p. 35) The Buddha does use the principle of paticca samuppada, dependent co-arising to explain the origin of suffering in a dialogue with Kassapa, who stands in for all of us, when we or someone we care about is suffering. He asks the questions we all want answers to. In the suttas this dialogue is repeated with others. It is a universal human dilemma. Macy describes the exchange:

Here is Kassapa's first question, "Is suffering wrought by oneself?" We think, was it something I did? Did I cause my own cancer somehow? Am I to blame for my own suffering?

The Buddha answers no, [or literally, "do not say so," Kalupahana points out that the actual term the Buddha used suggests prohibition rather than denial: the emphasis is on the

wrongness of the question and the kind of answer it implies: “don’t put it that way” rather than its negation.] Do not say so, the Buddha says, explaining that would imply the eternalist theory: a changeless self.

“What then, Master Gotama, is one’s suffering wrought by another?” This is our second question too: is someone or something else to blame? Is there something outside of me causing this suffering?

“Do not say so,” the Buddha replies, for that would assume one is impotent in a predetermined universe. Similarly, he responded to the third query, whether suffering is caused both internally and externally. All three of these questions presuppose that causality requires an enduring substance which as agent produces another.

The fourth and last question offers the only alternative that Kassapa sees: “Has suffering, wrought neither by myself nor another, befallen me by chance?” We wonder too, “Is my suffering just random happenstance in a chaotic universe—just bad luck?” Again the Buddha’s negative reply. We can imagine Kassapa’s frustration and confusion. He wonders whether the Buddha has any idea what he is talking about. “The Master Gotama neither knows nor sees suffering.”

“Nay, Kassapa, says the Buddha, I am not one who knows not suffering nor sees it. I am one that knows suffering, Kassapa, I am one that sees it.” He then teaches *paticca samuppada* as the basis for suffering, as it is for all phenomena.

Please understand that to say something is complex is not to say it is incomprehensible; to say that causes and effects arise together and condition each other is not something mystical. Over the next two classes I hope we can keep clarifying this teaching so that we can make good use of it in our practice and in our lives.