

The Buddha's Program

April 29, 2021

When we look at the Buddha's teachings, some of them seem awfully abstract—far away from our immediate daily lives. But we have to remember: Everything is there for a practical purpose. Some of the more abstract-seeming principles are really the most basic ones, and it's good to see how they relate to what we're doing.

Like the Buddha's statement of causality: "When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." That's two causal principles interacting. One principle is causality in the present moment: Something arising right now has a cause that arose right now. The second principle is causality over time: Something arising right now may have a cause that has long since passed, but it left an influence.

When you put these two principles together, it means that what you're experiencing right now can come from the present or it can come from the past.

The Buddha lays this out more clearly in dependent co-arising: The world of the six senses, contact at the six senses, comes halfway through the list of causes. That factor basically consists of influences coming in from the past. Whereas fabrication and intention come earlier—and these are things you're doing right now. In other words, what you're doing right now is prior and influences the fact that you even experience things coming in from the past.

This principle is why we're meditating: We're trying to look at what we're bringing to the present moment. What anticipations, what ideas, what perceptions, what assumptions are we bringing?

You see this clearly in the breath: The way you picture the breath to yourself will have an influence on how the breath actually goes right now. How you tell yourself to focus on the breath will influence how the breath goes right now.

This is why we try out different assumptions about the breathing and the breath energy in the body—and why, when the meditation isn't going well, you don't just chalk it up to past bad karma. You look at what you're doing right now.

Now, it may be that something happened a little while ago that has you all riled up. You can't change that fact, but you can change the fact of how you approach being riled up, and to what extent you develop skills to calm yourself down. Calming bodily fabrication, calming mental fabrication: These are steps in

the breath meditation. They apply to the way you shape things coming in from the past as much as to things you're doing right now.

Ideally, you take the lessons you've learned in the meditation and apply them in the rest of your life. Try to be sensitive to the assumptions you're bringing to different situations, so that you don't just react on automatic pilot. Because what is automatic pilot? It's just your old assumptions.

Someone comes and pushes a button, one of your buttons—and you know what has buttons: machines. *People* don't have buttons. When you allow your buttons to be pushed, you turn yourself into a machine. You simply go along with the program. When you look at some of the programs, you realize it wasn't the wisest person in the world who designed them. It's more like Daffy Duck and Elmer Fudd: violent emotional reactions that obliterate your mindfulness.

So you've got to leave little signs for yourself, to remind yourself: Things outside may not be ideal, but that doesn't mean you have to suffer from them. Try to rewrite the program. Take your old assumptions and compare them with the Buddha's.

There's a Thai term for these assumptions: *samut*. It comes from the Pali *sammatti*, which means something that's agreed on, something that is supposed into being. The mind has its little inner agreements. And here again, you might ask yourself, who you're agreeing with when you follow a particular program. Is it still Daffy Duck? Can't you agree with somebody better?

The Buddha gives you ways to think, ways to breathe, perceptions to hold in mind. Try to drill them into yourself, so that they're present in your awareness when you encounter events that otherwise would push your buttons.

Now, these are assumptions. Anything that's expressed in language is an assumption. There's a belief in parts of the Buddhist tradition that there are two levels of truth: There's the language of assumptions, conventions, and suppositions on the one hand; and then there's the language of true reality on the other. But all language is a matter of supposition. The forest tradition doesn't make a pairing between assumptions and ultimate reality. It makes a pairing between assumptions and *release*, because only in release is the mind is totally beyond the influence of past assumptions.

Even the Buddha's teachings, as he lays things out, are there as assumptions for you to fall back on, to guide your actions—as long as you have to be acting. After all, you assumed yourself into being a being, and once you've become a being, beings have to feed, and you need something good to guide you.

So what are the Buddha's feeding instructions? He has you feed on generosity; feed on virtue; feed on meditation; thoughts of goodwill; and then the

meditation of getting the mind to settle down with the breath, to gain discernment.

All these instructions are the assumptions that you use to feed well—and feed in a way that takes you to a point where you’ve developed the strengths inside that you no longer need to feed.

They also allow you to call into question any assumptions that would make you suffer. What are the assumptions that are making you suffer right now? Can you question them? If you can’t question them now, what are you going to do when you die?

One of the hardest things about dying is the question, “What will become of me?” Like Elisa Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*: “What will become of me?” If you assume yourself to be a being, you have to worry about that.

But if you can simply be with awareness, not making any more assumptions around that than just the awareness, and let go of all the things that have to do with the life of this particular being, then you find that you don’t suffer. You learn to turn around and look at these assumptions and the extent to which you saw them as reality, as the basic reference points in your existence, in your awareness.

You see how they were useful in some ways—otherwise you wouldn’t have latched on to them—but they can also weigh you down. Then you realize that this is the time to stop using them as reference points, and can learn how to let them go. Again, the Buddha gives you the tools of analysis, his assumptions for analyzing these things, so that you can use them and get past them.

When you get past them, you put the tools down. The mind will come to that point where it’s no longer giving any input into the present moment. Even the intention not to do anything is not present.

This is why when the Buddha talks about this moment, it’s in paradoxes: As when that deva asks him, how did he cross the stream? And he responds, “By neither pushing forward, nor by staying in place.” It’s a very precise, accurate description of that moment, but it’s hard to understand as long as you’re still in the coordinates of space and time. But when you can drop that present moment input—and this is where that teaching on causality really shows its value—there is a possibility for freedom.

So as you meditate, learn to get very clear about the assumptions you’re bringing to the present moment, seeing which ones at the moment are unnecessary baggage, which are old programs that were designed by a programmer who didn’t know what he or she was doing.

Take the Buddha’s program: Realize that what seems to be hard-wired in you is part of the software, and you can rewrite the software. The Buddha’s instructions

are basically lessons in how to rewrite the software. You follow them, and then you put them down.

You find that there's a place where there are no assumptions at all.

That's how the more abstract teachings apply right now: Look at what you're doing. This is what alertness is all about. We're in the present moment not to be aware of the whole present moment as a totality, but more specifically: What are we *doing* in the present moment? We focus on that.

Learn to see the programs behind it. Learn to see where they're well written, where they're ill written. As you go through the day, try to be mindful. When you see an old program slipping into place, you have the right to pull out. Give the Buddha's program a try.