

## Causes and conditions

While waiting for the bus to take us home from the Minding Centre, I would sometimes jest with Ratna (my wife) by saying: “If I tap on this bollard, bus no 852 is sure to come.” True enough, the bus eventually came. Ratna is, of course, wise enough to understand that even if I did not tap on the bollard, the bus would still arrive to pick us up.

Looking back, we can say that my bollard-tapping and the bus arrival are simply a series of unrelated events that are present in our consciousness. The point is that things happen all the time, whether we observe them or not. Then we relate event A to event B, in which case, it is possible that A = cause and B = effect.

But this is not the rule, as my bollard-tapping and the bus’s arrival have no causal connection. (If I had tapped the bollard at, say 2 am, no buses would come at all.) This may be a trivial example, but surprisingly, very often, this is how we think. Examples abound. If I have a lot of money, I’ll be happy. If I have some title, people will respect me. I believe in God, so I’m prosperous. This Buddha pendent saved my life in the accident.

There are many other ways we could explain such cases, depending on how we think, what we believe in, and how we perceive things. None of them, despite our belief or faith, could be right in themselves. We simply believe what we want to, especially when we lack the wisdom or opportunity to investigate more carefully.

Let’s now look at a more likely example: where there’s smoke, there’s a fire. We see smoke coming out of a building. If the smoke is thick and billowing, we can conclude that there the building is on fire. Of course, other cases of smoke could lead us to a kitchen stove fire or a barbecue pit fire. However, white clouds of carbon dioxide from a fire extinguisher do not come from a fire. Such an anomaly, of course, did not exist in ancient India, whose philosophers used that famous example of a smoking fire.

Even at this stage, we can conclude that a “cause” is a *mental* connection (or perception) we make between two events. Such events, in themselves, may or may not be related. If we see fire issuing forth from a struck match, we can rightly conclude the striking the match caused it to burst into flames. We would, of course, be wrong to conclude that the “smoke” from a fire-extinguisher or an anti-mosquito thermal fogger comes from some fire.

In short, external events, even when unconnected, can be seen as being connected in our minds. This is, in fact, how religious faith tends to work. When we see a large religious building, we may think that it must belong to a very “good” religion. We see an impressively dressed priest, we may conclude he is very “holy.” We are given a business card with a long list of titles and positions, and we think (or are supposed to think) that its owner is a very accomplished person in something (or at least should have our attention). Since a teacher is famous and senior, whatever he says or does must be right, we think.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s come back to the example of the burning match. Notice that it is wrong to say that the match caused the fire. It’s more correct, although not completely accurate, to say that striking the match causes it to burst into flames. Of course, we might say, there are other conditions: the right ambient temperature, sufficient oxygen, and so on. These are the conditions for the match bursting into flames.

Let’s get a bit technical to save time. A “cause” then, for our purposes, means a “sufficient condition,” which means that it is effective by itself (eg when there is no oxygen, a fire is extinguished). A “condition,” on the other hand, is only a “necessary condition,” meaning that it must be present for something

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<sup>1</sup> “Non sequitur” (21 May 2013) features an instruction cartoon on why students paying \$100-an-hour for a Zen meditation can never out-sit the guru: <http://www.gocomics.com/nonsequitur/2013/05/21>

to happen, but not necessarily by itself make it happen (eg the match is only a sufficient condition, which needs other conditions to start a fire).<sup>2</sup>

This distinction between causes and conditions is very useful in our understanding how our mind works, and not to be duped by false reasoning, especially in religious beliefs. Here's a dramatic example, suppose a famous guru is giving a talk and suddenly he floats up into the air. If we do not understand the nature of causes and conditions, we would conclude that he must be enlightened, or perhaps have some magical powers. The point is that he could be a master illusionist (like David Copperfield or David Blaine).

There are two unrelated instances here: the guru's teaching and his levitation. The teaching is neither a cause nor a condition for the levitation. It could be explained in many other ways: he used an illusionist's techniques; or perhaps (an imaginative perception) he has magical powers which permits him to levitate. However, it is important not to conclude: therefore he must be enlightened, or he must be good. Suppose it were Māra in disguise! The point again is that we should clearly understand and apply the principles of causes and conditions.<sup>3</sup>

On a vital and practical level, we need to see these principles of causes and conditionality at work in our daily lives. When we fail to achieve something, especially after repeated attempts, our frustration compels us to find someone or something to blame: "I'm stupid; my parents are uneducated; all these people are stupid; I'm having bad luck," and so on.

Here, it is wise to simply step back for a moment to (1) define precisely what is it we really want; (2) what are the conditions preventing us from achieving it; (3) how to overcome these hindrances; and (4) what shall we do right now?

Our struggle with difficulties in life is all related to causes and conditions. After an episode of difficulty, it is helpful to reflect on how causes and conditions were at work in them. Try to see the causal and conditional patterns in them. We would notice, for example, that nothing happens in itself: all events occur as part of a network of events. Try to see the bigger picture and our place in it. Then we begin to know what we rightly need to do.

If causes and conditions are the mechanics of life (the "meaning" of life, if you like), then our vision and goals are our "purpose" in life. We need to clearly distinguish between "instrumental" goals and "intrinsic" goals. Instrumental goals are those which serve as the bases for higher goals, that is, they are not fulfilling in themselves. Making money surely must be an instrumental goal, which explains why even when we have attained our financial target, we are still never really happy.

It is what we *do* with our money, status, fame, personality and so on that makes us happy or not. This is not only a healthy "work-life" balance, but also keeping intrinsic goals clearly in mind. If we really care to list our priorities, surely our list, beginning with the foremost, would be: health, happiness, love, housing, service to others, and so on. Occasionally (at least once a year), we should review how we have kept up these priorities, or working in that direction.

Actually, there is really only one intrinsic goal: to be truly happy. However, we first need to understand what happiness really is. What we "have" may contribute to material happiness; what we "are" (positive qualities) defines our true (or spiritual) happiness.

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<sup>2</sup> For details, see **Necessity and sufficiency in early Buddhism**, SD 35.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/35.1-Necessity-sufficiency-piya.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See **Miracles**, SD 27.5a: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/27.5a-Miracles-piya.pdf>