

The Karma of Ideas

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When we think about the Buddha's teachings on karma, we most often think about how it applies to the results of our words and our deeds. We tend to forget that it also applies to the mind. In fact, though, it applies primarily to the mind. Our ideas are instances of karma as well. The things you focus on, the things you choose to think about, the questions you choose to ask, the perceptions you choose to hold in your mind: These are actions as well. They all fall into the Buddha's teachings on karma.

There are skillful actions on the worldly level, in other words, there are skillful ideas that help you live in the world in a happy and pleasant way. There are unskillful ones, which make you live in an unpleasant or unhappy way. There are mixed ones, and then there are the ideas that take you beyond ideas, take you beyond action entirely. Those ideas are the ones related to the noble path: right view, right resolve, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are all instances of karma. So when you let your mind dwell on something, ask yourself: "What is the result of dwelling on this?" In other words, the question is not only, "Is this thought true?" but also, "Is this useful? Is it going to take you some place good? What's its impact?"

If you see that it's not only true but also useful, then the next question is, "Is this the right time for it?" Those questions that the Buddha has you ask about right speech apply to your thoughts as well.

You can see this as you meditate. The most relevant thoughts come down to three technical terms: attention, intention, and perception. Perception is the mental picture you hold. In this case, what picture do you have of the breathing process? When the breath comes in, what's coming in? How does it come in? What's making it come in? Have you stop to examine it?

One way to examine it is to give yourself a new perception, consciously, intentionally. Think of the body as a big sponge. It's got holes all over the place, and the holes are connected throughout the sponge. So when you breathe in, breath energy comes in from all directions and there's nothing really in the way. There are always holes someplace that it can come through. Just hold that perception in mind and see what you start noticing, how it changes the way you breathe, whether it's more comfortable or less, whether it's easier to stay with the body or harder to stay with the body. That shows you that the karma of your perceptions has an impact: It can bring about either comfortable feelings or uncomfortable feelings. Or you can think of the breath as subatomic, and all those spaces between the atoms in your body. That's even more open than a sponge, more refined than a sponge.

Ajaan Fuang used to recommend thinking of there being a core running down from the brain down to the bottom of the spine, right in middle of the body, and the breath comes into that core and goes out from that core. You can think of it as a line of energy. See what that perception does. Or you can focus on a particularly difficult part of the body where you hold tension, where there seems to be a blockage. Focus directly on that and see what happens. Think of it opening up, and the breath can come in from any direction—front, back, top down, coming up from below—and see if that helps open up the blockage. Sometimes the blockage may feel to be in one spot, but it's actually caused by a blockage in another spot. Check for that as well.

As you do this, you begin to see the impact of your perceptions. Perceptions—the ones you choose to focus on—are a kind of karma. We carry around so many perceptions that we are hardly aware of them. We pick them up from this person or that, or they're ideas we've gained from books we've read, people we've talked to, things we picked up on our own when we were little kids. The mind is often like a house where you haven't moved out of the house ever since you were born. You know what happens when you live in a house without ever moving: You never have to take stock of your possessions. Things just pile up.

When you're meditating, it's like moving out of the house and you have to decide, which possessions are really worth taking with you, which ones do you want to throw away or give to Goodwill? If you find the perceptions are hard to detect, then consciously come up with some new ones, intentionally come up with new ones, and then try holding on to them to see how they affect the way you breathe. This way, you get a better and better sense of the karma of your thoughts, the karma of your ideas.

You can start seeing this in other areas of your life as well.

In the chant we had just now on turning the wheel of Dhamma, the most important part of the chant is the wheel. You may not have noticed it. It was the passage where we went through the four noble truths and then the duties appropriate to each of them. Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause is to be abandoned, its cessation is to be realized, and the path to that cessation is to be developed. These are the Buddha's "shoulds." They're another set of ideas that you can carry around with you, particularly as you go out into the frenzy of the world, because one of the crazy-making aspects of our modern cultures is that we're exposed to a lot of shoulds all at once. People with political agendas have their shoulds, people with psychological agendas have their shoulds, members of your family have their shoulds, and if you try to live by all the shoulds that are being imposed on you, you go crazy. You get pulled one direction and then another, you get blown around by the ideas of the world. Some of their shoulds are humane, and some of them are not. Some of them have your true happiness in mind, but a lot of them don't.

This is why the Buddha's shoulds are so valuable, because they really are on your side. From the psychological point of view, they're the Buddha's version of the superego, which tells you what you should do. He's saying basically that you should take the issue of your suffering really seriously. When you see that you're doing something that's causing suffering, abandon it. But first off, you've got to comprehend what is this suffering. That requires that we sit and look at it, but all too often, we run away from it. We try to cover it up, hide it, push it out—anything but actually sit and look at it. This is one of the things that blows us around. Every time we come near suffering, we try to run away. So in addition to the winds of the world blowing us around, we have our own fears that keep pushing us away, pushing us away. But if you're willing to sit and look at the stress you're feeling, look at the suffering you're feeling, with an attitude of curiosity, that helps make you resistant to a lot of the winds, the shoulds of the world.

So this is one way of withstanding outside pressure, because fear and bewilderment is the hook of a lot of influences that come from outside. They say, "You want to be happy, you want to get away from your sufferings and your pains, and your miseries? Well, we will show you how. Do it our way." You're so ready to run away from your suffering that you just follow anybody who comes up with a suggestion. But if you say, "No, I'd rather sit and look at this for a while," then you're not so susceptible to their influences.

But of course, you need skill to manage this. This is why we have the path. If there were nothing but suffering for you to look at all day in, all day out, you wouldn't last very long. So we work on developing concentration, keeping a center, maintaining that center inside. Always have the perception that you've got this quiet spot inside that doesn't have to get involved with the suffering. You can stay in your quiet spot and watch the suffering. You can see it clearly. It's as if there's a clear glass window between it and you. Try to maintain that attitude all the time.

This is why we work on the breath to make it comfortable: so that you do have a place to go when suffering gets really bad, when you get worn out trying to understand it, comprehending it, and just can't see where it's coming from. Okay, drop the issue for the time being and go back to the sense of ease that you can create by working with the breath energy in the body.

That's an important part of the Buddha's strategy, trying to maximize the pleasure you can get simply from the process of breathing, so that you have your foundation. That way, you're in a much better position to be able to sit and look at the suffering, look at stress, to see how it comes, how it goes, how it comes back again. Then you can ask the question, "What did I just do that made it come back again?" Or when it goes, ask yourself, "What did I just do just now?" You begin to see what arises together with the suffering and ceases as the suffering ceases. That's a lot of your clue right there as to what's actually causing it. Often it's these elements of perception, attention, and

intention: the ideas you hold in mind, the things you focus on as important, and what you want to do as a result.

So as you decide to keep the Buddha's shoulds in mind, that changes your intention. You hold on to these, as opposed to the shoulds of the world, and you find that life gets a lot easier. You're not so susceptible to outside influences. You're not so easily pushed around. When the winds of the world blow, they can just blow right through you, but you stay where you are. You're like a screen on a big window: The wind blows through the screen, and the screen may wobble a little bit, but it doesn't get blown around, because it allows these things to come through without trying to catch them, without trying to resist them. You're secure enough that you don't have to run with every influence that comes from outside, because you've got your set of shoulds that you know is more important than the shoulds that other people are imposing on you, or that your old ideas impose on you.

So right view, or what the Buddha calls appropriate attention, means looking at things in terms of these four noble truths and the duties that are appropriate to them. That's an important kind of karma. It's part of the karma that leads to the end of karma—a set of ideas, a set of mental choices, that lead to the end of having to have ideas and choices. In other words, they can ultimately deliver you to true happiness.

So when the ways of the world seem overwhelming, remind yourself, you've got something that's more important than the world, that's more solidly based than the world.

We talk about the real world as if the practice is unreal, or the attitudes that the Buddha has us follow are unreal, that's not the case at all. These are real. As for the world, you just look at what it's like, at how dependable it actually is. One day, people have one set of attitudes; a little while later, they change. If you allow yourself to take the axis of the world as the point where your compass points, it's not like the physical world. Magnetic North does move a little bit on the physical world, but the magnetic North of the world of people's attitudes wobbles all over the place. The Buddha's magnetic North is even steadier and more constant than the magnetic North of the physical world. It's just these things: There's suffering, and you want to comprehend it. There's its cause, and you want to abandon it. There's its cessation, which you want to realize, and there's the path to its cessation, which you want to develop. Make sure that those are your values, those are your ideals. Those are the ideals, those are the shoulds that you follow. They give you something solid to hold on to as the rest of the world blows around in whatever it's going to do.

So the choice is yours. And always remember you have that choice. That's what's so important about the Buddha's teachings on karma: its affirmation of choice. It's strange that karma has been one of his teachings that's had a hard time penetrating into the

West. People like being independent, they like being able to shape their lives, but they don't like the idea that their actions have consequences. They're like children. They want to be free to play but they don't want to have to pick up their messes. But if you realize the fact that you do have these choices, you should also realize that this is what enables you to be free: the fact that there are consequences to your actions. You're able to shape the world through what you do. If your actions didn't have consequences, there would be no freedom to accomplish anything at all. It's simply a matter of learning how to work more skillfully with your thoughts and your words and your deeds, but especially your thoughts.

So each time a thought comes into your mind that you feel tempted to focus on and develop, ask yourself, "Is this skillful?" Remember, it has consequences. And remember you have the choice to focus on the thoughts that have the best consequences. It may take time, it may take application of energy—after all, it's a skill you have to work on—but the results are more than worth it. Whatever effort goes into it, the results go way beyond the effort. The karma that leads to the end of karma opens you up to the deathless. The conditioned world, if you learn how to manipulate the conditions properly, opens you up to the unconditioned.

So always hold that attitude in mind.