

## *The Karma of Meditation*

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People sometimes wonder what the teaching on karma has to do with meditation. The first thing it has to do with is this: The fact that you're meditating is a type of karma. You set up an intention and you try to stick with it. Now, the original intention itself is the karma, and the intention to stick with it is also karma. Because it's karma, you want to do this as skillfully as possible. In other words, you don't just set up a good intention and hope that the good intention on its own is going to take care of everything. You check carefully to see what you're doing and the results you're getting right now.

This goes along with the Buddhist teachings on causality. The fact that you're having any experience of the six senses at all right now involves three things: the results of past karma, your present karma, and the results of your present karma—all those things mixed together. Which means that in some cases what you do right now is going to give you results right now. Some of the things you're experiencing right now have to do with what you're actually doing right here. So try to do this well, and you'll begin to see some of the results right now.

When the results don't come, you may wonder, "What about that past karma?" The Buddha doesn't have people think too much about past karma, except for the general principle that you want to do good karma right now, skillful karma right now, as much as you can, and be prepared for the fact that there may be some bad things coming up from your past karma.

It's like being a cook. You want to be able to cook well with whatever your ingredients are. You know the cooks who have to have only the best ingredients, only the best pots and pans, and only the best stoves and whatever: Those are not really the skilled cooks. The skilled cooks are the ones who can take anything and make good food out of it.

Now, as the Buddha said, if you tried to trace back where your past karma is coming from, who is responsible, who is at fault, or who can be credited with it, you'd go crazy. There are many stories in the commentaries about people who develop a real animosity for each other, and then life after life after life they come and go, back and forth. A kills B, and then in the next lifetime, B kills A, and the next time around A kills B again, to the point where you don't know who is to blame. Everybody is to blame. So the issue becomes moot.

The real issue right now is if there's anything bad coming in from the past, how you learn not to suffer from it. At the same time, how do you learn not to react

unskillfully to bad or good things coming in. Sometimes good things come in and you can get complacent. Then you get unskillful in the present moment. Or bad things come in and you lash out in anger. That, too, can lead to unskillful behavior now.

So first you have to put the mind in position where it's not going to be so affected by whatever comes in from the past. The Buddha recommends two things. One is developing an attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. These are called the *brahma-viharas*, the sublime abidings. They're the attitudes of people of really well developed concentration, with a sense of well-being inside that they want to share with others. They don't think only about their own narrow little limited interests; they think broadly, sharing this good attitude broadly.

The Buddha makes a comparison. He says it's like a very wealthy person who incurs a debt or incurs a fine. The authorities come and they ask for the debt or the fine to be paid back. Because the person has a lot of wealth, he hardly feels it at all. The other type of person is someone who's very narrow-minded, narrow-hearted. Doesn't care about genuine well-being for himself or other people or herself and other people. Has very little compassion, very little empathetic joy. Can't remain equanimous over things that arise in life. That kind of person is like someone who's very poor. The authorities come and they ask for the money for the fine. The person doesn't have it and so is dragged off to jail.

There's another passage where the Buddha says that these attitudes are the wealth of a practitioner, so that you can pay back your debts. Ajaan Lee makes a lot of this, as I mentioned last night. The goodness that comes from meditation is that the mind gets more and more saturated with a sense of well-being, and your sense of the boundaries that separate you from other people begin to wear down. You begin to get more sympathetic about their well-being, too. This actually minimizes the impact of past bad karma. As he says, you hardly feel it at all when the results of old karma come, because the mind is in a different state.

The other way of preparing the mind to deal with anything bad coming in from the past is to try to train the mind so that it's not overcome by pleasure or by pain. In other words, you can stand the pain. You can also stand the pleasure. It may sound like a strange idea, but all too often when pleasures come, we just wallow in them, slurp them up. Totally lose our mindfulness. Of course, then we behave in unskillful ways. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath to try to allow it to be comfortable so that you get used to having this sense of pleasure with you, and it becomes no big deal.

Everyone has been through the stage in the practice where you've been trying and trying and trying, and nothing seems to work, and finally one night everything clicks, everything falls into place. There's a great sense of well-being and you try to grab it—and it's like grabbing thin air. Grabbing it, of course, destroys it. It's because you let yourself get too excited about it. But you work at it enough, come back, come back, come back, and get used to the fact that there are going to be good days and bad days. When the good days come, you learn not to get excited about it. You try to learn from it, so that eventually it becomes more and more of a skill. In other words, you see, "What did I do that brought about these results?"

Again, it's like cooking. Sometimes you've got good ingredients as you come to the kitchen to prepare your meal. The other times you begin to realize, "Okay, even though the ingredients aren't all that good, I can still make something good out of them." There may be pains in different parts of the body, but you learn how to work around them. You learn how to breathe through them. On days when the breath throughout the body seems like nothing but iron bands, you should just let it go. Think of the breath as a soothing breath, a calming breath, that just radiates. It has no clear lines, no clear boundaries. That can begin to dissolve those iron bands away. Which means that even though there are ingredients coming in from the market that day, you can deal with it. You can turn them into good food.

As the sense of well-being gets more developed, you can approach pains in the body with a lot more equanimity. When you can develop that equanimity, you don't feel so threatened by things. You can actually look into them.

That's what the Buddha calls the duty with regard to suffering: to comprehend it. Primarily he's focusing on the suffering of stress in the mind. But to comprehend that, you have to consider how the mind conceives of, say, pain in the body. How does it conceive unpleasant emotions in a way that makes it suffer even more? For most of us, as the Buddha said, when we're struck with a pain of some kind, it's like being shot with one arrow—and then we shoot ourselves with a few more arrows over that. It turns out that those extra arrows that are the real problem. You have to look into that response. Why does that first arrow get you to grab your bow and grab your quiver and pull out all the arrows you can and then shoot yourself? Why do you do that? What is it about that first pain that gets you all worked up? It's because you have some strange perceptions around it. Look into those.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a lot of great questions you can ask yourself. Suppose there's a pain in the knee or a pain in the hip. Is the pain the same thing as the knee? Is it the same thing as the hip? Well, no. They seem to be right there. The pain seems to have totally covered everything in the hip, totally penetrated

everything in the hip. But that's not the case. It's like different radio waves in the same spot in a room. You can put your radio anywhere here in the sala and you can get stations from San Diego, you can get stations from Los Angeles, Tijuana, Phoenix, whatever. They're all in the same spot but they're on different frequencies. Well, pain is a different frequency from your physical sensation of the body. If you can see it that way, then the pain can be there, the body can be there, your awareness can be there—they're all there but they're on different channels. The mind doesn't feel like it has to take the pain on.

In this way, whatever comes, you can handle. The results of past bad karma just get less and less and less. Again, you don't have to trace them back to who's at fault and where it came from. That doesn't solve any problems at all. What solves the problems is learning how to deal with these things in the present moment so that they don't have such an impact on the mind. That frees the mind so that it's a lot more able to respond in a skillful way.

Then you look more carefully at this present action—the fact that you do have some freedom here. All too often, people think of the Buddhist teachings on karma as being deterministic: that you're going to have to suffer in the present moment because of something you did in the past or that people who are enjoying things now are the ones with good karma; people with pains and problems right now are the ones with bad karma. The happy people deserve to be happy and the unhappy people deserve to be unhappy. None of that is the case. Again, think of the cook. You can have some really bad produce coming in, but you can do something good with it if you're really good. So you have some freedom here.

There were some Jains, another sect at the time of Buddha. They believed that everybody had karma from the past and they had to just endure it. If they could just endure it without moving, then they would be burning off the old karma. The Buddha went to ask them—it was one of the few times that he actually went someplace with the purpose of engaging in an argument. He said, “How do you know that the pain you're feeling right now is the result of your past karma? Haven't you noticed that when you don't do your austerities, there's no pain? And when you do do them, there is pain? So how can you attribute it all to your past karma?” They didn't have much of an answer; they hadn't thought of that. The Buddha was pointing out that what you do right now makes a *huge* difference.

You've got this freedom, so make the most of it. This is why meditation focuses on the present moment, because this is the moment when you're free to choose—free to develop good qualities or, if you want to do something else, you're free to do that. But haven't we had enough of our old wandering around, putting

up excuses not to train ourselves? Maybe it's time to just get to work and say, "I've got to learn how to do this skillfully." Learn how to read what you're doing so that you don't engage in recriminations; learn how to have a more equanimous attitude so that you're not so threatened by past karma, you're not threatened by what's happening right now—so that you can look at things with more objectivity.

It's like learning any kind of skill. If your emotions go up and down with every stir in the pot, you're really in trouble. You have a bad day, the food gets burned: If you get really upset about that, you're in trouble. Just notice, "Okay, burned the food today. Don't do that again the next time around." There always is a next time around—present moments keep coming and coming and coming. You've got another chance, another chance, another chance to figure out what you did wrong and learn how to do it right.

This involves two qualities that Ajaan Fuang stressed again and again. One, be observant. Two, use your ingenuity. If the breath is tight and constricted, ask yourself, "Is there another level of breath?" You can leave this level of breathing and focus on a level of breath that's a lot more comforting, soothing. It's there. After all, this is the force of life. Open your mind to new possibilities of what sensations in the body are actually breath sensations. Maybe you've been pushing and pulling liquid sensations around, mistaking them for the breath. That just gets things all mixed up.

So the lesson here is that the skills you're developing are what really matter. The ingredients that you find in the kitchen that day, well, sometimes they're pretty meager, but you can learn how to make good, simple meals out of meager things. Learn to appreciate the fact that there are some potentials that you may not have noticed.

We've talked about the idea that if you're happy right now that means you have good karma, and if you're unhappy that means you have bad karma. Well, that doesn't mean that you have only good or only bad. Everybody has got good and bad in their field. To change the analogy, as the Buddha said, it's like a field full of seeds, both good and bad. Some of the seeds are ready to sprout and will sprout no matter what you do; others are going to sprout if you water them. So try to water the good ones. And don't look down on other people who are suffering, because maybe they've got some unsprouted good seeds, and maybe you've got some unsprouted bad seeds in your field.

Another complaint people have about karma is the idea that if somebody is suffering, they deserve to suffer so you're going to leave them that way—which is not the case. Again, nobody deserves to suffer; actions just have results. But the

state of mind with which the action is done and the state of mind with which you receive the results can make a huge difference. If it seems hard-hearted to say that other people are suffering because of their karma, you have to ask yourself: Is your compassion so pure that you can only give it to pure people? We're all in this together; our compassion has to spread to everybody—good and bad, those who have good things, those who have done bad things to us. We've all done both good and bad things. Karma's a great equalizer, in the sense that the basic principle underlying it applies equally to everyone. At the moment, there are inequalities. Some people are very happy. Some people are very fortunate, others are not at all. But we're all living in the same principle.

As the Buddha said, when you see somebody really wealthy, enjoying all sorts of power and pleasures, remind yourself: You've been there. If you see someone really poor—and the example he gave was a leper living on the side of the street—remind yourself that you've been there, too. This way, your compassion can learn how to be not condescending, and your attitudes toward people who are wealthy can be free from any kind of envy or resentment. As we all know, these things go up and they go down, and they go up again and down again, until you learn how to get out of the cycle completely.

That's the other feature of karma: Given that you've got these two principles acting together—the present karma and the past karma—makes things very complex. But the virtue of a complex system is that you take the principles that put it together and you play them in a certain way that makes the whole system break down. In this case, you realize that this can go on and on and on, forever. Consciousness depends on craving, craving depends on consciousness, and they can feed each other along the way. But if you feed the mind really well until it's strong, it doesn't need that companion of craving anymore. It doesn't need to feed. You can bring it to a point of equilibrium through the development of both insight and tranquility, and another dimension opens up—the dimension that's outside the system.

It's because karma is complex that it can be so maddening trying to figure things out. But once you do apply the basic principles—this is why we're so fortunate we had the Buddha who set out the principles—you can use those principles to make yourself free, to find the freedom that's waiting for everyone who learns to use these principles well.