Karma of Meditation, The

September, 2002

Sitting quietly like this, it’s hard to imagine that we’re creating any karma. But we are. After all, karma is primarily a mental event. It’s the choices we make, the intentions we have. Right now I trust that you’re intending to focus on your breath, trying to give rise to a state of concentration in the mind. And in doing it, there’s a letting go, of course, but there’s also a doing. The Buddha says, “Vicacakamehi,” letting go of sensual objects, sensual moods, sensual desires. In other words, you’re not going to focus on any desires that have to do with sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations. You’re going to let go, also, of unskillful qualities. “Vicacakusalehi tamnehi.” Thoughts concerned with passion, aversion, delusion. Thoughts concerned with harming either yourself or other people. You’re going to let those go. You’re going to put them aside. Even though you may not have abandoned them forever, at least you’re going to put them aside for the time being. That’s the letting go. Then there’s the doing, the developing. You’re going to focus the mind on the breath. And as soon as it wanders off, you’re going to bring it back. If it shows the slightest sense of wavering, you’re going to bring it right back. There’s a constant doing in the concentration. Sometimes we lose sight of this. We think, “Oh, just let the mind settle down, be very, very still, and nothing’s doing.” But in order to have the quality of right concentration, there is a doing. That’s what directed thought is all about. You keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. Each time the breath comes in, you remind yourself. After a while, it becomes more and more automatic, so it becomes less and less of a conscious choice. As you settle in, things get more comfortable. Because in addition to directed thought, there’s also evaluation, which is aimed at evaluating how the breath feels. Does it feel good coming in? Does it not feel good coming in? If it doesn’t feel good, what’s wrong? Sometimes you change the rhythm of the breath. Sometimes you change the quality of the breath, from a rough breath to a smoother breath, say. Sometimes you change your perception of the breath. Where is the breath coming in? What do you have to do to get the breath into the body? Do you have to do anything? Ask those questions. If you find that one way of perceiving or conceiving the breath creates a sense of tension or tightness, you can change it. If there’s a lot of pulling or pushing, if it seems there’s a blockage, say, in your nose, think of the breath coming in and out the back of the neck, down from the top of the head, the middle of the forehead. There are all kinds of places where energy can come in and out of the body. As you get more sensitive to what’s going on in the present moment, you realize that that energy is your primary experience of the present. Everything else is just added on, including your perception of what you have to do to breathe. So you’re free to change it. See what works. As the breath gets more comfortable, you find it easier and easier to stay here. It’s as if your center of gravity gets lower and lower, so it’s harder to tip you over. Once a sense of comfort is there, then you spread to make it what they call a single preoccupation. In other words, you want your whole body to be connected with the sensation of breath, so that whatever you feel of the body you can interpret as an aspect of breath energy. All of a sudden, the sensations that you tolerated because you thought they were, say, the bones or whatever, you realize this is blocked breath energy. Something can be done here. You can work through it. Some blockages you find don’t respond. Well, you learn how to work around them. But you want to expand your frame of reference, expand your awareness to fill the whole body, and perceive the whole body as breath, as energy. That way, you’ve got all the factors of the meditation together, the directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. In other words, you’re focused on one thing, and that one thing fills your range of awareness. Once you’ve got the causes of concentration together, then the results will come, a sense of fullness, refreshment, they call rapture, and a sense of ease or pleasure. It’s called sukha in Pali. You don’t have to do those things. Those are the results. But you are acting. There is a karma of meditation. The more clear you can be about it, the more skillful you can approach it. And also, the more ready you are to learn from it in terms of gaining insight, developing discernment. Because when you see what you’re doing, it’s a good lesson in the nature of action, the nature of karma, which is central to any kind of understanding that’s going to liberate the mind. As we were saying this afternoon, the Buddhists say that the central teaching is the teaching on karma. It’s amazing how people say that’s the part of Buddhism that can be most easily dispensed with or attributed to Indian cultural ideas. But when you look back on the Buddha’s time, you realize there are all kinds of theories of action. When the Buddhists tried to distinguish their teaching from the other teachings around them, that was a topic that they focused on. It’s what the other teachings taught about karma or action as opposed to what the Buddha taught. There were teachers that said that action was illusorative. It didn’t really exist. Others said it was totally predetermined. You weren’t responsible for what you did because there was some force acting through you that had already determined what was going to happen. There was another teaching that said that karma is what kept you in the process of rebirth, and the only way to get out was just to stop doing anything. They interpreted karma as physical action. As opposed to all this, the Buddha said, “No, karma is mental.” There are four types. The first three are types of action that keep you going through the round of rebirth, in either pleasant ways or unpleasant ways, or mixed. But then the fourth was the type of karma that caught you out and led to the end of karma. We think that the Buddha came up with this theory of action based on his preconceived notions about what was going on in the universe, but it was the other way around. He learned about actions first. What is the nature of human action? How does it come about? What influences it? What shapes it, and then what does it shape in turn? After exploring action, it was from there that he came to his conclusions about the nature of the universe, how things happen in the universe, based on watching the actions of the human mind and realizing that you can act in a certain way to get out of this web of causality. In fact, his very first teaching was on this type of action, the Eightfold Noble Path. So he starts with karma as well. He didn’t use the word “karma” in that first talk, but he was talking about the fourth kind of karma. That was his first topic. So it really is central to the teaching. Some people wonder how you can put an end to causality by using causal factors. It’s based on the complexity of the causal network that the Buddha taught. Mathematicians nowadays talk about complex fields and how by using the formulas that create a particular field, usually they’re simple formulas that are interacting, you’ll hit certain spots in the field where you’re dividing one of the members of the formula by zero, which of course is an undefined number that’s technically out of the system. So in terms of formal causal theory, there’s no great problem that you can find these spots by using causality to get you outside of causality. You’re following a formula, but it so happens that you get a spot that’s divided by zero. If we think in terms of karma, those are the points where there is no intention in the present moment. Things are brought to an equilibrium when you get out. In a more graphic metaphor, someone once asked Nagasena, who was a famous arahant a couple centuries after the Buddha, “If nirvana is unfabricated, how can you practice to get there? How is this path supposed to cause nirvana?” Nagasena said, “That’s not the case. It doesn’t cause nirvana. It just takes you there. It’s like the road to a mountain. The road to the mountain doesn’t cause the mountain. The fact that you follow the road doesn’t cause the mountain to be, but following the road gets you there.” This is that fourth type of karma that brings you to the end of karma by bringing you to the spot where there’s no more intention. As long as you haven’t reached that spot, there’s still some karma in what you’re doing, so you’re going to be very, very insensitive to what you’re doing. This is why we work so hard to develop mindfulness and alertness, because these are the qualities that help us see what we’re doing. As many times as our intentions are the least obvious things going on in our mind, we tend to hide them. Not only from other people, but also from ourselves, especially if the intention is less than honorable. We’re very good at denying those acts of the mind, so it takes a real element of will to bring them back up into the light of day so we can see precisely what our choices are, how we choose things, what the impact of those choices are. The Buddha’s first teaching to his son had to do with watching your intentions, gauging your actions, and their results, and then learning from your mistakes. For many of us, this is a very difficult proposition. One, to admit that we’ve made mistakes. If other people point out our mistakes, we get all flustered and upset. Part of this, of course, has to do with the fact that we’re living in the world of self-esteem here, in the nation of self-esteem. If you’re going to have self-esteem, it has to be based on the fact that you’re skillful in the way you act. Otherwise self-esteem becomes empty and becomes one more thing that leads to denial. It’s our ability to admit our mistakes and then learn from them. That’s what makes a difference in the path. The person who can’t admit mistakes doesn’t have much of a future on the path. There’s a story about how they select candidates for a surgery school in the University of California in San Francisco, probably the top school for brain surgeons in the country. They assume that everybody who applies there has got to be smart. They know their premed really well. They know their medical skills really well. But the question is, are they going to make good surgeons? Just because they’re smart doesn’t mean they’re going to be good at the operating table. One of the questions they’ve devised in their interview for weeding out smart people but people who don’t have much of a potential is, “Can you tell me about a mistake that you’ve made recently?” Some people say, “Well, I haven’t really made that many mistakes.” Those are the ones that are immediately crossed out. They don’t get into the school. It’s the ones who say, “Yes, I made a mistake just the other day.” Then they say, “What was the mistake? How did you handle it? How did you correct it?” People who talk very frankly about what the mistakes were and how they used their ingenuity to correct it, those are the ones who get admitted into the school. So it’s this very basic process of learning from your mistakes. That’s how you get started on the path. Realizing that the most important thing in your life is what you’re doing right now and understanding the effects that your views and your opinions and the quality of your attention influence your actions and what you do to make that attention more clear, make your views straighter, more in tune with the way things actually are, better informed. How to be observant, how to learn, how to use your ingenuity in order to deal with problems that arise that are not mentioned in the textbook or that are not told you by other people. These are the resources that are necessary for the practice to work because it is a practice of action. Even sitting here with our eyes closed, there’s action. There are choices that are being made. With every in and out breath, more often than every in and out breath, every metal moment. We’re making the mind still so we can see these things clearly and then notice where the mistakes are, where the false moves, the awkward moves, the unskillful moves are. So at the very least we can create better karma the first time. The karma that leads to pleasant results within the cycle of rebirth, which will hopefully put us in a better position so we can start thinking about that fourth type of karma, the karma that gets us out, that leads to the point of no more karma, no more action. So be very alert about what you’re doing because it makes all the difference. It makes all the difference in the world.

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