Conviction in Kamma

April, 2003

When I first went to train under Ajaan Fuang, I asked him, “What do you have to believe in order to meditate?” He said, “There’s only one thing that you have to believe in, and that’s in the principle of karma, that the happiness and suffering you experience come from your actions, from your intentional actions. Skillful intentions lead to happiness. Pleasure, ease. Unskillful intentions lead to pain, suffering, stress. That’s the working hypothesis in the meditation. Otherwise, if you don’t believe in that, what are you doing here? If you don’t believe that your actions have an impact on your experience of suffering and happiness. You meditate thinking that things are just going to happen to you. Somebody else comes in and makes the enlightenment happen. Another person can do this, or a god might do this. So you sit there just waiting for it to happen and biding your time in the meanwhile. But that doesn’t accomplish anything. We’re here training ourselves, learning about the principles of action as it shows itself moment to moment to moment here in the mind. We’re also learning that there’s a skill that can be developed as you pay attention to what you’re doing, pay attention to the results. You can take that knowledge and apply it back to the next moment, the next breath. If you keep paying attention like this, then the quality of the meditation changes. You realize it’s because of your efforts, it’s because of your being observant, that you’ve made the difference. So this is the working hypothesis we bring to the meditation. In some ways, it’s reassuring knowing that our potential for happiness doesn’t have to depend on powers outside. We can depend on ourselves. But it’s also sobering, realizing that if we don’t try to make a difference, there’s not going to be any difference. We can’t fall back on some outside power. So the principle of karma is empowering, but it’s also challenging, which is one of the reasons some people don’t like it. They don’t trust themselves, they don’t feel that they’re capable of handling what’s needed to be more skilled in this area. So they just rather trust on some benevolent being, either a guru or a god of some kind, that’s going to come in and take care of everything for them. But it doesn’t work that way. If the Buddha could have enlightened other beings, we’d all be enlightened now. But it turns out the question of awakening is a question of skill, and nobody can develop a skill for somebody else. You can teach other people the basic rudiments of the skill, point out lessons that you’ve learned, but the question of whether that person is going to develop skill or not is totally up to that other person. In other words, it’s totally up to each of us. So keep this in mind as you meditate. You actually see the principle of karma in action all the time, if you look for it. Because what is karma? It’s intention. You sit down here and you have an intention to stay with a breath for the duration of the hour. Now you find that that intention stays for a while, and sometimes you forget about it. That’s a lapse of mindfulness. Then you catch yourself. If you’re really determined, you bring yourself back to the breath. You reestablish that intention and try to strengthen mindfulness so that the next time around you catch yourself more quickly, more quickly, more quickly, until you get so that you can sense when the mind is going to wander off and you say,”No.” You realize that you have a choice. You’ve hidden these choices from yourself. They’re placed behind the curtains, behind stage props in the mind. There are lots of hidden layers. But if you decide you’re not going to get distracted by those hidden layers, you’re not going to get deceived by them, you begin to see that there are lots of choices being made moment to moment to moment. Where are you going to stay now? Where are you going to focus now? Where are you going to focus now? There’s a choice that’s always being made. You can make it easier for yourself by giving yourself a pleasant place to stay. This is why we work with the breath. Breathe in good and long. See what long breathing feels like for the body. Try subtle breathing. Try heavier breathing. Try lighter breathing. Try different ways of conceiving the breath process. Where does the breath come in? Where does it feel like it’s coming? You know the air is supposed to come in the nose, but how does the energy flow feel in the body when you’re breathing? Where does that start? Where does that stop? Does the energy flow seem to work together through the different parts of the body, or are the different parts of the body working at cross-purposes? These are things you can work with, things that you can explore. You find that by giving yourself questions like this to explore, it’s a lot easier to stay with meditation. It’s not just an exercise in forcing the mind to stay with one topic. It’s a learning process. In the course of learning about the breath, you also learn about the mind. In the course of learning about the mind, you learn more and more about this factor of intention that’s shaping your experience here. Then you see the role that present intentions play and past intentions play. Past intentions play in the mind. Past intentions create habits. So certain thoughts keep coming up again and again and again, because you’ve played along with them again and again and again. It’s like a rut in a road. Your car gets stuck on the rut, and then you just go wherever the rut leads you. But you can also learn to get out of the rut. When you sense the mind going off into a particular way that you don’t want it to go, you can make up your mind you’re not going to go there. If it comes back again, you make up your mind again. Sometimes it requires that you be really stubborn, because if you see the thought coming back again and again and again several times, you begin to think, “Well, it’s beyond my power,” and you give in. Well, who says it’s beyond your power? Sometimes it’s simply a question of being really insistent. Back to the breath, back to the breath, back to the breath. Finally, that becomes your new rut. It’s a healthy rut. It leads you in the right direction. You might think of it more as a path. You have to walk over a piece of ground many, many times before you can kill all the grass and actually have a path there. So you’re trying to create new pathways in the mind so that skillful decisions become more and more second nature. Your past habits of unskillful decisions start to grow ground. Grass starts to grow weeds, and after a while they’re no longer paths. Your mind just doesn’t go there. An important principle in understanding the Buddha’s teachings on karma is being clear about the difference between past karma and present karma. Present karma is the intentions you’re acting on right now, the choices you’re making right now. Things that you don’t choose right now, things that you don’t intend right now, those are the results of past actions. Be clear about the distinction. This is the one element of freedom in the mind. You always have the opportunity to make a skillful decision in the present moment. Meditation is training and learning how to take advantage of that freedom. As always with freedom, it’s a little scary because it requires responsibility. But consider the alternative. If you’re not free to make those choices, what would that be like? Life wouldn’t have any purpose. Meditation wouldn’t have any purpose. We’d all have to go home and we’d be stuck forever in whatever this deterministic universe would do to us. But the good news of the Buddha’s teachings is that we do have this freedom to make these choices right here, right now. With practice, by being observant, by learning how to ask the right questions, by being inquisitive about what we’re doing and the results of what we’re doing, we can become more and more skillful. That’s what the meditation is all about. It’s developing skill in how we manage our minds so that we’re no longer creating suffering for ourselves. or suffering for other people.

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