The Good Side of Kamma

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When I first went to stay with Jahn Phura, I asked him what you had to believe in order to meditate. He said there was one thing, the principle of karma, that you choose your actions and that your actions have results. That’s why we meditate—so that our choice of our actions can be more skillful, and the results we get out of our actions are better. A lot of us, when we come to meditation, especially here in the West, don’t think about the karma or see that it has any relevance to the meditation. Karma seems to be a matter of past lives and future lives. But even though the Buddha did talk about karma in those terms, each time he discussed past lives and future lives, the discussion always came back to the present moment. He’d be talking about the cycles of the universe, the development or non-development of the human race. He said all came from karma, people’s decisions, the choices they made, what they were going to do and say and think. And where does that happen? It happens right here, right now. The reason it’s so unskillful is because we’re not paying attention to what we’re doing right here, right now. This is why we meditate—to pay more attention, to be clearer about what’s happening. As you stay with the breath, you’re learning to be more mindful, more alert, and to put more effort into being skillful about what you’re doing. So you begin to see the results of skillful choices right here and now. You pay attention to the breath, you stick with it, you learn how to focus on it in a way that doesn’t put too much pressure on it, so you’re not forcing it too much, or in a way that’s not too loose so that the mind keeps slipping away. You find just the right amount of focus, just the right amount of pressure to stay with the breath, to keep it smooth, coming in smoothly. You feel it going in, going out, so it feels just right. This way you begin to see the rewards of learning how to make skillful choices, trying to develop a skill. The Buddha had the advantage back in his day that people coming to see him already had developed all kinds of skills—skills in running the household, skills in managing their work. As a member of the noble warrior class, he had to learn the skills of archery. They say that the women in the noble warrior class had to learn the skills of surgery. Their husbands would come back with arrows. The women were the ones who would get them out. So it was a vital skill. In those days, you had to have a wide range of skills. Our problem nowadays is that a lot of people come to meditation and they don’t have much experience with skills. They don’t have the psychology that comes from learning a skill. So if you do have a skill, some kind of physical skill or manual skill, try to reflect back on the qualities of mind that helped you stick with it. Learn from your actions. Do not get discouraged by setbacks. And if you find things going well, how to keep pushing the envelope to make them better and better. If this is your first exposure to a skill, keep those qualities in mind. Don’t let yourself get discouraged. Don’t let yourself get defeated. Just keep coming back, coming back, coming back, and saying, “There must be something to learn here. There must be something I can do here that I’m missing right now.” Now think about those instructions that Ajahn Lee gave in his Seven Steps. As you get a greater sense of mastery here with the breath, try to spread that around through the rest of your life. And your other choice is about what you’re going to do and say and think. This is where it’s helpful to have a positive sense of the teaching on karma, and not a negative one. For most of us, when we hear about karma, it sounds punitive. You did something bad and you’re going to get punished. And no wonder we don’t like the idea. But for the Buddha, the whole notion of karma was in its possibilities for freedom and its possibilities for happiness. And he would teach it in terms of its positive connotations, starting it with generosity. It’s because we have choices that generosity has meaning. If we didn’t have choices, if the world were just like a wind-up clock or a wind-up toy, then people would be wind-up clocks and wind-up toys. And if they gave something to you, it’s just like a wind-up toy carrying something over to you and plopping it down in front of you. It wouldn’t have any meaning at all. But it’s because that person had the choice to do that or not to do that, that’s why generosity has meaning. And you see it in yourself. The times when you’ve chosen to be generous. Try to think back to the first time you gave a gift that wasn’t mandatory, i.e., it wasn’t a Christmas present, it wasn’t a Bar Mitzvah present, it wasn’t a birthday present. It was a totally random day on the calendar. You saw something you wanted to give somebody, and you gave it. And it felt good. That’s the kind of feeling you should have around the teaching on karma. It’s the same with teachings on gratitude. You realize that people, to be kind, you had to go out of their way. It wasn’t the easiest thing in the world to be kind. Your parents didn’t throw you away the first time you were crying and making a tear of yourself. They got up in the middle of the night, they looked after you, night after night after night. Not because they didn’t love you, not because they had to, but because they wanted to, even though it was hard. So you should have some gratitude for their choices. Again, if they were wind-up toys, there’d be no need for gratitude. If you’re a wind-up toy, you wouldn’t have to feel gratitude for anyone. But we’re not wind-up toys. We’re not totally determined. We do have choices in the present moment. And so the feeling you have when you really feel gratitude, that should be related to the teaching on karma. A lot of our problems with karma, as I said, are because we don’t have a sense of how to relate to it in an emotionally positive way. But when you think about it in terms of gratitude and generosity, you realize that there’s a power we have to make choices. It’s an important thing. You want to protect it. You want to train it. That’s for the knowledge that we’ve done unskillful things in the past. The Buddha said the proper way of thinking about it is that as soon as you realize it’s unskillful, you want to make up your mind that you’re going to refrain from it. You’re not going to make that mistake again. That’s it. He says that feeling remorse over the mistake, strong feelings of guilt, the kind of feeling you see a dog when it knows it’s done something wrong, gets on its back and wags its tail, hoping you’ll forgive it—that’s not the kind of reaction the Buddha wants. Because if you let remorse take over, then you feel more negative about yourself. Then you don’t like those negative feelings, and that causes you to do a lot of unskillful things. That’s why people go to drink, they go to drugs, to wipe out those negative feelings. Just remember, you’re an honorable human being. You’ve recognized a mistake and you’ve resolved not to repeat it. That’s the best that can be expected of a human being. Then the Buddha says, “Develop thoughts of good will.” Good will for yourself, good will for all the people around you, as a way of strengthening that resolve not to act in an unskillful way. Again, good will has meaning because of karma. Good will becomes our motivation to do things in a skillful way. If we wind up toys, if we wind up drinking, if we wind up eating, good will would be superfluous. If our actions had no impact on anybody, good will, again, would be superfluous. It wouldn’t have any meaning. But we know that we have choices, and we want to make sure that our choices are skillful. That means keeping this in mind. You don’t want to do anything harmful. You don’t want to hurt anybody. You don’t want to hurt yourself. You don’t want to hurt other people. You want to look for a happiness that doesn’t have to cause other people to suffer. So this is why we meditate. It’s because our actions are important. And to get our heads around the teaching on karma, it also helps to get our heart around the teachings. Have some positive feelings towards this teaching on karma. It’s not there just to punish you. It’s there to offer you opportunities. It’s there to remind you that your actions are important. And even though you’ve done unskillful things in the past, you’ve got a new opportunity right now to do something skillful. And then again, right now. So even if you do find yourself in the middle of having made some unfortunate choices, you can say, “Well, I’ll stop.” And the fact that you’ve stopped becomes positive karma right there. Part of the mind might say, “Well, you’ve been doing unskillful things in the past, and you’re going to give in to unskillful impulses in the future, so why bother fighting it?” You’ve got to fight it. And you have the freedom to fight it. That’s the important part about karma, is that element of freedom. So all these good things associated with the teaching on karma—gratitude, generosity, goodwill, freedom—keep those positive associations in mind. And as for the complexities of the teaching, that has to do with the working out. We’re planting seeds here, and the way the seeds are going to grow depends on all the other seeds in the field. Some seeds will crowd other seeds out and sprout faster. And you have no control over what seeds you planted in the past, but you do have control over the seeds that you’re planting right now. You have control over the seeds that you’re watering right now. That’s why we’re meditating right now. And the meditation gets us to stay in the right now. So regardless of what there is in the past, you know that what you’re doing right now is skillful. It’s done with clarity, it’s done with mindfulness, alertness, heedfulness. And this is another one of those qualities that wouldn’t have any meaning if our actions weren’t important, and if you didn’t have freedom. So learn to think about the Buddhist teachings of heedfulness in a positive way as well. On the one hand, you’re aware of the dangers of acting in an unskillful way, but you’re also aware of the opportunities you have to be skillful. And they really can make a difference. They are important. And this is why we’re meditating, because this is a heedful thing to do, a skillful thing to do. It helps us to be more heedful and skillful in all our other activities as well.

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