Mature About Karma

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The first line in the Garna Niyametta Sutta, “This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace.” I once knew of someone who complained about the word “should” there. Why does Buddhism have “shoulds”? Shouldn’t it not have “shoulds”? The answer is, the Buddha’s shoulds are all conditional. He’s not forcing anything on you. He’s certainly not trying to make you feel guilty of having been bad in the past. He simply says, “If you really want to be happy, this is what you should do. This is the way cause and effect work. The laws of action work in this way.” And all of his motivation is based on that insight. He’s not in a position to tell you what you have to do. He didn’t create you. But he does have some experience, some expert experience, on how action works and how we can recognize when we’ve done something unskillful and how we can change our ways. That’s always the thrust of his teachings on karma or action. It’s what we can do right now more skillfully than we’ve done in the past. And part of that depends on proper motivation, understanding that we’ll be happier if we learn to be more skillful right now, and also recognizing where we’ve made mistakes in the past. That requires maturity. All too many people want to be told that nothing they did in the past is wrong and that there are not going to be any consequences. But that’s not a mature attitude. If you want to change your ways, you have to recognize that the old ways were not quite right. And the reason they weren’t right is because you didn’t know, as the Buddha says, the causes of suffering. Running down through craving comes down to ignorance. You don’t know. That’s why you made mistakes. When you hear his teachings and understand where the causes of suffering are and what the causes of true happiness are, he’s telling you that you’re free to change your ways, to be more skillful. So we have to learn how to take the journey. We have to learn how to use the teachings of karma wisely, in a mature way, recognizing that we’ve probably done some really stupid things in the past. All of us have. If we didn’t have any stupid things in the past, we wouldn’t be here as human beings. So we want to learn how to recognize what those mistakes were so we don’t have to repeat them. And we have to have a lot of good wisdom. We have to have a lot of good will for ourselves and for all the people around us. That’s how he always has you respond to that recognition that you’ve harmed yourself, harmed other people. That remorse doesn’t help, and you certainly can’t go back and change the events in the past. But you can change your actions now, and you can resolve not to make a mistake in the future. And how do you strengthen that resolve? By developing compassion. Developing good will for yourself, for all other beings. That’s good will applied to people who are suffering or people who are acting in ways that are going to cause suffering. You have to have compassion for them. That includes yourself. Empathetic joy. That’s good will applied to people who are happy or creating the causes for happiness. You’re happy for them. And again, when you see yourself doing something well, you don’t try to undermine it. Or if there are voices in your head that would undermine whatever good you’re doing, you learn, “Okay, I don’t have to listen to those. They’re not helpful. They’re left over from who knows where.” And you develop equanimity, again, for yourself and for all others, realizing there are things in the past that you can’t change. So there are going to be times when you’re not going to gain the pleasures that you want, or the people around you might be suffering in ways that you can’t help them. And you have to have equanimity about that. That’s an issue of karma. And you develop equanimity not to be hard-hearted, but simply so that you can focus your energies on areas where you can make a difference, where you can help. This is one of the ways in which you develop a mature attitude towards teaching on action. Action is such an important part of the teaching. Everything depends on it. The Buddha’s telling us, “This is what you do that’s creating suffering, and this is what you can do that will lead to the end of suffering.” It’s all about doing. It’s all about the power of your choices. You do have some freedom of choice. The range of choices available to you at any one time may be limited by past actions, but you can always choose to do the most skillful thing. Or at the very least, the most skillful thing you can think of right now. And as you pursue that, you find that the range of choices widens before you. So he teaches us the principle of action not to get fixated on what may have happened in the past and how that’s going to influence our present moment or our future, but to focus instead on what opportunities are available to us right now. And to see them as actions. This is especially important as we try to develop the mind. Because your thoughts are types of actions, your choices are a type of action. In fact, your choices are the principle type of action that the Buddha is interested in. Because we do have this freedom of choice. And there’s a curious question there. Why is it that there is some influence coming in from the past, but we do have this potential freedom? The Buddha wants us to get closer and closer to that freedom, because that’s what’s going to lead us to the ultimate freedom, i.e., total freedom from suffering something that’s totally unconditioned. But you work first with your conditioned freedoms. Once you try to be mindful of the teachings, once you’ve learned what he taught you about what’s the skillful and the unskillful path, he tells you to analyze the actions of your mind to see which are siding with the skillful and which are siding with the unskillful. That requires a lot of maturity right there, because we are so prone to side with whatever we want to think about ourselves. If we have certain habits we want to side with ourselves, those are good habits, those are okay. But then we can grow only if we want to. We begin to see, “Okay, this particular habit has these drawbacks. We need to replace it with something else.” The Buddha said to apply appropriate attention to the skillful and unskillful habits of our mind. That’s how we develop this as a factor for awakening. He himself applied this principle. In fact, that was how he said he got started on the right path, deciding that he was going to divide his thoughts into two types. On the one hand, there were thoughts that led to harm, and there were thoughts that didn’t lead to harm. The ones that led to harm were the ones that were motivated by sensual desire, ill will, and harmfulness. And the ones that didn’t lead to harm were the ones that were motivated by renunciation, lack of ill will—in other words, goodwill—and harmlessness. In other words, he was looking at his thoughts, not so much for their content, but as to where they came from and where they were going. In other words, he looked at them as actions. And he learned to curb the harmful ones. So it was just like cattle during the rainy season in India back in those days. That was one of the big issues among farmers. The people who owned cows had to keep them out of the rice fields. You didn’t want them to trample over people’s crops. You didn’t want them to eat their crops because there was going to be trouble. So if you had a group of cows, you had to be very careful with them. You had to check and use your goad and use your stick on them to keep them out of the rice. In the same way, when you see that unskillful thoughts are arising, whether you like them or not is not the issue. You want to see where they’re coming from, where they’re going. You have to learn skillful ways of holding them in check. That’s an important point, because all too often we have unskillful ways of holding our greed, aversion, and delusion in check. We beat ourselves up, or else we get ready to rationalize them. There are all kinds of unskillful ways that you can try to hold your thoughts in check. You’ve got to find out ways, “How can I deal with my anger in a way that’s not increasing my thoughts of guilt around it?” The same way with your lust, the same way with your greed, your jealousy, whatever unskillful habits you may have. You have to learn how to have a mature attitude towards them in the sense that, “Okay, these are habits you have, and you see that they’re not skillful. How do you deal with them in a way that’s not going to give rise to guilt?” How do you deal with them effectively? So you take that as a challenge. And if you find that you fall down, well, you pick yourself up and try it again. This is one of the really reassuring things about this teaching. It was found by someone who had made mistakes in the past, and he knew what it was like to make a mistake, and he knew what it was like to suffer from those mistakes. But he also knew what it was like to finally work on his desire not to suffer in such a way that it would lead to a really skillful way of dealing with these things. In other words, this is a religion founded by someone who had had experience in being imperfect. So again, he’s not trying to motivate us that we’re imperfect. He’s simply saying that we have more to learn. And that willingness to learn is what sees us through. That’s what makes us mature. When there are skillful habits, you encourage them. And you’re not embarrassed about encouraging yourself and taking joy in the fact that you’re learning. That was one of the things he taught his son, Rahula, right from the very beginning. When you see that you’ve done something or said something or spoken something that didn’t make sense to anybody, take joy in that fact and keep on training. Because that joy is what sustains you. It makes it easier to make that more skillful choice the next time and then the next. As he pointed out, if you train the mind in this way, looking at your thoughts as actions, it inclines the mind finally to the action of learning. Learning means getting to settle down with a sense of well-being. And that’s how we develop concentration. Even when we get into concentration, though, he has us see that as an action. This is important because all too often when people get to really deep states of concentration, there’s a sense of infinite space or infinite knowing, awareness, nothingness. There’s a temptation to see that as a meditative physical absolute. You’ve tuned into the ground of being or you’ve tuned into the source of all things. And it’s very easy to see, say, in that sense of oneness of awareness. Things arise and pass away, and they go back into that oneness from which they came. That’s what it feels like at that point. That’s what your awareness of the world around you and the world in you is like. But the Buddha always encourages us to look, “What did you do?” to get there. This is a type of action. You have to make some choices to reach that state, and you have to make some choices to maintain it. This is why he has us focus on the fabricated nature of these states of mind. So again, you see, there’s a choice that you’re making there. And the fact that it’s fabricated through your intentions means that it’s not going to last. And here again, your motivation kicks in. You want true happiness. The Buddha doesn’t ever, ever, ever tell you to be embarrassed of your desire for happiness. He simply says to take it seriously. In other words, try for true happiness, a happiness that’s not going to disappoint you down the line. Because after all, what we do and say and think is all for the sake of happiness, isn’t it? However we conceive it. And what he’s teaching us is to look at our concept of happiness and say, “Maybe you can change that so it actually works better.” In other words, you have a better concept of what will give rise to happiness and a better concept of what true happiness will be. It’s interesting that many of his really basic terms are never given an essential definition. In other words, there’s no place where he says, “Happiness is X.” But what he does say is, “Happiness is X.” What he does expect is that your concept of happiness is going to develop as you practice. If you’re starting out with happiness for sensual pleasures, he says, “Well, look, there’s a better happiness. It starts with being generous. It starts with being virtuous, getting the mind concentrated.” So you work on that. And as you develop a taste for that more refined happiness, your sensitivities develop. And you actually get more demanding of yourself. You’re demanding in a way that’s healthy. You say, “Can I do this better? Is there something I’m doing here that’s causing unnecessary stress?” Look for it. If you can see it, let it go. Without recrimination, without any of those negative emotions, just see it. “Well, that’s not skillful.” And it’s through this process that we finally do arrive at the ultimate happiness, one that’s not conditioned. The freedom that lies beyond conditioning. We find it by exercising our free will right here and now. This mystery of why it is that there is the freedom of choice right now, even though there are influences coming in from the past. We do have this freedom of choice. Learn how to make the most of it. So this is how we develop a mature attitude toward action, recognizing when we’ve made a mistake and recognizing that we can do better. And why would we want to? Because we want to be happy. Not out of guilt or remorse or any of those emotions, but simply for the desire for happiness that’s not going to let you down. It’s in this way that the Buddha’s “shoulds” are really humane. So look at your attitude towards action and the idea that actions carry results, and develop it to a higher level of maturity. Because that’s where the happiness is. When you find it, you realize this was the happiness you wanted. That’s where it’s to be found.

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