The Karma of Meditation

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All living beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. To whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir. We chant this every evening, every morning. It’s an important principle to keep in mind as we meditate. Many people think that teachings on karma have to do with past lives or future lives, anything but the present moment, so why do we have to think about it? Just focus on the present and do our work here. That’s all we need to think about. But the teachings on karma give us the motivation for being here to begin with. They give us perspective on the present moment and give some directions on what to do while we’re here in the present moment. So it’s good to think about them. In terms of the motivation, it’s part of that series of five reflections that the Buddha has. We’re subject to aging, illness, death, separation, which, if we just stop with the four reflections, would be pretty depressing. It makes it seem like life is pretty worthless. But then the Buddha says, “That’s not the fifth reflection. Reflect on actions.” He says, “When you reflect on this principle, then you begin to realize that unskillful behavior is something you really do want to avoid. It does matter. Skillful behavior is something you want to develop.” Then further, when you reflect on the fact that all living beings are subject to aging, illness, death, separation, then they all have the ability to move forward. That, the Buddha says, gives rise to a sense of sanghvega that gets you onto the path. When you realize we’re not meditating just to have a nice, peaceful, equanimous time as we go through life, but to find a way out of this cycle of repeated death and rebirth, death and rebirth, over and over and over again. In other words, it raises the stakes. It reminds us that we really do have to be careful about our minds, because action, of course, comes from the mind. And if your mind is untrained, your actions are going to be all over the place. So this is why we focus on meditating—to train the mind. This way of reflecting on the past and the future is what brings us into the present moment. This is where things are important. This is where the important things are happening. This is the way the Buddha taught every time he taught about karma. He’d always bring it back to the present moment, even when he was talking about not only a future life or a past life, but huge cycles in the universe. He’d always end up by saying, “All of these things are shaped by action.” But where does action come from? It comes from the mind. Where can you observe the mind? Where can you train the mind? Right here. So that’s why we focus right here. But further, it tells us where to focus, what to look for. You want to look for your intentions. What are you doing to shape your experience right now? What are you willing right now? How much can you trust these intentions? A good way to test this, of course, is to set up an intention that you know is at least relatively skillful, like deciding to stay with the breath. You make up your mind you’re going to stay here, and then you try to maintain that intention. And pretty soon another intention is going to come along. And a large part of training the mind is learning how not to go with any intentions that are going to pull you away from the breath. This means sorting out which intentions are helpful with staying with the breath and which ones are not. And you’ve got to learn how to do that. You’ve got to learn a lot of strategies for helping to strengthen that original intention. This is why we work with the breath, to make it comfortable, to give rise to a sense of ease, to give rise to a sense of well-being. So it’s easier to stay here. Those weaselly little voices that say, “Well, I’m not having any fun here, this is not enjoyable, the meditation is not going well,” you learn how to resist those. As you get more and more interested in focusing on the breath and seeing what the potentials of the breath are. Because there is that strange quality that you have freedom of choice. The range of choices you may have may not be all that great. Many times you don’t realize the range that you do have. But as you meditate, you get more and more sensitive to the choices you’re making. You realize intentions come in many, many layers in the mind. You take care of the obvious layers and you begin to realize, “Oh, there are other layers below those, and then below those.” And the more awareness you can bring to them, the wider your range of choices, and the more you realize the extent to which you actually are shaping your experience. The Buddha talks about this in dependent core arising. Even before you get to sensory contact, you’ve got intention, you’ve got fabrication, which is often used as a synonym for intention. You’re shaping things before you even run into them. You’re preparing yourself to look for certain things. And when you see certain things, you’re preparing yourself to interpret them in a particular way. Now, a lot of this is habitual. But one of the important things about meditation is that you can learn to look at your old habits, step back from them, and not get carried away by them. Some people find this threatening. They’re comfortable in their old habits. It’s like old shoes. They may be lousy old shoes, bad for your posture, bad for your feet, but you’ve been wearing them for so long that they seem like second nature. That’s when you realize that they really are bad for you. You’ve got the impetus. You’ve got the motivation to be willing to try the new shoes. It’s like changing your diet. You’re used to hamburgers and fries and milkshakes. And the idea of eating healthy food is really repellent, because you’ve learned to like what sodium and fat and all these other things do to your body. But when you see the effects on other people, that’s when you begin to realize, “I don’t want to go there.” And so, for a while, it’s going to go against you. That’s the grain to keep looking at your habits and questioning them. But that’s how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He kept saying, “Why am I doing X? It’s leading to stress. It’s leading to suffering. I’m pursuing my happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die. How will I reverse that? How will I find a happiness that’s true? Why don’t I look for something that’s deathless, that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die?” That’s the question that got him started on his path. He tried various approaches, some of which led him off in weird directions, but others of which really worked. Like the one here says, “Why don’t I try dividing my thinking into two sorts, thinking that leads to genuine happiness and thinking that leads to suffering?” In other words, he was able to step back from his thoughts and watch them and see his habitual ways of thinking. Instead of looking at their content and getting involved in the worlds of those thoughts, he stepped back from them to view them as events in a causal chain, realizing that he had the choice to follow some thoughts and not follow other thoughts. That’s an important lesson in karma right there. The fact that a thought appears in your mind, you’re not necessarily responsible for that fact right now. That may be karma from the past. But you do have the choice of whether you’re going to pursue that thought or whether you’re going to abandon it. That’s another important lesson that karma gives us as we meditate. The general principle is that you have to accept the fact that you’ve got some past bad karma. You never know when it’s going to show up. Sometimes it shows up in unskillful thoughts or strong, unskillful urges. Sometimes it shows up in other ways—physical pain. How do you live with that fact? Some people get really upset. They feel that they’re being blamed for their pains or blamed for their illnesses that come from past karma. But you have to remember, the karma you’re experiencing right now is not the sum total of all your past bad and good karma. It’s not like you have one karma account and what you see right now is the running balance. You’ve got lots of seeds in your karmic field, some of which are pretty weak, some of which are stronger, some of which aren’t going to sprout. Some are going to sprout for quite a while, and others are ready to sprout right now. It needs a little bit of water, i.e., the water of your delight and your intention and attention, and they’re going to sprout. So the fact that you’re suffering from some bad karma right now doesn’t mean you’re the only person in the room with bad karma. We’ve all got some bad karma. We wouldn’t be human beings if we didn’t have any past bad karma. So it’s all there. It’s just that some people’s karma is showing. Others’ karma is back there in that field, ready to sprout sometime, who knows when. This is why the Buddha teaches us not to be proud of our current good fortune or to look down on other people for their current bad fortune, because you don’t know what lies in store, what other seeds you may have or they may have. What you do learn is to do the best with what you’ve got. Be kind to people who are suffering, because maybe your kindness will be the thing that will get them over whatever their bad karma may be, so that you’ll have good karma in the future when you may or may not meet up with a similar problem or the same problem. That’s the attitude the Buddha has you develop about karma in general. And so you try to bring the same attitude to your meditation. There are days when the meditation really goes well. Everything just seems to fall right into place. Like a well-designed machine, all the parts fit very snugly. Everything runs smoothly. Other times it’s like a machine that was banged together who knows where. Nothing works, so you don’t get upset. You don’t get worked up about it. You figure out, “Okay, what can I do given the situation right now? What’s the most skillful thing I can do?” Because the fact that you’ve got good or bad karma coming in is not the issue. The issue is, what are you doing right now? How do you understand the situation? How do you explore where the openings for change may be and what areas can you not change? So on days when the meditation doesn’t go well or when there’s a lot of pain, you don’t get upset about what’s happening. You just realize, “Okay, this is the range of choices I have, and this is the problem I’m facing right now. What’s the most skillful thing to do right now?” At the same time, that principle of karma teaches you not to be complacent. About the times when the meditation does go well, things could change at any time. So you’ve got to be on top of the situation. Because it’s all too easy when things go well. You say, “I’ll just sit back and just kind of watch whatever comes up and be okay.” And that opens the door for who knows what to come in. And it may come in only a little bit now, but tomorrow it’s going to come in a little bit more, like the old story about the camel in the tent. It’s standing out in the sandstorm, and it asks, “Please, can I just put my nose in the tent?” So it lets it put its nose in. And then, “How about a little bit more? Can I put my eyes in so I can see so the sand doesn’t get in my eyes?” So it puts its eyes in. Pretty soon, the camel’s taken over the whole tent. And that’s what happens with our thoughts. Little thoughts of lust, little thoughts of anger, little thoughts of greed, little thoughts of jealousy—whatever. Bit by bit by bit. At first, they don’t seem all that much of a problem. But as the Buddha said, when you allow thoughts like this into the mind, that becomes more and more the inclination of the mind. And then it takes a lot of energy, once it’s created ruts in the mind, to let it get out of the ruts. So on the one hand, the teaching on karma teaches us not to get upset by difficulties in the present moment. At the same time, it teaches us not to be complacent about things going well in the present moment. These are just a few of the ways in which the teaching on karma is really useful as we meditate. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha stressed it again and again. There were so many issues that were hot topics in the Buddha’s time that he didn’t touch at all. Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Is your body the same as your life force, or is it some separate life force? How about if an arahant dies? What do you say about that? Does he exist or not exist? Both? Neither? These are all issues that the Buddha would put aside. And there were a lot of other issues that were hot topics during the day that he would also put aside and wouldn’t get involved in. With karma, I realized that this was an issue that had to be addressed. Because on the one hand, he had a lot of things to say about karma that nobody else was saying at the time. People either taught strict determinism or else they taught that everything was totally random. And I realized that both of these attitudes, if you really followed them, thoroughly and consistently, would pull you off the path. So it wasn’t just an attitude that he picked up from his culture without thinking, or something he picked up because he wanted to please people. I was once asked by a Dhamma teacher, “Wasn’t it the case that most people in India believed it at that time, as if that would be a factor that the Buddha would bring into consideration at all?” He would shape his teachings by taking a straw poll. He saw what was necessary and what was not necessary for the sake of putting an end to suffering. And the teaching on karma, he saw, was a really important way of getting people motivated to look in the present moment and also getting them motivated to see where in the present moment should you focus your attention. And then once you focus your attention there, what should you do with it? Keeping in mind the role of intention. This is why, when he talked about the establishing of mindfulness, there’s ardency, alertness, mindfulness. Mindfulness is the keeping in mind. Alertness is knowing what to look for. And there’s ardency. What do you do with what you’ve got? How do you shape the state of your mind? The reason the Buddha taught these things is very easily explained by his teaching on karma. So it’s good to take it as a working hypothesis. As he said, he couldn’t prove all the teachings on karma to people, but he says you take it as a working hypothesis and it’s really going to help you on the path, both through your motivation and with your sense of what can be done, what needs to be done, and where to focus your attention. As I said, when the path starts maturing and bringing its results, you’ll see that what he taught was true. So give it a try. Try to use this teaching in as skillful a way as you can.

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