Karmic Debts

April 25, 2015

Try to give your full attention to the breath. When you breathe in, notice how you feel it, where you feel it, what kind of feelings there are. Some of them may correspond to the way you already think about what’s happening when you breathe, and others may not. So try to open your mind to the idea that breathing in and out of the breath breathing is something you don’t really know that well. There’s more going on in the body as you breathe than you might think, and there are more levels of breath energy than you might think. And there’s a lot to be gained from getting in touch with them. It’s like having a piece of land, and the difference is that you’re going between just knowing you have that piece of land someplace and then actually going out and investigating it, seeing what kind of soil it has, what kind of plants it already has, what kind of plants it might be able to grow, where there are weeds, where there are good things. There’s a lot you can get out of this body. We’re commemorating tonight the fact that he died 54 years ago, on the night between April 25th and April 26th. It’s good to think of some of the teachings he left behind. This is one of them, that we have potentials within us that we don’t really understand, that we don’t really have much of a sense of what worth they have. So we go looking outside. We’re hoping that we’re going to get happiness outside. But the happiness of the world is, as you know, gain and then there’s loss. There’s status, there’s loss of status, there’s pleasure, there’s pain, there’s praise, there’s criticism. These things come in pairs. You can’t have the good side without the bad side. And on top of that, it’s not like we come into the world hoping that we’re going to get with a clean ledger. This is another one of his teachings. In fact, he says this is one of the thoughts that gave him the impetus that he wanted to go out and practice to begin with. There was a strong sense that each of us is born with lots of debts, and we can accumulate more and more debts as we live. The main debt is feeding. Just to keep this body alive, we have to feed on all kinds of things. There are lots of animals out there that we’ve fed on. And even if at some point we decide that we want to become vegetarians or vegans or whatever, there are still a lot of animals that have suffered. Just to keep this body alive. And even as we maintain a vegetarian diet or a vegan diet, there are a lot of people whose labor we depend on. So we’re going to have to pay these people back, these animals back. We’ve got karmic debts. There are people we’ve wronged in some ways, people we’ve depended on who are happy to have us depend on them, and others who we’ve depended on who are not all that happy. We need something to pay people back. And so one of the things you want to be able to do in the meditation is to think of this as a goodwill. When you have goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others, you benefit the people around you and you benefit as well. All the goodness of the practice is of this sort. You’re getting happiness as part of your goodwill. You’re getting a happiness that makes life easier for others, makes life better for others. If you’re generous, of course people benefit from your generosity, but you benefit too. When you’re virtuous, people benefit from the fact that you are abstaining from unskillful behavior, and you benefit too. When you meditate and try to gain some control over your mind, there are two aspects that the Buddha pointed out as very useful. One is that you develop a mind that’s unlimited in terms of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, wanting all beings to be happy, to understand the causes for happiness, feeling compassion for those who are not happy or who are creating the causes for unhappiness, feeling empathetic joy for those who are happy or creating the causes for happiness, and then developing equanimity for all beings that you would like to help but you can’t. Sometimes that includes yourself, areas of your life that you can’t change. The Buddha said that when you develop this kind of expansive mind, then when there is a result of past bad karma come up, it’s like a lump of salt in a large river of water. The water is so great that you hardly taste the saltiness at all. If your mind is narrow and confined, just thinking about what you want and what you can gain, no concern for others. It’s like water in a small cup. You put that lump of salt in there and you can’t drink the water. So you’re protecting yourself as you’re giving to others. Another protection is to learn how not to be overcome by pleasure or pain. This doesn’t mean avoiding pleasures and pain. You’re going to be meeting with them, so you learn how to deal with them in a way that the mind is not squeezed by the pain and doesn’t just wallow in the pleasure without any thought for where that pleasure is going. Pleasure of concentration is a good pleasure. It strengthens the mind and gives it some defense in dealing with pain, both in terms of giving you a better place to focus your attention and giving you the stability and stillness you need so you can investigate into the issue of pain. Why is it that pains in the body, say, have an impact on the mind? Part of our mind says, “Well, of course there’s going to be an impact, but that’s because I’m so used to that happening.” But the Buddha says it doesn’t have to. So look into that. Look at it as something strange that physical pain would have an impact on the mind. Then you begin to understand things about pain that you wouldn’t have understood before. And you get to the point where the mind really is a lot more resilient to pain. Ultimately, you get to the point where the pain is one thing, the mind is something else. Your awareness of the pain and the pain itself separate out. They’re next to each other. You know the pain, but it’s not going to have an impact on the mind. That’s one of the skills you can develop with the meditation. Not only does this protect you, but it also means that when you are suffering from pains of various kinds, or the body is suffering from pains, you’re not weakened by it, you’re not a burden on other people. It’s the people who are thrashing around and miserable with the pain, those ones that everyone else feels sorry for and they have to run around and help. But if you can bear with the pain without any problem, things are a lot lighter for everybody. So in these ways, when you’re protecting yourself, you’re also giving a gift to others. And this way you begin to pay off your karmic debts. This is a theme that we hear a lot about in Thailand. They talk about karmic debt collectors. In other words, the people you’ve wronged in the past, they’re going to come after you. And it’s often not when you’re healthy and strong, it’s when you’re weak and sick. So you want to have something to pay them back. All these qualities of the mind, the goodness you’ve done, is a gift. If nothing else, you can dedicate it to them. But this attitude of coming to the meditation, not just to get something out of it, but to give, is a really important part. Years back, when I was at Wat Thammasat, John Fung’s students wanted to build a jetty. He thought about it and decided it would be a good idea. Not that he was going to get something out of the jetty, but he was going to give people an opportunity to develop the merit they need to develop, the good qualities they would need to further their practice. As I said, a lot of these people started out, they weren’t interested in meditation. They liked what he called “heavy merit,” not “light merit.” Light merit is when we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, breathing, focusing on the breath. We don’t have to carry cement and wood and all kinds of things around. But that’s merit, too. And having that attitude of wanting to give, give, give, and everybody gave freely. Labor was free, freely given. Everything was volunteer. And as people developed this attitude and nurtured this attitude, they became more and more willing to meditate. So all the difficulties that went into the construction, from John Fung’s point of view, were there because the people who were engaged in it were benefiting. As for who was going to use the jetty when we were done, he said that was up to them to decide to make the best use of it. But the act of giving is an important part of the practice. It develops the right attitude. As I said at the beginning, you want to give yourself to the practice. You want to give yourself to the breath. You want to give yourself to this present moment. Don’t hold things back. That attitude comes from the willingness to give other things as well. In John Lee’s last public Dhamma talk, he talked about his sense of gratitude for all the people who had helped him with his various projects, and that he was going to do his best as long as he was still around to send thoughts of goodwill their way. He says that thoughts of goodwill have a power that you can’t always comprehend on the surface, but there is a power to the mind. And you want to be able to meditate so you can have that willingness to give of the power of your mind. I think I’ve told you the story about the old monk in Bangkok who was very much opposed to the forest tradition. He fell sick one time, and John Lee went to visit him while he was sick and sent one of his disciples to the corner of the room. He didn’t say anything, just sat and meditated. The old monk could feel something coming from John Lee’s corner there. He said, “What are you doing?” John Lee said, “I’m giving a gift of stillness.” The old monk said, “Well, keep it up. Whatever it is, keep it up. It’s feeling good.” Eventually the old monk got over his illness, and then John Lee was able to teach him how to meditate. This is an old ecclesiastical officiate who had never really meditated. He began to realize how much he had misunderstood the forest tradition, how much good there was in the meditation. That’s just one example of the many ways that a John Lee gave of his meditation. He meditated not just to get, but also to give. So try to develop that attitude as you meditate. Because this is a very special form of happiness we’re working on here. You give to yourself and you give to others at the same time. And the more you appreciate that double dimension, the better everything is for everybody around.

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