The Karma of Meditation

July 27, 2016

I know someone in New York who said she liked listening to my Dharma talks because of the crickets in the background. So tonight’s going to be a good Dhamma talk. When we come to the practice, we have to make sure that we don’t burden ourselves down unnecessarily. We have to have the confidence that this is something we can do. When we hear the teaching on karma, that sometimes it weighs us down. We think that we’re being presented with a bill of some debt we incurred a long time ago that we’ve forgotten about, and that our savings aren’t enough. We have to remember, though, that past karma is just a series of possibilities. The important karma is what you’re doing right now. Think of the case of Angulimala. He’d killed a lot of people. Yet he was able to change his mind radically and become an arahant. Now, there were a lot of people who weren’t happy with that. He was getting off scot-free, as far as they were concerned. The king left him there as a monk. And so there were people who would throw things at him, pots and other things, when he was going on his almsround. He’d come back with his head all bloody. And the Buddha told him, “Bear up, bear up. This is much better than what it would have been if you hadn’t gained that attainment.” So what we do in the practice of the Dhamma can have a radical effect on how we deal with the ups and downs of our lives. As the Buddha said, the ups and downs outside are things that we don’t have that much control over. But we do have control over our minds, and through our minds we can make some changes. That’s the important thing. That’s the important suffering that he was talking about. As for the suffering of social injustice out there in the world, that’s always going to be there, because you can’t stop people from behaving in unskillful ways. This is another aspect of karma. Everybody has freedom of choice. However much you would like everybody to use their freedom of choice, well, there’s not that much you can do to force them. In fact, often the harder you force them, the more they push back. Good karma has to come from right view. That’s what you’re trying to get out into the world, as much right view as possible. Where are you going to find that? You have to find that inside, too. Think of the Buddha’s insight on the night of his awakening. After seeing his own many rebirths, the question came, “What’s the pattern here? What’s the driving factor?” That’s what the second insight was all about—seeing the rebirth of beings after they died, and particularly seeing how it was determined by their actions. Their actions were determined by their views. That was what gave the Buddha the clue for how he was going to get out of the cycle and work on his views. That’s how he came up with the Four Noble Truths, like we chanted just now. He was seeing that looking at experience in terms of these Four Truths would enable him to get out. What are these Four Truths? They’re all about things inside your awareness. There’s that aspect of your awareness that you don’t share with anybody else. Your experience of pain and suffering, that’s your experience. No one else can come in and share it. You can’t take it out to show to anybody. The same with the cause of suffering, the craving that causes it. That’s something that’s inside your mind. Your experience of your craving is one thing. Other people may see the outside effects of it in your actions, but the actual craving itself is something that you experience from within. And the factors of the path are also things you experience from within. The problem is inside, but the cure is inside as well. Again, it lies in doing things. This is the type of karma the Buddha says is the karma that leads to the end of karma, primarily in the sense that you reach an attainment that doesn’t have anything to do with karma at all. It doesn’t have to be maintained by actions, not like everything else. Concentration has to be maintained by your actions. Mindfulness, goodwill, all the factors of the path have to be maintained by your actions. But the deathless doesn’t need to be maintained by action at all. It doesn’t need to be maintained by anything. It’s where karma ends. And also, to get there, there has to be a moment where there’s no intention in the mind. That’s another way. And which is the end of karma? And finally, when you get in the noble attainments, it does wipe out an awful lot of old karma. As the Buddha said, simply with stream entry, the amount of suffering left is comparable to the amount of dirt under your fingernail, as opposed to other people’s suffering, which could be as large as the dirt in the entire earth. So there’s a practice here that really cuts through a lot of old, bad karma. So when you think about your past bad karma, don’t get discouraged, because you’ve got the opportunity right now to do good things. And if the principle of karma weren’t working, good things wouldn’t have any meaning. When the Buddha discusses karma, when he starts the topic, he doesn’t talk about your past karma debts. He talks about the fact that karma allows for the meaning of generosity and it allows for the meaning of gratitude. In other words, because we have choices, generosity has meaning. Because other people have choices in what they do and don’t do, the fact that they do something good for you is something you should feel grateful for, because they had the choice not to do it. In fact, the word for gratitude in Pali, kathanya, literally means knowing what was done, having a sense of what was done, having a sense that when people did good things for you, it involved often sacrifice, it involved difficulties, and yet they were willing to do it. If you learn how to feel gratitude for that, then, as the Thai saying goes, that’s a sign that you’re a good person. Because you appreciate goodness and you’re more likely to be the sort of person who is willing to pass on the gift to other people. All of this comes from the fact that people have choices that have consequences. That’s the good side of karma, and it’s important to remember the good side, because it’s what enables us to do good and to benefit from it. There’s so much out there in the world that says, “Well, you do good, but look what happens. The power is that you don’t like it.” Well, the goodness outside is something that’s very variable, but the goodness you do inside is something worth remembering. Remember, you’re in control. As I said, after all, it is your experience of suffering that you’re dealing with, and the causes are in here, and the solution is in here. This is where, when the Buddha was talking about his principle of causality that lay under this, it was all in terms of this and this, this and that, things right here in your awareness. Everything you need is right here. All your potentials are in your awareness. They can be developed into the path. They’re here, and it’s simply a matter of taking them and actualizing them, bringing them into fruition. So we sit down and focus on the breath. That’s a kind of karma. Think of it that way. It’s good karma. It can wipe out a lot of the old past bad karma. So don’t let your past bad karma weigh you down. If you know there are people you’ve wronged, well, dedicate the merit of your practice to them. If there are people you can apologize to so they know that you realized what you did was wrong, go ahead and do that if you can. But there are a lot of cases where you’ve wronged other people and they’d rather not see you, or they’re no longer around. This is another one of the aspects of the practice that’s good. You can dedicate the merit of the practice to them. You can spread goodwill to them. Whether they accept that as a just settlement doesn’t really matter. The whole idea of justice is not something that karma actually provides. Sometimes you hear the idea that people like the teaching on karma because it gives some sense of justice in the world. But as I said, Angulimala got away with murder, literally. And the Buddha doesn’t say that the path is only for the kind of undeserved suffering that people have. It’s also for suffering that other people might say is deserved. But what they say doesn’t matter. The Buddha taught the path to put an end to suffering “deserved” or “not.” He didn’t ask people, “Did you do things that you deserve to suffer for?” He’d ask simply, “Do you want to put an end to your suffering?” Now, we may have to meet up with difficulties in the path and chalk that up to past karma. But don’t let it catch you down. Don’t let it discourage you. Accept it like a good sport and just keep on doing your best. That’s when you find the teaching on karma encouraging. That’s when you know that you really understand it. Because, you see, that opens the way to all the goodness we can experience, both in the world and beyond the world. So use this teaching to take heart, because that’s what it’s for. (crickets chirping)

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