A Hunk of Karma, A Hunk of Dharma

October 20, 2017

We’re all sitting in the same room, but we’re in different worlds. To begin with, each of us is sitting in a different body with what is said to be viewed as your old karma, this body with its senses. Or as they say in Thailand, you’re sitting here with a hunk of old karma. And this old karma provides you with opportunities for good or for bad. There are opportunities for pain here, there are opportunities for pleasure. You’re not seeing all of your old karma all at once. You’re just seeing some of it. But it’s basically providing you with the raw material for your experience right now. Because from that raw material, we each create even further different worlds, what the Buddha calls worlds of becoming, which basically come down to a sense of who you are in a particular world of experience. And given the range of possibilities that are coming up through your six senses right now, you can be in lots of different worlds. The kernel of each of those worlds is a desire. As we’re meditating, we’re trying to create a world of concentration here. So it requires the desire to stick with one object. It can be the breath, it can be the parts of the body, whatever you find congenial right now. And try to maintain that. That’s one of the potentials that you can work with right now, one of the states of becoming you can create out of the potentials you’ve got here. There are other potentials. There’s a potential for pain. You can make yourself really miserable sitting here focusing on pains in a certain way, in a way that amplifies them. Or you could spend the hour talking to yourself about some issue that gets you all worked up. That’s a potential here as well. That’s an opportunity here. But if you’re wise, you want to make the best of the opportunities you’ve got. There was a Vietnamese chef who one time said, “Give me a good bottle of fish sauce and I can make good Vietnamese food out of anything else you give me.” In other words, there’s a skill. You’re taking the potentials you’ve got here right now and turning them, say, into a state of concentration, using the potentials for pleasure. The breath is the main potential for pleasure right here. Of all the elements in the body, it’s the easiest to adjust. And it’s the closest to your awareness. So work with that. Try to figure out what works well here. This is where you have to use your own powers of evaluation. We’re not simply following a manual that says, “Now you do this, and now you do that.” There are basic steps, but a lot of the exploration has to be done from within. Because of this hunk of karma here, there’s also a hunk of dharma. This is where you learn the lessons of the dharma, through developing skill around how you manipulate the various potentials that are coming in from your past karma. This is where the Buddha learned. This is where all the great Ajahns learned. It’s in mastering the skill that you actually get to know the dharma. That’s one of the potentials that’s available here as well. That was the Buddha’s great discovery, that this human body, with its senses, can be a vehicle for awakening to something that goes beyond it. So it’s up to you what you do with these potentials you’ve got right here, right now. Get in touch with what you’ve got here. You can work with the breath in various ways to make it more comfortable, so that the mind will be more willing to settle in. If the breath is uncomfortable, if the body is uncomfortable, the mind will be resistant. It’s like pushing two south ends of different magnets together. They just repel each other. But if the breath is comfortable, the change in the image, the mind will begin to melt into the body. It feels good here. It feels more trust and staying here. That’s one of the potentials that’s here as well. So keep in mind the fact that you are manipulating things here. There’s that element of present karma as well. In fact, without the present karma, you would have no experience in the present moment. In the Buddhist analysis of dependent co-arising, it’s your present intentions that come prior to the raw material from past karma, i.e., present karma comes first. This is why it needs guidance. This is why we practice mindfulness, i.e., the ability to remember good lessons from the past about how we dealt with certain problems, how we were able to maximize pleasure in one way or another, things you learned either from reading or from your own experience. That’s what mindfulness is for, to remind you of these lessons. Otherwise, you learn the lesson, you forget it, as if you never learned it. For many of us, that’s how we go through our many lifetimes. We learn things, then we forget. We learn things, then we forget. Then we have to learn them the hard way all over again. Mindfulness is what passes the messages on. This is good to know. It’s like that character in Sirens of Titan who knows that he’s going to get his memory erased. So he writes down everything he can think of that is valuable to know. Then he hides in a little hiding place. Then he passes the messages on to someone else. When I come out through my memory eraser, he says, “Direct me to the sea.” That’s what mindfulness is. It’s jotting down the things that are worth knowing, the lessons you’ve learned as you try to be skillful, and pass them on, pass them on. It’s about this process of fabrication, using your present karma to fashion your opportunities from past karma into something good. So those lessons don’t get forgotten. They can help guide you. As you explore this hunk of old karma, the opportunities that are here, turn it into a hunk of dharma. Because even with the pains, the potentials for pains, as the Buddha said, you can analyze pain. You can come to understand pain in such a way that it frees the mind. So even stuff coming in from bad karma can have its uses. Try to be like that chef. Have a level of skill that you can make something good out of whatever comes up. So this hunk of karma really does become a hunk of dharma. And it opens you up to the dharma beyond. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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