Complexities of Karma

June 2, 2024

Years back I was asked to give a talk on karma. A group of people who have been doing Vipassana for many years. And I talked about how understanding karma is an important part of understanding how and why you’re meditating. Because when you meditate you’re trying to develop a skill. And the way the Buddha taught karma, the principle behind karma, is that what you experience in the present moment is a combination of two things. Results of past actions and then current actions and their results. Because not everything waits until the next lifetime to show its results. You stick your finger in a fire and you don’t have to wait until the next lifetime for it to hurt. It hurts right away. So we’ve got this complex interaction, past karma plus present karma. That’s why we meditate, because what we do in the present moment is going to make a big difference. So we focus our attention on the present moment. Not everything is determined by the past. Sometimes we hear a simplistic idea of karma that what you do in the past shapes the present moment, what you do in the present moment will shape the future. You do good, you get good results. You do bad, you get bad results. Those are the basic principles and they sound very simple. But in the actual working out they can be very complex. So I mentioned this to the meditators there and they gave me these perplexed looks. And I found out later that they had been taught that meditation meant not doing anything at all in the present moment. Just being with whatever comes up, accepting it and letting it go. Well that is kind of a doing. But it limits you in terms of the skills that you can develop right now. As the Buddha said, there are some things we want to comprehend, other things we want to abandon, other things we want to develop. And his reason for the focus on the present moment came from his seeing how complex karma can be. You may remember that on the second watch of the night of his awakening, he saw beings passing away and re-arising in line with their karma. And you read that and the first impressions to me that if you do good in this lifetime, you’re going to get good results in the next lifetime. Go to a good place, be happy. If you do bad in this lifetime, you’re going to go to a bad place. But the Buddha saw it was a lot more complex than that. Because you could do good in this lifetime and still go to a bad place next time around. In cases like that, he said, it’s either you had some past bad karma that was stronger, or you changed your habits before you died. You started doing bad things. Or at the moment of death, you develop wrong view. Deciding that all that good you had done wasn’t worth it. Sometimes people are in a lot of pain when they’re approaching death and they feel, well I’ve done all this good in my lifetime and it hasn’t done me any good for this disease. And they change their attitude, develop wrong view. And that wrong view can pull them down. And that doesn’t totally erase the good that they’ve done in the past. It simply delays it. But the delay can sometimes be very long. And vice versa. Someone can do some bad things in this lifetime and still go to a good place next time around. Either because they’ve done good beforehand or done good afterwards. Or developed right view at the moment of death. And the Buddha saw that the good that you do and the not good that you do comes down to your intentions. Why you act. So the mind is really important. It determines the quality of the action. But it can also erase some good things you’ve done in the past simply by adopting a wrong view. It can delay the results of your good actions. So as you look at your life, think about what you’re going to do to find happiness in this lifetime and prepare for the possibility that it’s going to be in the next lifetime, shaped by your actions. You don’t just be generous or observe the precepts. You’ve got to train the mind. Because if the mind changes on you, and as the Buddha said, there’s nothing in the world so quick to change direction as the mind, then all that goodness can be blocked at the moment you die. You don’t want that. This is why we develop mindfulness. So if you remember what’s good, what’s right and what’s wrong, and hold that in mind and not let our emotions or our moods push that knowledge away. Because mindfulness is keeping something in mind. And you want to keep in mind the fact that your intentions are important, your actions will shape your life. So you have to be very careful about what you do and say and think. You’ve got to hold on to that right view. When the Buddha says mindfulness is a governing principle, it’s not just watching things arising and passing away. It’s remembering what’s right and what’s wrong, and then making sure to give rise to what’s right and to abandon what’s wrong. And you want that mindfulness to be really strong. That’s why you want to develop to the point of concentration, so you can stay focused on one thing in spite of the disturbances around you. Like right here, as we’re sitting, it’s a relatively quiet place. There’s a little bit of noise in the background. And there may be pains here and there in your body. But you have to ask yourself, “Where can I focus so we’ll get the best results now and on into the long term?” You need to focus on the breath, which means that you have to pay no attention to the other things. They’re there. It’s not the case that your ears crowded. It’s simply that you don’t lift your attention out and focus it outside. You focus it right here, in spite of everything else that’s going on. Because think about it, when you’re dying, there’s going to be a lot more going on. If you’re in a hospital, there’ll be all the beeps and noises in the hospital, all the people coming and going up and down the corridor. And that, on top of the fact that your mind realizes that it can’t stay in this body anymore, it’s got to go. So you want to maintain your focus, maintain your determination that you want to go to a good place where you can continue practicing. And you believe that the work that you do right now as you’re dying, trying to keep the mind under control, is really worthwhile. Some people think that as you approach death, well, there’s nothing more you can do, so just get yourself shot up with morphine, painkillers, of some kind, and relax as best you can. Because there’s nothing you can do. Well, there’s actually plenty you can do to maintain your right view, and to keep your focus solid and strong, as all these other distractions threaten to pull you in their direction. Of course, the opportunities that will open themselves to you at that point will depend not only on your having meditated, but also on the times you’ve been generous, the times you’ve been virtuous. Which is why the Buddha recommended a complete course of goodness, not just meditation, but also generosity and virtue. That way your mind is under control, and you have good opportunities that are waiting to open up for you. So the Buddha’s policy for living a good life, and that includes managing a good death, come down to some very basic things. Be generous, be virtuous, develop thoughts of goodwill in your mind, and then try to develop as much concentration and mindfulness as you can, ultimately leading to a discernment, a discernment that sees when the mind moves in certain ways, it creates suffering, so you don’t have to move that way anymore. When it moves in other ways, it creates the path to the end of suffering. So you want to encourage those movements. As for the narrative that you are leaving this life, that can get you really depressed, really upset. But just remind yourself, all you have to do is maintain the state of your mind at that point. Your body is under the responsibility and care of the doctor. If you’re dying, you’re in a hospital. If you’re dying in an accident or someplace away from a hospital, you say, “Well, the rest of the world can take care of the body. I’ve laid claim to it long enough. Now it’s time to move on.” Realizing that your most important possession at that point is the state of your mind. We read so much in Buddhist teachings about how the important place to focus is the present moment. We’re sometimes told that it’s because it’s the only place there is. Sometimes we’re told, “Well, it’s a wonderful place to be.” It’s not always wonderful. And you do have to prepare for the future. But where do you prepare for the future? You prepare right here, right now. Because it’s the qualities that come up in the mind right now that are going to make a difference. As a Buddhist insight, seeing that one moment of mind state at the end of your life can have a huge effect on where you go. Just because it’s one moment doesn’t mean that it’s weak. In fact, with every moment, we’re making decisions to shape our experience. The better we learn how to do it well right here, right now, the more sensitive we are to how we do it right here, right now. Then the greater the likelihood that we’re going to be able to do it well then. So make sure your goodness is complete. That way the good opportunities will be open to you. Good opportunities will be open to you. And you have the presence of mind to choose them well.

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