The Karma of Meditation

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When we practice concentration we’re trying to set up an intention in the mind that we’re going to stay with one object and that we do our best to maintain that intention. In this case the intention is to stay with the breath. You want to be sensitive to the breath all the way in, all the way out. So take a couple of good long deep in and out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing most clearly in the body. When the Buddha talks about breath he’s not talking about the air that you feel at the nose. He’s talking about the movement of energy in the body. So where do you feel that as you breathe in? Where do you feel that as you breathe out? Place your attention there and then try to keep it there. That’s what turns this state of mind into concentration. Otherwise it’s just one more state of mind in a series of states of mind. We’re trying to see what can happen if you focus on one thing and stay with one thing continually. But you want to stay with a sense of ease and well-being otherwise the mind is going to fight, try to struggle away. So when you notice where the breath is clearest then the next question is how can you make that spot really comfortable as you breathe in, as you breathe out? You may notice if the breath gets too long you feel like you’re squeezing it so you don’t want to squeeze it. If it’s too short you don’t feel satisfied. So try to find the right balance. So it’s a normal part of the meditation in the beginning that you will be talking to yourself about this, asking yourself where is the best place to focus? What kind of breathing feels the best? When you get a comfortable sensation of breathing how do you maintain it? And then the next question is how do you let it spread through the body? And John Lee gives some examples. He says you can think of the breath energy starting at the base of the skull, right on the back of the neck, and then going down the spine, down the legs, starting again at the base of the skull, going down the shoulders, now the arms, starting in the middle of the chest, right above the heart, going down through the heart, through the intestines. But those are some ideas that you can begin with. You may want to notice when you breathe in do you feel the movement of the energy and where does it move? And is it moving in a good direction? Sometimes if you have the feeling that the energy moves up as you breathe in you can start getting headaches, which you don’t want. So in that case you have to think of the breath energy going down. Some people like to think the breath energy starting from within the body and radiating out. Other people like to think of it outside the body radiating in. So you can play with different perceptions, different ways of conceiving the breath. Don’t put any pressure on the breath. When you make changes in the way you breathe you don’t have to tense up or tighten any part of the body. Just use the power of thought. See how the body responds. This is how you help to maintain that original intention, which is to stay right here, to get to know your mind by focusing it on one thing. The mind is hard to watch, hard to follow. But if you get focused on one thing for a long period of time you can begin to notice it more clearly, you can see your thoughts more clearly, and get a sense of which thoughts are going to be good to follow and which ones are not. You also get a sense of how to go with the good ones and how to stop going with the bad ones, all of which is really useful to know. Because these are lessons in karma. We don’t like tend to think of karma as being related to the meditation, but it is. Years back I was asked to give a talk on karma to a group of meditators, and I hadn’t had any experience with their meditation centers. So I talked about how the way the Buddha teaches karma is ideal for applying to the lessons of how you approach meditation as a skill. In other words, you do something and then you notice the results. Because as the Buddha taught karma, it’s not the case that it acts only between lifetimes. We think, well that’s something I did in a previous lifetime, it’s giving its results now. Sometimes it’s something you just did just now that’s giving results. This is how we learn from our actions. You stick your finger into a fire, it burns, so you pull it out. That’s pretty instantaneous, and instantaneous karmic lessons like that are easy to remember. The harder ones are the ones where there’s a period of time between the action and the result, and sometimes we can forget the action as we experience the result. But at the same time, when you do something and you can see the results, and then you can change. You see the results are not good, you can change what you’ve done next time around. This is how we develop skills. We have the freedom to choose what to do, and we have the ability to observe our actions and to observe their results. We have the ability to judge the results as to whether they’re good or not, and then we can make changes again. In fact, everything you experience in the present moment is the result either of present karma or past karma. And a large part of the skill will be learning how to tell the difference. And one of the easiest ways to do that is to change what you do, see what the results are, then change it again, see what the results are, and you begin to gain a sense of cause and effect in your own mind. That’s the lesson we want to learn, is how we can create good causes, maintain those good causes, and let go of the bad ones. So I presented this explanation to the people at the center, and they gave me quizzical looks. And afterwards I found out that they were told that meditation involved not doing anything at all, just allowing whatever was going to come up to come up. No sense of directing your breath, no sense of directing your mind. But you don’t learn much that way. We’re here to learn cause and effect so that we can master cause and effect. Use it to good purpose. In something very immediate like this, the breath is very close to the mind. The mind is very close to the breath. Sometimes you see an event in the breath that has an effect on the mind. Sometimes it’ll be an event in the mind that has an effect on the breath. But they’re very closely related. So this is a good way to study your karma here in the present moment. This is part of the Buddha’s approach to how you prepare yourself to live a good life and to die a good death. Because at the moment of death you’ll be faced with many choices. Different opportunities will appear to you as to places where you could go, identities that you could take on as you leave this body. And you want to have a lot of mindfulness and concentration and discernment, so you can choose wisely. And of course at a moment like that, the body may be in a lot of pain. The mind, if it’s not trained, will be wandering all over the place. And you have to resist those tendencies. You have to master some skills so that when the time comes to go, you can maintain your focus and focus into the direction you really do want to go. Make sure that other random desires don’t suddenly pop up and take over. As to where you may go, the opportunities that will present themselves at that point will be the results of past karma. Which is why you don’t wait until the moment of death itself to master these skills. There are other skills you have to master as well. This is why we have the practice of generosity, the practice of virtue, the practice of developing goodwill. Because these actions will create good opportunities for us in the next lifetime. These are the kind of activities that do give the good results, sometimes immediately, but more importantly over the long term. So in a combination of two things, one is the kind of karma right now that will create good opportunities in the future, and two, the kind of karma right now that will develop skills that you’ll need to use in the present moment at the moment of death. This is why the Buddha didn’t teach just meditation. He taught generosity. He taught virtue. He taught restraint. He taught all the good qualities of the mind. Because these things, when they’re developed, will be your treasures. Which means that when you have to leave this body, you won’t be deprived of good opportunities. They won’t be greeting you after you’ve been away for a long time. All your good actions won’t be there in the form of their results. They’ll be welcoming you back. But at the same time, you need to make sure that your mind, at that moment, is well under control. And this is the harder part. You’ll notice here, as you meditate, sometimes the mind wanders off and it’s a while before you catch it and say, “My gosh, I was meditating on the breath and then what happened? Here I am, 50 miles away, 100 miles away, at a different time, different place. What happened?” A lapse of mindfulness is what happened. And here you are sitting in relative comfort, and mindfulness can still lapse. Imagine what it’s going to be like as the body gets so uncomfortable that you can’t stay. And there’s going to be people around that will be all upset at the fact that you’re dying. How are you going to maintain your focus then? You’ve got to practice now. When the Buddha talks about focusing on the present moment, it’s never to say that the moment is a wonderful place to be, or it’s the only possible place to be. There are lots of possible places you could focus right now. But you focus on the present moment because there’s work that has to be done right here. As you keep your mind under control, give it a sense of being happy to be here. In other words, you don’t want your control to be too heavy-handed, too harsh, but you do want it to be insistent. But insistent in a good way, insistent in an inviting way, so that the mind feels good being here. Maintain that original intention. Because that’s where the karma lies, is in the intention. If you’ve got a good intention, the Buddha says that’s meritorious right there. Then if you maintain it, it gets even more meritorious. But if you get it and then lose it, it doesn’t have the power it could have otherwise. So maintain your intention to stay here and do what you can to make the breath interesting, make the breath comfortable. Make it a good place to stay. Right here, right now. So you need practice in maintaining a good intention. You’ve got the opportunity to do it right now, so make the most of it.

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