How to Use the Teaching on Kamma

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Years back I gave a talk on karma to a group of people at a mindfulness meditation center. I explained that the way the Buddha taught karma is not deterministic or fatalistic. That the way he taught karma is very useful when you take the attitude that meditation is a skill. Because, as he said, the things you experience in the present moment are a combination of two things, actions coming in from the past and your actions that you’re doing right now. And the way you put those things coming in from the past can make a big difference. So when you’re trying to develop a skill, you look at what you’re doing right now, and if you see that you’re making a mistake, you can correct that mistake right now. You’re not determined to say, “I have to make a bad table or make a bad set of clothing.” The influences come in from the past, your past skills, what you’ve already learned, what you’ve already mastered, and what you haven’t mastered. But then you have your powers of observation right now, as you do something. It’s in the same way, this is ideal for viewing meditation as a skill. You’re sitting here with your breath, and some of the things you’re experiencing in the body right now are the result of past karma. And some of them are the result of what you’re doing right now. So you can try to adjust the breath to see if that makes a difference, if there’s a pain someplace. Sometimes you have to put up with the pain. You realize that no matter what you do right now, in terms of how you breathe, how you talk to yourself, the images you hold in mind, there’s going to be pain. But still, you don’t have to suffer from it. Because the way you perceive the pain can be changed. The way you talk to yourself about the pain can be changed. And over time, as you get more experience in meditation, you get a wider range, a bigger repertoire, for how to deal with things coming up that are unpleasant, from, say, your past karma. What’s really interesting, and the Buddha put it so well, it’s all together, independent, co-arising. Your present karma comes first, then the results of past karma are shaped by your present karma. So what you’re doing right now is really important. As I gave this talk, I was getting a lot of blank looks. It was explained to me later that they had been taught that in meditation you don’t do anything, you just watch. You just be with whatever comes up. And accept it. As for karma, they tended to view it with suspicion. Largely because, one, they didn’t understand it, and two, they didn’t know how to use it, the teaching on karma. It’s extremely useful. One, it’s useful for understanding what you’re doing right now. This is why we’re focusing on the breath in the present moment, because we want to catch the mind in the present moment. Because that’s the source of all our karma. People in the time of the Buddha had lots of different teachings about karma. One of the prevalent ones was that the most important karma was what your body was doing, and then your speech. And the least important was the mind. As the Buddha explained, they had things backwards. Because if your body’s going to do something, for it to be karma it has to have an intention. So the mind has to have the intention. And it’s the quality of the intention that determines things. Which means that the mind is the part that has to be trained to be skillful. So that’s why we focus right here, right now. And the fact that things are not totally determined by the past is also why we focus right here, right now. Because what we do right now can make a big difference. So simply understanding what you’re doing, why you’re doing it as you meditate. The teachings on karma are really important. But we can also use them in other ways. When I first went to Thailand to meditate, to stay on the mountain there with the Chan Phuong, I was pretty much alone for much of the day. A lot of old stories came up. Stories from when I was in grade school, high school, college. Issues in my family. I could find myself getting all worked up about them. I talked to Chan Phuong about some of them. And he was very helpful. He said, “Look at it in terms of karma, in terms of rebirth. The fact that you’re suffering from this and that means that you probably did something like that in a previous lifetime.” Then my mother died when I was fairly young. Then my having been a soldier probably in a previous lifetime left a lot of kids orphaned. That kind of thing. That was the one time he gave a detail like that. Other times it was more general. And this is where the teaching on karma really is useful, and the teaching on rebirth is useful, and the general principle. Think about the Buddha in the night of his awakening. His first knowledge was of what he had been in previous lifetimes. And the most important thing he learned from that knowledge was that there’s no steady progress. It’s not the case that you keep coming back on the same level you were, until you learn the lessons you’re supposed to learn on that level, and then move up to the next grade. We’re not going through a public school here. People go up and down. But he couldn’t figure out why they were going up and down. Then he realized the question of what he had been in a previous lifetime was not the important question. The important question was why. And the answer was karma. So the question was what had he done rather than what he was. When you think about it in those terms, you realize that you could have been many things in the previous lifetimes. All kinds of karma that you have with you. As the Buddha said, to get reborn in the human realm you have to have both good and bad karma. So accept the fact that there’s a mix. You don’t have to know all the details. But realize if something comes at you, you did something equivalent or something similar in a previous lifetime. And it takes a lot of interest about the things that would tend to get you worked up, either while you’re meditating or as you go through life. Something bad happens or something bad happened in the past. You can get worked up about it really easily. But what does it serve? What purpose does that serve? When you get worked up and you have to deal with the situation, you can’t deal with it as clearly as you could if you let the anger go. But for most of us, a lot of the interest in the story is coming up in our lives about injustices, the feeling that something hasn’t been settled, something hasn’t been brought to closure. But when you realize it’s part of a long, long, long mudslinging battle through the many lifetimes, it gets less and less and less interesting. Less and less worthy of anger. Some people say, “Well, that means you’re saying that the victim is responsible for his or her suffering.” Well, what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with that is what people tend to make out of that, which is that if someone did something bad in a previous lifetime, well, then they deserve to get what they’re getting now, so you don’t have any compassion for them. That’s the wrong response. Because as I said, everybody here in the human realm has some bad karma. And if you reserve your compassion only for good people, who are you going to have compassion for? Only people who have no bad actions in their past? There’s nobody around you’re going to have compassion for. I got an email today from someone who complained about one of the suttas, where the Buddha talks about ways of overcoming hatred. And you think about this person has done something bad to someone that I like, or has done something good to somebody I dislike, or will do, or is doing something bad to someone I like, or to me, or has done something good to people I don’t like. And the response is, “Well, what should I expect?” And this person who’s complaining is saying, “Well, does this mean that you don’t do anything at all to right wrongs?” That’s not the case. It simply means you don’t develop hatred for that person. If you have hatred for that person, it’s going to be hard to figure out the right thing to do. So you try to get the hatred out of the way, you get the anger out of the way. So you can see clearly. Part of the problem with anger is you get blinders on you, and things appear very, very clear. “You should say this. You should say that. This is what I want to say, what I should say.” Well, the “shoulds” there get very clear because the nuances have been blocked out. Usually when you’re angry, you have a sense that things are abnormal. Something has gone incredibly awry. It’s out of the ordinary, so you have extraordinary rights to do and say what you like. But that’s blocking out the reality, which is that bad things happen, and it’s normal. Because bad karma has been done in the past, all over the place. So there’s bound to be more bad things happening. The question is, what is the right response? What is the most effective response? A response that can help put an end to some of the mudslinging. And to think in those terms requires that you not be angry. So you look at the allure of the anger. Now when you’re meditating and you’re trying to stay with the breath, it’s easy to say, “Well, I don’t want to get involved in that thought, so for right now I’ll put it aside.” And if you see it in the light of karma, it does make it a lot less interesting. One more chapter in this back and forth. It’s just nobody was clearly in the right or clearly in the wrong. Everybody’s in the wrong. But when you’re out in the world outside, and you’re not meditating, it’s a lot easier to say, “Well, I’m justified in this anger, and it’s going to be good.” You kind of realize it gets in the way. So whatever ways you can think about using the teaching on karma to help calm things down in the mind, so you can see more clearly the appropriate reaction, it’s all to the good. So a lot of our problems with the teaching on karma is we don’t know how to use it. We come to a lot of wrong conclusions and say it’s a bad teaching. If it were a bad teaching, the Buddha wouldn’t have mentioned it. In fact, it’s so important. That’s one of the things he did mention about his awakening. As he said, what he awakened to was like all the leaves in the forest. What he taught was just the handful of leaves, because those were useful in putting an end to suffering. And karma is part of that handful of leaves. So he could have put the whole issue aside if he’d seen that it was not important. But here it is important. It’s an extremely useful teaching to understand what you’re doing right now, why you’re doing it, to understand how you can get past thoughts of bad things that have happened to you in the past, thoughts of bad things you’ve done in the past. You see in the light above, a much larger picture, and those distractions just get less and less. Less interesting. When you’re out in the world, it makes it easier to not give in to anger, justified anger. What you think is justified anger. Because you realize you don’t know what the score is in this mudslinging battle. That is what a lot of what samsara is about. In a way, you can learn to be more skillful. Not be a slave to your greed, aversion, or delusion. The same goes for lust and greed. As the Chan-Fu I once said, when you really desire sensual pleasure of some kind, it’s a sign that you enjoyed it in the past. You’ve had it already. You say, think about that for a few minutes. It’s enough to give rise to strong sense of samvega. Because after all, if you get it again, you’re going to lose it again, you’re going to miss it again. And it goes around and around and goes nowhere. Meanwhile, you’re creating a lot of bad karma. The Buddha said as much. He said, if you see somebody who’s wealthier than you and you feel jealous about their wealth, envious of their wealth, remind yourself that you’ve been there too. Or if you see somebody who’s really, really poor and miserable, you’ve been there as well. In this case, he says, the first thought helps to get past any resentment you might have about other people’s good fortune. The second thought helps to get you past any sense of condescension in your compassion for those who are less well-off than you are. So when you’re used to teaching properly, it’s very effective. You’re having to cut away your defilements. And then it goes beyond that and helps to induce a sense of samvega. You realize all the ups and downs, ups and downs. And all the unskillful thinking that can come when you get really concerned about the ups and downs. And you realize the best prospect would be to get out. When you can think in those terms, then you’re using the teaching for its intended purpose. We’re not here keeping score about who deserves what. We’re just looking at this principle. As long as we’re engaged in this process of wandering on, there’s going to be suffering. You make other people suffer, you make yourself suffer. Over and over and over again. Why not get out? The Buddha is offering this possibility. It is possible to get out. He shows the way. And we chanted just now. So do your best to follow it.

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