Mindful about Pleasure & Pain

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One of the big misunderstandings of the teaching on karma is that it’s tit-for-tat. In other words, you kill five people and then you have to be killed five times. That’s not what the Buddha taught at all. The way karma works itself out is very complex. And the way you experience the results of your actions depends not only on the action, but also on your state of mind when those results come to fruition or begin to ripen. And that’s something you can do something about now. As the Buddha said, you can reflect on the fact that you’ve done unskillful things in the past, especially when the Buddha talks about what’s skillful and what’s not. And the proper reaction is recognizing that it was a mistake, not getting tied up or move worse, resolving not to repeat the mistake, and then spreading thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Goodwill for others, of course, is to make sure you don’t repeat the mistake. Goodwill for yourself also helps you not to repeat the mistake, because if you get down on yourself for your past mistakes, it weakens you. One of the strange habits of the mind is when you realize you’ve done something unskillful, to blot it out. You just do something new unskillful. So have some goodwill for yourself, that you’re not here to punish yourself. Nothing is accomplished by punishing yourself ahead of time. And then you try to develop the qualities that create a mind state that is not going to be affected by past unskillful actions. The Buddha lists them. In addition to developing goodwill, there’s development in virtue, and then development in discernment. And then there’s a skill that you develop as you practice concentration, which is learning how not to be overcome by pleasure and not to be overcome by pain. But the pleasure, it’s mainly a matter of when you mind begins to settle down and the breath begins to feel good. There’s a tendency to just go for the pleasure and wallow in the pleasure, forget the breath, and then you lose your foundation. To maintain your foundation, you have to have the right attitude toward pleasure, that the pleasure will do its work. It will soothe the body, soothe the mind, without your having to gobble it down. Because you’ve still got work to do. So maintain the foundation by sticking with the breath, by noticing the breath, paying careful attention to the breath, making it as continuous as possible, your attention. And the pleasure will take care of itself. It will do its work. If you can’t develop this skill, then there’s no way the mind’s going to stay concentrated properly, or even if it is still, it’s going to be blurry and it’s not going to be the kind of concentration that’s good for developing insight. Good concentration requires mindfulness, which is the mind’s habit of stitching moments of attention together. The mind is aware, or it pays attention in discrete moments. So to stay with one object, you have to learn how to stitch those moments together. That’s what mindfulness is for. It’s like a little message that each moment sends to the next moment. That’s what you have to remember. And it’s those little messages that keep you alert. Otherwise you get lost. You lose your focus. You forget while you’re here, and it’s in those moments when the thread has broken that we wander off. So you can’t let the pleasure distract you from those little messages you’ve got to keep sending to yourself. There’s work to be done when you’re getting the mind concentrated. It’s not just total rest. Sometimes the messages can be very simple, just breath, breath, breath. In the beginning they’re a lot more complex. So look at the different kinds of breathing, check out what the mind needs right now, what the body needs right now, and remember what you’ve learned. So you don’t just keep repeating the same mistake over and over again. In other words, if you learn that short breathing is not good tonight, well, you don’t go back to short breathing. That’s because, you remember, you tried it out and it didn’t work. So you keep sending to yourself. That’s what keeps you on topic. That’s what allows you to develop this as a skill. So it’s very important that you not let the mind get overcome by pleasure. It’s there. It’ll do its work. And there will come a point when you decide that it’s too much, especially if there’s a lot of rapture going along with it. You’ve got to tune into something finer. And again, how do you do that? Well, you remember the lessons you’ve learned from the past. You’ve learned how to tune into a more subtle level of energy in the body. Just let the rapture go. It’ll continue for a while, and then as you’re not focusing on it, not feeding on it, it’ll go away. And the mind can settle down. So this is how you develop that ability not to be overcome by pleasure. As for not being overcome by pain, this also relates to those little messages you’re sending to yourself. Bad messages around pain. The pain is right here. Watch out for it. It has these boundaries. It has this shape. It has this quality. It’s been here this long. You can send those messages and keep sending them and sending them and sending them. It just makes the pain worse. This is one of those areas where you actually have to strip down the message. You might say, “Okay, there’s a pain there,” but you don’t have to go into it. Or if it’s really present, like if it’s invading your head or something, you have to remind yourself you don’t have to define the edges of the pain. And you also have to continue to remind yourself of what’s worked in the past in terms of the perceptions you hold to. One perception I’ve found very useful is to remember that the pain does come in moments. And as soon as you notice a moment of pain, it’s going away. So you don’t have to catch it. You don’t have to hold on to it. There’s a part of the mind that seems to want to take a pain and stuff it in a bag to keep it. Why you want to keep it, it’s hard to tell. But we lug our pains around much more than we have to. So when the pain comes, it’s going away. The pain comes, it’s going away. And you don’t have to send any message about how sharp the pain is or how bad the pain is or how long it’s been there. Just send the messages of what to do when the pain comes so that you’re not going to suffer from it. So this requires strong mindfulness, this ability not to hold on to the pain. Not to become overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. The ability to send the right messages to yourself as you go from one moment to the next to the next. That way you not only get the mind to settle down and to stay clear and alert, but also not to be overcome by pain. So that when the results of past karma come, they don’t weigh so much on you. Particularly this relationship to pain. It’s something we’ve experienced ever since birth. And all too often we’ve let it drive us around. Sometimes there doesn’t have to be that much pain. There just seems to be the threat of pain, and it’s got us scared already. So we can learn how to be with pain and not make ourselves suffer from it. We’ve learned a good lesson. It’s not only good in alleviating the results of past actions, but also making sure that we’re not a slave to the defilements that go around pain. It means also that we’re not going to be the slaves of other people who want to use those defilements for their purposes. The whole point of this is that we become free. Remember, the whole point of the teaching is to free us from suffering. It’s one of the big ironies when people talk about karma in the Buddhist context. The Buddhist teachings are all aimed at teaching us how not to suffer. And yet the common interpretation of karma is that the Buddha is telling us why we deserve to suffer. That’s an abuse of the teaching, if you understand how complex action is. And yes, there are such things as mistakes, and there are going to be the results of mistakes. But the Buddha is teaching us that whether you deserve to suffer or not, he never uses the word “deserve.” No matter how deserved your suffering may be, he can teach you how to free yourself from it. That’s a lot of good news right there. People sometimes ask me, “Where is grace in the teaching on karma?” Grace as a gift from somebody else does not exist in that sense. But there is this freedom in the present moment to change your habits in such a way that you don’t have to suffer, no matter what you’ve done in the past. And you can’t really call it grace. But it’s something much better. It’s the possibility of freedom. And it’s there for you to take advantage of.

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