Weathering Karma Storms

October 1, 2022

People sometimes wonder what the teaching on karma has to do with meditation. Well, meditation is a type of karma, and one of the principles of karma that are good to know is the principle that what you’re experiencing right now is a combination of three things. Results of past actions, your present, and the results of present actions. If you’re able to sit here without too much of an evasion from past actions, you can give all your attention to what you’re doing right now—focusing on the breath, talking to yourself about the breath, holding in mind a perception of the breath that makes it easy for feelings of well-being to spread through the body. There are other times, though, when past karma comes in—and it comes in really strong in the Buddhist terms—it invades your mind and remains. And it seems that all you can do is just hang on. It’s like a storm coming through. We’d have these storms back in Thailand, wind and rain, wind and rain. The trees were getting knocked down. There’s nothing you can do about it except hide out, find a safe place where you wouldn’t get wet, wouldn’t get chilled by the wind, and wait for the storm to pass. And sometimes we have these karma storms that come through—events from our childhood, things we’ve done in the past. They come roaring in, and they take over the mind. What you’ve got to learn how to do is not let them take over. Remind yourself that this is past karma coming in. You can’t do much about it. You can’t go back and undo the past karma. But you can turn your attention as much as possible to your present karma. And this is where we do it. We’re dealing with the three kinds of fabrication—bodily fabrication, the breath; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication, the perceptions you hold in mind together with the feelings that you focus on. These are the things that provide you with a safe shelter right now. So first you’ve got to work with your breath. No matter what emotional content there may be in these thoughts that are coming through, don’t let them take over the breath. You can very consciously breathe in a calm way, though the thoughts will still be there. They may have taken over your visual field inside, like an IMAX screen. But you still have the sensation of the body as you feel it from within. So stick with body, body, body sensations. That’s one of the good things about taking the breath as your object, because it’s not in the mind. It stands a little bit outside. So breathe calmly. And then learn how to talk to yourself in the right way. One of the worst things you can do is get angry and upset about the fact that these thoughts are coming in. Remind yourself, “These are the thoughts that are the result of past bad karma, and this is what past bad karma looks like as it gives its results.” Do you want more of that? No. Then do what you can to be skillful in how you approach these things. As you remind yourself that this is past karma, you’re not responsible for it right now, that helps take some of the burden off. The fact that it’s invading your meditation, you say, “Well, maybe I didn’t see it sit down with the intention to learn patience, but I guess patience is what I’ve got to learn.” In other words, use your ability to engage in verbal fabrication in a way that’s helpful. You may not like the idea that you have some past bad karma, but remember, this is the human realm. Everybody in the human realm is here because of a mixed bag of past karma, good and bad. And the fact that your past bad karma is showing itself right now doesn’t mean you’re worse than other people whose past bad karma is not showing itself. The Buddha’s image is of a field. Our karma is seeds that we planted in that field. And who knows what we have in the field? We know that certain seeds have sprouted. The plants are there. Maybe our plants don’t look very good. Other people seem to have better plants right now. But you never know how things can change. Because you don’t know what seeds are there on the ground. What you do know is that you want to plant good seeds right now. So even though patience wasn’t what you came here for, maybe you have to tell yourself, “Well, this is the lesson I’ve got to learn. Patience, endurance, and a certain amount of equanimity.” Given that we all have a mixed bag, we have to learn how to live with the bad parts and the good parts. Not let the bad parts get us down. Not let the good parts get us complacent. And finally, perceptions. That perception that, yes, this is past bad karma coming in, that’s a really useful one. It takes you off the hook right now. It reminds you that the important thing for you right now is to find a safe place to hang out. Maybe just a small part of your awareness, the thoughts that have invaded and are remaining in the mind, may have occupied a huge part of the territory. But you still have your spot, your determination not to get bowled over by these things. Hold on to that determination. When Ajahn Mun gave his last words, he said, “Be determined not to come back and be at the laughing stock of the defilements ever again.” It may feel like the defilements are laughing at you right now, but you learn to put up with it. But you’re determined, “I don’t want to come back and do this again.” So focus on the good things that you can do right now. Don’t let the storms invade your mind. They may have invaded part of the mind, but don’t let them invade the entire mind. And be especially careful not to brew up any new storms right now. So any anger over the fact that these thoughts are invading your meditation, that’s something you simply have to drop. Remind yourself, “There are good things I can do right now. There are lessons that I can learn. Patience is a good lesson. Determination is a good lesson. All those Capricorn virtues, those are your real friends. They’re unassuming. They’re a little drab, but they stand by you. So learn how to nurture them. Learn how to see their value. Just don’t get tied up in thoughts of guilt or frustration or anger around the fact that some past bad karma is showing itself. I mean, this shows itself not only in karma storms like this, mind storms like this. It can also show itself in pain, difficult situations outside. These are all things we have to deal with. There are things that can interfere with the meditation that you might not think of as interferences. There was a woman one time, a nun, who was practicing meditation with a Chan Fung. The way a Chan Fung would teach would be that if anybody had something appearing in their meditation, like a vision, they were to speak up. Although sometimes you wouldn’t wait for them to speak up. He’d say,”Are you having anything happening to you?” And she’d say, “Oh, yeah, I just had this vision of X.” So a Chan Fung would tell them what to do with X. After several days of this, the nun said, “I know my mind is quiet, but nothing is happening. It’s just quiet like that.” And a Chan Fung said, “Do you realize how lucky you are? Other people have all these visions come in interfering with them, so they can’t get the mind to settle down.” A lot of people would meditate for the sake of visions. In fact, in Thailand, many times, if people find out that you’re a meditator, the first thing they’ll ask is, “What do you see?” But as he pointed out, we’re here to get the mind still. And even the fun and games of visions, it’s a big distraction. And again, it’s karma getting in the way. So we all have our problems getting the mind to settle down. And those problems will come in different forms. And if you’re experiencing a mind storm right now, you say, “Okay, this is my past bad karma, but I want to make sure I don’t make any bad karma now by the way I breathe, by the way I talk to myself, by the images that I hold in mind.” Hold in mind that image of the storm, and you’re in a shelter. That’s a good, tight shelter. That’s your breath. It’s the way you’re talking to yourself about the breath, the way you’re talking to yourself about the mind storm. Focus on that, because that’s where you really can make a difference right here, right now. That’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about. Where can you make the best difference? What choices do you have? You may not be able to choose what’s showing itself on your metal screen. But you can choose how you react to it, how you defend yourself from it. And however long it takes for the storm to pass, realize that your ability to stick it out will all go well for the future. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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