

Of Past & Future

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I don't know how many times I've started a Dhamma talk by saying, "Don't listen to the Dhamma talk. Focus your attention on the breath. The talk is here to be a fence to direct you back to the present moment, direct you back to the breath in case you wander off." The reason I say that is because that's how the Dhamma functions as a whole. It's meant to point you back to your mind in the present moment, to what you're doing in the present moment, where you can relate things to the present moment – that's when you're using the Dhamma the correct way. When you find that the talk carries you off into speculation, you're using it in the wrong way. The Dhamma is meant to function as a set of tools to apply to the present moment. You're not here simply to *be* here. You want to understand *why* you're here, what you're doing here, what's the best thing to be doing here. When the Dhamma talks about the past or the future, it's meant to catch you if you've wandered off into the past or the future, and to bring you back – not only to bring you back to the present, but also to give you a perspective on what you're doing here.

For instance, the teachings on karma: Every time the Buddha talked about cycles of past lives or the general direction of the universe in the future, he ended up by saying that it all comes down to what people do, that karma is what has fashioned the past, will fashion the future. And where is karma being made? Right here, right now. What is karma? Intention. That's the action being performed in the present moment. So you want to look at your intentions. The best way to do that is to meditate.

As for the future we're shaping, think about the past you've shaped with all your past actions. What are the things you've regretted most? Sometimes you might think that you regret something that somebody else did, but the things that really burn inside are the harmful things *you* did. And they burn especially when you did them even though you knew they'd be harmful. Why did you do them? Because you weren't very alert, weren't very mindful. You let defilement take over the mind. How are you going to prevent yourself from doing that in the future? By developing mindfulness, developing alertness. Where do you do that? Right here, right now. So if you're concerned about the future, remember that if you take care of the powers of the mind here in the present moment, those powers will enable you to handle the future well when it comes. So the teachings related to past and future – particularly the teachings on karma – are designed to bring you back into the present moment and to give you an understanding of why you're here. You're not just hanging out in the present moment because it's

a wonderful place to stay. You're not here passively; you're actually doing something here all the time. And what you're doing is important.

So you want to do something skillful. The Buddha talks about Right Effort: the things you should abandon, the things you should prevent, the things you should give rise to, the things you should maintain and develop. He also talks about the four noble truths, and each of them has a duty. With stress and suffering, your duty is to comprehend it. If you happen to run into some suffering here in the present moment, try to comprehend it. If you run into any craving, recognize that that's the cause for suffering. Do what you can to abandon it, to undercut the ignorance that makes it unskillful. As for the factors of the path – concentration, mindfulness, alertness – develop those. If you see any moments where craving disbands, try to be very clear about how that happens – whether it's simply one craving taking over another one or if there's actually a moment when craving stops and nothing takes its place. Look into that. Make it clear. As for the right efforts or the right exertions I mentioned just now, their purpose is to give rise to skillful qualities – like the qualities of the path – and then to maintain them. The preventing and the abandoning apply to the cause of suffering.

So the Buddha's instructions are very clear. They tell you what to do. But they don't simply say, "Do this and don't think about *why*." They give you the reasons, so that you understand why you're here in the present moment, why you're doing what you're doing. When you understand that much, you understand the purpose of the Dhamma. When you use the Dhamma for that purpose, you're using it properly: to come into the present moment and to sort out what's going on right here, and particularly to understand what your intentions are doing.

So don't be worried if you don't know a lot about the Dhamma or don't understand it all. Understand enough to bring the mind to stillness. Understand enough to bring the mind to the present moment, to watch what it's doing, to do it skillfully, to be mindful, alert, right here. If you find yourself wandering off, try to keep it as short a wander as possible. If the mind is persistent and constantly going back to the past or worrying about the future, keep reminding yourself of the lessons that the Dhamma has to teach about how to relate to the past and the future.

The only really beneficial use for the past is to remember your mistakes and to resolve not to repeat them, to remember what you did well and see if it applies right now. As for the future, its main use is to remind yourself that you don't know how much future time you have left in this particular lifetime. Notice how the Buddha teaches recollection of death: It's not just keeping "Death, death, death, death, death..." in mind. The proper reflection is, "If I had just one more breath, I could make good use of it." So where does that reflection focus you? On the present moment. You *do* have this one more breath, so make good use of it. Have a sense of the value of each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out. Have a sense of the importance of the present moment. The opportunities are

here in the present moment for performing the duties appropriate to the four noble truths, for mastering Right Exertion or mastering Right Effort. That's all you really need to know. If you want your understanding of those teachings to get more refined, the present moment is the place to look more carefully.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his Awakening. His first knowledge was recollection of past lives, but that wasn't Awakening. Still, it did inspire the question: Did this pattern apply just to him or to everybody? And what's the factor that determines whether a life is going to be happy or sad, comfortable or not? In the second knowledge he applied his powers of concentration to that question and discovered that the principle of rebirth applies to everybody. He also found that actions performed with Right View – skillful intentions influenced by Right View, the view that your actions are important – are the things that led to happy lifetimes. Unskillful intentions performed from Wrong Views lead to suffering.

But then the Buddha did something very unusual. He applied that insight to the present moment: What do all these lessons have to do with the present moment? That's where the third knowledge came in. He focused on the immediate present, on the questions of stress and suffering right here and now, the causes for those things as they appear right here and now. In other words, he focused on his actions, his intentions, in the present moment, along with the stress and suffering occurring right there in the present moment. And the mental activities that led him beyond the suffering, to transcend suffering: Those were all right there in that moment, too. It was because he looked at the present moment in that way that he was able to break through to something else, something that can be touched right here in your awareness of the present, but lies beyond it.

So learn to use the Dhamma in a way that keeps bringing you back, bringing you back to what you're doing right here, right now, with the determination to do it skillfully, with alertness, with mindfulness. If you have any doubts about why you're here, reflect on what the Dhamma teaches: that what you're doing right here is useful. Very useful, both for you and for the people around you. A lot of people accuse meditators of simply running away from things, but we're not running away. We're running *to* the source of all things right here. We're accused of doing something totally useless to other people. Well, no it's not: We're getting rid of greed, anger, and delusion right here. This benefits not only ourselves, but also everyone around us. That's our purpose for being here.

And it's an important purpose. It's the most important thing we can do with our lives: the sort of thing that if it demands great sacrifices, we should be willing to make them. As the Buddha once said, even if your practice of the holy life brings tears bathing your cheeks in sorrow, frustration, and despair, you should *stick with it*. That's much better than giving up. This is the best use of your life. The Dhamma is there to remind you of that.

So we're not just hanging out here in the present moment, grooving on or blissing out in the present moment – although there may be bliss. That's not all that we're here for. We're here for something more important than that. The teachings on the past or the future – all the teachings of the Dhamma – are here to remind us of that, to give us the incentive to stick with the present moment, to watch the present moment, to work with the present moment, to parse it out and see which part of our experience is the result of past karma, which is the actual karma we're doing right now, which is the result of the karma we're doing right now. And our experimental laboratory is the breath right here.

So here you are: right at the breath. You're where you should be. You're at the best place you can be right now, the most useful place you can be right now. So make the most of this opportunity.