

Your Own Karma

October 21, 2004

The Buddha once described right concentration as the heart of the path. And the other seven factors were its attendants, its requisites. In other words, right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right mindfulness, right effort: These were the things that help make right concentration right.

So it's right that we focus on the concentration practice as the centerpiece of our practice. But we have to remember the other factors, too, beginning with the first level of right view, the teaching on karma: the principle that our actions are what shape our experience. When we think this way, we create the proper context, the proper environment for our practice. You have to remember it's our actions, our resolves, our words, our deeds, our way of making our livelihood, that have the biggest impact on our meditative environment.

Learn to look at what other people say as the result of your past actions; what other people do is the result of your past actions. In other words, the karma you've done in the past is coming back at you.

It's a sobering thought to think: Your past actions were done with the desire for happiness, and now you're experiencing the skillfulness or lack of skillfulness in your past actions, in your past desires for happiness, your past efforts to bring about happiness.

When you have that attitude, it's a lot easier to live with other people. If they do something outrageous, you realize that you probably were a real character sometime in the past. And let it go at that.

Your focus right now should be on what you're doing and saying and thinking in the present moment. That's why we have right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, as parts of the path. These various factors reinforce one another.

In other words, the context you create for your meditation through your actions and your words in daily life has an effect on the meditation. And the meditation should turn around and have an effect on your words and your deeds, too. If they're mutually reinforcing, then the path progresses. If they're working at cross-purposes, then you have a problem.

As we mentioned today: When you speak, ask yourself first, "Is this really necessary?" Because of all the forms of wrong speech, idle chatter seems to be the most difficult to overcome. Yet it also provides fertile ground for other kinds of wrong speech to come up as well. Idle chatter is basically speech that really doesn't

have any purpose: You just open the mouth and whatever comes out, comes out. If you're not careful, you start coloring the truth a little bit and you start saying things you really shouldn't have said. So one of the first steps in the practice is to be very careful about what you say, very deliberate in what you say. Have a purpose when you open your mouth.

The same principle with right action: Look at your actions to see where you're harming yourself, harming other people.

Check out your livelihood, and then also look at right effort. This is one of the parts of the path that tends to get overlooked. It's basically keeping watch over what's going through your mind, the qualities that are coming up in your mind, whether they're skillful or unskillful, and wanting to straighten them out.

This is where desire plays an important part of the practice: the desire and to stick to the desire to get rid of any unskillful qualities that have arisen and to prevent future unskillful qualities from arising in your mind.

Sometimes this requires simply watching: When an unskillful thought comes in, just watch it come, watch it stay for a while, watch it go. If you can learn how not to get involved with it, that often takes care of it right there.

It's like someone coming in and offering you something for sale. If you don't buy, they go away. Or someone with really juicy gossip comes in and you show that you're not interested. They'll go away and they'll want to gossip with somebody else. They'll leave you alone.

Other times, though, more active involvement is required to get rid of unskillful thinking, especially the kind that keeps coming back, coming back, coming back.

The Buddha lists a few ways of dealing with unskillful thoughts. One is just very purposefully directing your thoughts back to the meditation. Another is looking at the drawbacks of that unskillful thinking. If you sat here and thought about that kind of stuff for twenty-four hours, where would it leave you?

Often it's the old movies that keep coming back again and again. You've seen the old movies. You know what Humphrey Bogart's going to say. Except that in your thoughts it's not Humphrey Bogart. Look at the thoughts coming through your mind: If they were movies, would you pay money to watch them? Would you get the videos so that you could see them again and again whenever you wanted?

When you begin to see the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, it's easier to let go. You know where many of these thoughts are going to go, so you don't have to follow them.

Another way to deal with them is to consciously ignore them. You know that

that kind of thinking is there in the background of your mind but you can focus your attention someplace else. Let the thought continue chattering as long as it wants, but you don't have to get involved. It's like dealing with a group of chattering people you don't want to get involved with. The chatter is in your mind but remember it's just the results of old past actions. Whether it's other people chattering or this chattering going on in your mind, you just learn not to get involved.

It's like a stray dog coming up and asking for food. You know that if you feed the stray dog, it's going to hang around and you don't want it. It may sound cruel but after all, these are just thoughts. If they starve, they're not going to suffer. You're the one who's going to suffer if you take them on.

Then there's another technique the Buddha recommends, which is relaxing the fabrication of thought. This applies to cases when you're sensitive enough to the breath energy in the body that you can tell: When a thought arises, there's a certain part of the body that will tense up. The thought is actually related to that tension in that particular part of the body. Whether it's in the heart or the arm or in the leg or wherever it is, there's a location for the thought. You just breathe through that pattern of tension and the thought goes away.

The fifth way of dealing with thoughts when they come in and you don't want them, if none of the other ones work, you grit your teeth, press your tongue against the palate of your mouth, and tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." If you want, you can use a meditation word to blast it out: "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," very fast. Jam the circuits. This is the crudest of the techniques and a lot of people don't like it, but sometimes it's the only thing that works. It'll work for a while, the thoughts go away, and then you can step back and try one of the four other approaches. That's how you deal with unskillful thoughts.

But right effort also deals with fostering and strengthening skillful qualities as well. Mindfulness, the ability to recognize what's skillful and unskillful; persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, equanimity: When these things arise in the mind, you want to encourage them, either through thinking or not thinking. Sometimes we think that meditation is not thinking but sometimes you need to think in ways that encourage skillful qualities in the mind.

This is why the Buddha has that whole list of recollections: recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha; your own past generosity, your own past virtue. You can recollect death when you're getting lazy. Recollect the Buddha when you're getting discouraged. Recollect the Sangha when you're getting discouraged. Remember all the people who've trod this path in the past—people with lots more problems than you're having right now and yet they were able to

get their act together. They could do it; you can do it.

Whatever way of thinking is necessary to get the mind in the right mood, in the right attitude for meditating, to spark that desire to work on more skillful qualities: That all counts as part of the meditation.

So remember: There's a whole set of qualities involved in bringing the mind to a mindful state here in the present moment where you're concentrated, with an element of ease, rapture, pleasure.

That's when you're in the right mood to heighten right view: in other words, to bring it up from simply a belief in karma to looking at precisely what you're doing right now that's causing stress and suffering right now.

The mind is still enough to see these things. It's well-nourished with that sense of ease, rapture, refreshment—enough so that it doesn't feel threatened by the idea of looking in at your own stupidity. Because that's a lot of what insight is all about: seeing the foolish ways you've been dealing with things in the past, foolish ways you're dealing with things right now. And see that you don't have to keep on acting foolishly. There are alternatives.

If you undercut the causes, which come down basically to craving and ignorance, that particular type of stress you've been causing yourself just goes away.

Seeing this, of course, strengthens the other factors of the path. When the mind is concentrated, it's easier to be more careful about your speech and your actions. When you understand how you're causing stress and suffering, it's easier to get the mind still. All the different elements of the path work together.

So you can't do just mindfulness practice. That old attitude of, "All you need is mindfulness," doesn't really work. There need to be lots of factors working together. After all, the mind's problems are multi-faceted, so you need a path that's multi-faceted as well. This is what's meant by making your whole life the practice. You bring it in line with all eight factors of the path.

What is your life besides what you do, what you say and what you think? As for the things coming in outside: That's the result of past actions. But the actual practice, the actual environment you're creating: If you have the right attitude toward what's coming in, you can make a good place to practice out of anywhere.

So you focus on your thoughts, your words, your deeds. Those are the important elements in your life and those are the important elements in the practice. As for everything else, you let it pass.

If there are things you can do within the boundaries of right speech and right action, you go ahead and you do them. Anything that lies outside of that, you don't want to touch.

This focuses your responsibility where you really can make a difference, and it takes you off the hook for a lot of things you really can't make a difference. All too often we get upset about things we can't control, which means that we're ignoring the things we *can* control.

When you focus on keeping your thoughts, words, and deeds in line with the path, your world is a better place to live. The world of the people around you is a better place for them to live as well.

Ajaan Suwat used to say that "Everyone in the world has only one person." In other words, you're responsible for your actions; other people are responsible for theirs. If each person thought this way and really was responsible for his or her own actions, this would be a much better world. But we can't wait for other people to do it first. You've got to start.

And you can't control the extent to which other people will pick up on your example. But you know at least that you're putting a good example out there for anyone who's interested. That's all a human being can do.