

Mindful of Karma

August 15, 2012

As you're meditating here, don't listen to the Dhamma talk. Let it be in the background. Your main duty is to focus on the breath, to stay with the breath. Drop all your other preoccupations, all your other worries and concerns.

You're taking advantage of the fact that you have choice in the present moment. You can choose to focus on things that are negative or you can focus on things that are more positive, more helpful. There are places in the body that are painful and there are others that are not. You've got the choice as to where you're going to focus your attention and what you're going to do with those potentials. Because that's what they are: They're potentials coming in from the past.

The Buddha talks about how important it is not to let the mind get overcome by pain, overcome by pleasure. He says this is how a person is truly developed in body and mind. We think of bodily development as something else entirely: building big muscles and staying fit. But in the Buddha's eyes, bodily development means that you're able not to be overcome by pleasure; development of mind is being not overcome by pain. When you're developed in these ways, it will have a huge impact on how you experience the results of past actions and what you choose to do in the present moment. So having the right attitude toward pleasure and pain is very important.

And that involves having a right understanding. Pleasant and painful feelings come from action: past actions and present actions combined. The fact that you're feeling something unpleasant right now can be the combination of all kinds of things: what you did this morning; what you did last week, last month, in your last lifetime; before that even; but more importantly what you're doing right now. As for what you did in the past, you can't go back and change that. But you *can* change where you're focusing right now and what you're doing with your focus. This is where attention and intention come in, and where they're very important.

As for whether things are going well or not, on the one hand that's predictable and on the other hand it's not: predictable in the sense that there are some actions in the past that would explain the potentials that are coming up right now. But past actions interact in giving their results in very complex ways, which means that things are not all that predictable. The general pattern is set, but how it works out is very, very complex.

So what does this mean as you're sitting here meditating? One, the fact that you're a human being means you have both good and bad karma in your past, so good and bad things are going to happen. Be prepared. Two, you know that

if you choose wisely right now, the results will be good. Whether they're good right away or good down the line, that's something you can't control so much. But take advantage of the fact that this much you can understand.

As soon as the mind slips away from the breath, you just bring it right back. Slips off again, bring it back again. If you let yourself get discouraged, that's getting overcome by mental pains from your past actions. You don't want that to happen. Realize that with each breath you've got a new chance.

And when things are going well, the fact that the process is so complex and unstable means that you can't get complacent. It's all too easy when the breath is right there and everything is very easy, the mind settles right down, no problem at all, for you say, "Well, this is going to be easy tonight, this is going to be a good night." Then you get complacent and things start to unravel.

It also means that when things are *not* going well, there's no reason to be discouraged. Your next breath might be the one where things come back into line.

If you were to take a graph of your meditation, it wouldn't be a smooth curve. There would be lots of ups and downs. So when things are going well, don't get complacent. When they're not going well, don't get discouraged. Just keep plugging away, plugging away, putting in as much good energy, skillful intentions, right now, right now, right now, as you can.

While you're with the breath, try to be as quick as possible at catching the mind when it's about to slip off. You really do have to be alert here.

The Buddha talks about the qualities that you need to bring to the practice of staying with your frame of reference—as right now, we're staying with the body in and of itself, and particularly the breath. He says to be ardent, alert, and mindful.

"Ardent" means that you really try to do this well. You see the dangers of unskillful qualities, the dangers of allowing unskillful qualities to take over the mind, and the dangers that come when you don't develop skillful qualities to take their place. Ardency is a function of right effort. It also means that you really do try to replace the unskillful qualities with something more skillful, that you don't just sit there watching unskillful things run riot through the mind. You try to figure them out: What needs to be done right now? Some of them will go away when you just watch them and you don't get involved. Others, though, require that you actively try to observe them: What's going on here? Why does the mind go for this garbage? You're here meditating and all of a sudden the mind is off planning something else, remembering something else. Why? What's the appeal? What can you do to think in new ways, to see that this particular line of thinking is not as much fun or as attractive as you might have thought it was.

"Alert" means really watching what you're doing. It's more than just being

aware of the present in a general or random way. You're looking for the signs that the mind might slip off. In other words, you're focusing your attention on the issues that really are important right now. Basic awareness or consciousness just receives whatever comes in: important, unimportant, relevant, irrelevant. But once you've made up your mind that you want to stay with the breath, you have to be alert to the things you can do to keep yourself with the breath and alert to the things that are going to come in and pull you away. You have to be alert to how the breath is and also alert to how the mind is staying or not staying with the breath. Those are the things that you mark for yourself as the important issues.

And then "mindful" means basically remembering to do all this: remembering to stay with the breath, remembering that you have to be ardent, that you have to be alert. All the instructions that are relevant right now: You have to be able to keep them in mind and to apply them when they're useful. So you keep in mind your frame of reference but you've also got your knowledge of what ardency is supposed to do, what your alertness is supposed to do, and you remember that.

The Buddha talks about how mindfulness is the governing principle of the path, reminding you that if you've got unskillful qualities in the mind, you've got to do something to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, you've got to give rise to them. So mindfulness is not just watching things coming and going on their own. It's remembering that certain things have to be *made* to come and *prevented* from going. And other things have to be *stopped* from coming and *made* to go. It's important to sort these things out.

There's so much misinformation about mindfulness out there now. It's become a buzzword and it's everywhere. And you know what happens when words become buzzwords: They become buzz. They can mean anything to anybody. But the Buddha used these words very precisely. If you understand what he was getting at when he said to be ardent, alert, and mindful, then you have a clear sense of what to do.

So this is how karma is relevant to the practice. We are doing something here: We're developing a skill. As the Buddha said, there are four kinds of karma: there's bright, there's dark, there's bright and dark, and then there's the karma that leads to the end of karma, which is neither bright nor dark. That's what we're working on. Bright of course is good karma, dark is bad karma. A mixture of the two, when your intentions are mixed or wobbly, will give mixed and wobbly results. In fact, it's through a combination of dark and bright karma that we're all here as human beings. But the path is the karma that's neither bright nor dark because it leads you to the end of karma, it takes you to a spot where the mind is no longer creating intentions and is no longer receiving the results of karma past or present. But to get to that spot requires a

certain kind of karma: what we're doing right now, trying to stay on the path.

And not letting the ups and downs get to us. The more you can get your mind on an even keel, the more easily you'll be able to see what's wrong and what needs to be done, each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. When you have the right attitude toward pleasure and pain, toward success or lack of success in the practice, and the more your attitude is based on right view about how things work, then the more quickly you'll be able to recover from any wavering in your present intention, any wavering in your present attention, and get back on the path.

So karma's not one of those teachings that just happened to get attached to the teaching, like a leech from India that somehow latched onto the boat of Buddhism. It's actually central to everything we do, because the Buddha is teaching a course of action. Putting an end to suffering is something you *do*. And so he has to explain what action is, what it is possible for human beings to do, and how an understanding of action is really very helpful in acting skillfully.

So keep these thoughts in the background as you focus on the breath.