

Choices

August 1, 2016

One of the complaints you often hear about the Buddha's teachings on karma is that they're all about past and future, whereas the real practice is in the present—the implication here being that the teachings on karma are a distraction from where the real work is.

But that's not the case. When the Buddha talks about being in the present, it's in the context of the teaching of karma, both in terms of the motivation of why you want to be in the present moment and what you're looking for in the present moment. Your motivation is that there's work to be done here and if you don't do it now, you don't know how much longer you'll have the chance to do the work.

Remember the Buddha's contemplation of when you see the sun set that this may be your last sunset, or when you see the sun rise that this may be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? And a large part of the mind will say No. So there's work to be done. There are things in the mind that will weigh you down or pull you back if you had to go. So you want to work on those, clear them away as best you can, *right now*.

In the Bhaddekaratta Sutta the Buddha says, "Don't chase after the future. Don't chase after the past. Be aware of what's arising right now, right now. Because there's work to be done and you don't know if you're going to be here tomorrow."

So that's your motivation: Make the most of the opportunity for practice that the present moment provides.

And what are you going to find in the present moment? You're going to find karma: in the choices you're making right now, in the results of choices you've made in the past, and the results of choices you're making right now. These are three things you want to look for.

And you have to believe in the power of your choice. If you examine the fact that you are making choices right now and you learn how to expand the range of your choices, you're going to be a lot more skillful.

There's the passage where the Buddha said the reason we go for sensual pleasure is because we think it's the only alternative to pain. We keep on getting disappointed by sensual pleasures, but because we think there's no other choice, we just keep going back to fantasizing for more sensual pleasures, again and again and again.

Whereas here he teaches you right concentration: the pleasure of being settled inside the sense of the body, working with the breath in the body to give rise to a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, and spreading that ease and rapture throughout the body.

And you realize, here's a different alternative. This is the different choice you can make. Otherwise, you're just left going back and forth between pain and sensual pleasure, pain and sensual pleasure, and then the emotions that go around them: the attachment to the sensual

pleasure and the dislike of the pain, running after the sensual pleasure, thinking that you can get just pleasure somehow without having the pain come along with it.

Ajaan Chah has a really nice image about that. You see a snake. One end has teeth and the other end doesn't have teeth. So you figure, "Well, I'll just catch the end that doesn't have teeth and I'll be okay." But of course they're connected. And snakes don't like having their tails touched. So they'll turn around and bite you. It's the same with pleasure. As soon as you grab onto sensual pleasure, the other end bites.

So here you've got an alternative choice. The Buddha says you don't have to keep catching snakes. There are better pleasures in the world.

That's one reason we listen to the Dhamma: to get an idea of what these other choices are. And then we listen further to see how we can dig down to see what choices we're making that we're not aware of.

Because the big problem is that we keep making choices in the hopes that they will bring happiness but they don't. So what's the problem? Ignorance. And ignorance is not just a big dark cloud or a pit of darkness. Things are covered up in the mind. Sometimes they're covered up simply because you're not interested, and other times they're covered up because you're trying to hide them from yourself. You make choices and then pretend that you didn't make them. This is something you have to uncover.

This is one of the reasons why we try to work with the breath and stay with one intention right now. Because other intentions will come in and they'll complain. It's when they complain that you get to know them for what they are.

I was talking this evening to someone who said he didn't like doing goodwill meditation and he was trying to figure out why. And I said, "Well, the best way to figure out why is to go ahead and do it and see which voices in the mind complain."

It's the same as when you're working with the breath. Other things will come in and you say, "Oh, there's *that* in the mind and there's *this* in the mind." Some people complain they don't like meditating because it seems that their minds are more filled with defilement than they were before. But what's happening is simply that you recognize the defilement as a defilement, whereas before it was just part of the normal background.

So as you work with the breath, you get to dig things up. And the fact that you're working with the breath energy gives you an alternative to simply going back and forth between your feelings and your thoughts.

This is another narrow range that we confine ourselves to: believing that one side of you is dealing with pure feeling—wanting this, wanting that, pure emotion—whereas the other side is dealing with reason: pointing out what's right and what's wrong. There's a constant struggle between the two. But again, the two of them are connected. There are thoughts behind your feelings, and feelings behind your thoughts.

A feeling is simply a thought that's gotten more into the body. When you think that the body is telling you something, actually the body is not telling you anything. It's simply conveying a message from one part of the mind to another. And just because the message goes through the body doesn't mean that it's necessarily true. Sometimes there are parts of the mind that are embarrassed to say out loud what they want, so they just stir things up inside, with the breath energy. And you think, "This must be what I really want because my whole body seems to be overwhelmed by this." But it's simply one part of the mind that can't come out into the open and so it goes underground, like *The Thing*.

If you learn how to deal with the breath energies in the body, learning how to breathe long, how to breathe short; heavy, light; shallow, deep; fast, slow; and when you have something pleasant, letting it spread through the body: If you learn all this, you can reclaim this side of the whole equation. And the parts of the mind that tried to take over the body to force you to do something don't have as strong a hold as they had before.

So again, you're learning to see that there are choices being made and you can undo them.

It's like having lots of monsters in a big pool of water in your basement. You don't know what they are because there's so much water. So you have to drain the water out of the basement and then you can see them clearly. When you can see them clearly, they can die because they're water monsters. They need murky deeps to hide in, in order to survive. But you can drain the murkiness out of your mind and then you can see what's going on. When you see what's going on, the monsters lose all their power. They die.

So you're dealing with choices. That's what karma is. This is how you can reshape your life: by making good choices. And this is also how you get out of the whole process altogether.

The fact that you have this freedom of choice in the present moment is one of the big mysteries of the Dhamma. Why do you have this freedom? Fortunately, you don't have to explain why, you just explore it. And the best way to explore it is to try to get more and more skillful in your choices, more and more aware of what the choices are, more sensitive to subtle choices. Then you find that right next to freedom of choice is a larger freedom that's outside of the present moment entirely. And that's what we're looking for.

You don't find that by running away from your choices. Another complaint around the issue of karma that I've heard many times is, "Why are we so obsessed with the little issues of skillfulness and unskillfulness of actions in the present moment when we can just open up to the vast emptiness and space all around us?" Well, the emptiness and space around us is conditioned. It's not the goal. You can go there for a while but then you have to come back. Going there is a choice—and not always a skillful one.

Whereas if you focus attention on what you're doing, on the choices you're making, and getting more sensitive to them, you find something inside the mind that is not a choice, that is not conditioned, lying right next to your freedom of choice. This is where you're going to find it.

So learn how to exercise your freedom, exercise your power of choice as skillfully and as sensitively as you can. And you'll find that greater freedom.

How do you do that? You work on the meditation. You're making choices right now as you stay with the breath, sensitive to how the choices of the mind affect the breath, how the breath affects the choices of the mind. Explore that. There are a lot of good things to be learned right here.

So the teaching on karma provides the context for the present moment, and karma itself is what makes the present moment. Ultimately, you'll see that the fact that you're making choices in the present moment is what creates your awareness of the present moment to begin with. It makes it possible.

Now, the range of what you're going to experience is narrowed to some extent by your past karma, which means that you want to create a lot of good karma to expand that range, now and into the future.

So if you really look in the present moment, you can't escape the fact that it's all about karma. And the solution lies in going beyond karma: not by denying it, but by learning how to exercise your choices well.