

## *The Large Canvas*

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When the Buddha taught about karma, the principle of action, he would often illustrate his points by talking about the past and future. Many cycles of the world began with the brahmas who fell from their brahma heaven as the world began to reform. It's interesting that the first brahma to enter the new world fell because of his lack of good karma but then considered himself to be the creator. The Buddha was probably making a joke there about the brahman's belief about their Great Brahma. He was the Great Brahma because his karma ran out.

And then from there, as the world developed, the shape of the world, the course of the world, was determined by the karma of all beings up to the present day.

Then the Buddha would talk about the karma going on into the future. As the human race would degenerate, things would get really bad until they reached what's called the sword interval. Life will be very short. People will hunt one another down like animals. A few survivors will realize that this is no way to live so they will hide out until the slaughter is over. Then they will start trying to be more virtuous, be more generous. And the world will develop again, all the way up to the arrival of the next Buddha.

It's a huge canvas that the Buddha paints. In fact, there are many canvases that he paints on this scale. But each time he paints on that scale, he comes back to the present moment, saying that the force that shapes the universe, the force that shapes your life, is your intentions. This way he brings the focus back to the present moment, right here, right now.

So this is why we train the mind: because we need to train our intentions. We need to train our ability to watch our intentions, to choose among them. If you look at the mind with any kind of fairness and objectivity, you'll see there are all kinds of things coming up in the mind: good, bad, indifferent. That old question of whether the mind is basically good or basically bad is really a non-question. The mind can be both, with many shades of good and many shades of bad. You can't say that one is truer to your true nature than another. ]

In fact the whole point of the Buddha's teachings is not to talk about what our true nature is. The issue is what we can do with what we've got. We can create a lot of harm, but we can also create a lot of goodness. We can train the mind, and through our training, through our development of our intentions, we can actually come to a point where we go beyond intention to the ultimate happiness: the happiness of the unconditioned outside of the cycles of time. In fact one of the insights that you gain as you practice is that your intentions are what keeps your experience of time going. It's not that you have intentions in time. The intentions themselves shape your experience of time. But there are always limitations in time. Getting beyond those limitations is what the practice is all about.

So this is why the Buddha never talked about Buddha nature, or inherently good nature or inherently bad nature. We simply have all these different potentials. The question is not so much where you're coming from, but where you're going, what you can do with these potentials. At the same time, we're not here to judge other people's karma either.

When you look at other people, the Buddha says the best lesson to learn is, if you see them doing something unskillful, ask yourself, "Do I do those unskillful things, too? This is what it looks like, this is the impact it has." Or if you see someone suffering, he doesn't say, to think

about what past bad karma they have and why they deserve to suffer. That's not what he says at all. That's not the skillful use of the teaching on skillfulness. He asks you to reflect that you've been there as well. And you might be there again. If you were in that position, what kind of help would you like to receive? Perhaps you can give that help now.

So the teaching on karma is not there to judge other people. It's there to remind you that you have to act in a skillful way. You have opportunities to act in a skillful way. And who knows what kind of past bad actions you've got in your history, what past good actions you've got in your history. Because he also says that when you see someone who's flourishing, prosperous, happy, reflect on the fact that you've been there too. So we all have all kinds of karma in our background.

We keep that thought in mind so that our compassion is not condescending, and so that when we look at other people's good fortune we don't look at it with jealousy. What we do ask ourselves is: What is the skillful thing to do now? Because it's not the case when you look at someone else that you see the totality of their past karma. There's that mistaken belief that if you want to see somebody's past actions, you look at their present conditions. If you want to see their future condition, you look at their present actions. That's much too simplistic. When you look at the present their condition, you're seeing only a few of their past actions. When you look at their present actions, you can see only a very vague, limited indication of what their future might be.

It's not that we have one karma account and that you're looking at the current running balance at any moment. The Buddha's image is of seeds planted in a field. We have many different seeds in our fields, some of which are ready to sprout right now, some of which will sprout in the future. Our present desires, our present cravings, are the things that help nurture certain seeds, help them to sprout a little bit earlier. So what you want to do is look at your desires. What are your desires right now? Where are your desires? What seeds are they watering? If you're trying to help someone else, what kind of desires do you want to inspire in them? You want to inspire skillful ones. And it's the same in your own mind.

This is why we meditate, trying to inspire skillful desires: the desire to be generous, the desire to be virtuous, the desire to be wise and discerning. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us practice concentration, so that we can be still enough to watch what's going on in the mind, and to train our powers of thought and evaluation, so we have an idea of what really is discerning, what really is wise, what really is skillful.

In managing your mind, you're going to find that you have all kinds of different desires, all kinds of different habits. And there are some that we like to deny. The desire for revenge sometimes is something we try to deny, or the desire not to have to meditate. Part of this has to do with our identities. We don't like to think of ourselves as lazy meditators. We don't like to think of ourselves as vengeful people. When those particular desires begin to show, we shove them aside, deny their existence. Which means they never get trained, they never get dealt with.

So you have to learn how to deal skillfully with laziness. You have to learn how to deal skillfully with the desire for revenge, how to deal skillfully with ill-will. This means bringing them to the table and training them to where they're more mature. Because sometimes there's a shred of something worthwhile in that particular desire, a message that you need to know about what's going on in the mind. But it gets entangled with all kinds of other unskillful things. So it takes some time to disentangle it. Otherwise it gets shoved off to the side and never gets to the table and it turns into a terrorist.

So you've got to learn how to bring these things to the table. That's one aspect of skillful karma.

Lots of issues come up around the issue of karma, but the big question we should ask ourselves is, What is the skillful thing to do now? Given this situation, given this range of possibilities, what desires do I want to cultivate?

There's a mistaken belief that the Buddha said all desire leads to suffering. Well, some desires are actually part of the path to the end of suffering. There are many aspects of the path that work this way. We do want, ultimately, to put an end to desire, but that's not done by snuffing it out. It's done by attaining a happiness that's so thorough and so total that you have no more *need* for desire.

The same with pain: We're trying to gain release from stress and suffering, but we do have to put ourselves through some stress as we practice. We have to force ourselves more than we might like to.

We want to bring the mind to a point where it's free from the need to think. And yet we have to use thought to get there.

Now, it's not the case that we use everything that we're trying to overcome. There's a famous case where Ananda goes to see a nun who's fallen in love with him. And he tells her we practice to overcome our need for food but we need food in order to do that. We practice to overcome our need for conceit but we need conceit to get there. We practice to overcome our need for craving, but craving is an important motivator on the path. We practice to go beyond sex and there's no use for sex at all.

But in a lot of other areas, we do make use of what we're ultimately going to overcome, what we're going to go past. And intention is one of these things. We get to the point where the mind no longer has any need for intention, but we have to intend to practice this path. We need to have the intention, maintain the intention, to try to be as skillful as possible to gain a proper understanding of the principle of karma so we can make the most skillful use of it. And one very skillful way of using our powers of intention is to get the mind to settle down and be still, so we can see things more clearly and establish a kind of forum in the mind, so that when something comes up we're not pushing it away and denying it. There is a kind of concentration that's built on denial, but it's not the kind that's going to give you any insight.

What we want is a more spacious kind of concentration. This is why the Buddha talks about full-body awareness. When there's a sense of ease and well-being that comes from focusing on the breath as the mind begins to settle down, you do what you can to maintain that sense of ease. Then you spread it throughout the body. This more spacious sense of well-being: Think of it as a large table where all the different voices in the mind, all the different representatives of the different desires of the mind, can come and find a place at the table. Everybody gets to talk, exchange insights, exchange knowledge to train one another and inform one another about what's going on, so you can learn how to trust more and more what you're going to do in any given situation—because the mind is going to be better informed. As your intentions get more and more trained, you have a larger perspective.

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha talks in terms of that large canvas of the past and the future. He wants to give you that large perspective on what's going on in life. We look at all the injustices in the world, and on the one hand we do what we can in order to help people who are suffering, but on the other hand you have to realize that, ok, there's only so much that can be done. If you were to trace back all the different ways in which people have

been unjust to one another, it gets so entangled, so complex. The canvas is so large it almost becomes meaningless.

There's a story they like to tell in Thailand of a woman who found that her husband had a minor wife. She herself didn't have any children, but the minor wife was pregnant. It looked like the pregnancy was going to come to term and if the minor wife gave birth to a son, that would be the end of the major wife's status in the family. So she waited and she found out that, sure enough it was a son. So she killed it. When the two women died they were born as different animals and the minor wife, I've forgotten what she was born as, but she killed the child, the puppy, whatever, of the major wife.

This went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, many, many lifetimes. It was so complex that you couldn't keep track of all of it. And finally in this lifetime, this one woman had a child and the other woman wanted to kill the child and was chasing her down the street. So the woman with the child ducked into the monastery where the Buddha was. She came and bowed down in front of the Buddha, hovering over her child to protect it. The other woman came as well. And the Buddha told them both this long story. They'd been killing each other's kids for who knows how many lifetimes, as human beings, as dogs, as cats, chickens. And the Buddha said, "Haven't you had enough?" So they swore off their enmity.

This is the other role of those large canvases that the Buddha would paint: It's for reflecting on the huge amount of time that has passed in which we've been creating all kinds of karma, skillful and unskillful, and all the suffering that's gone on as a result.

You know the story of the time when the Buddha asked of the monks, which is greater, the amount of tears you've shed, or the water in the ocean? And the monks who'd been well trained said that the tears were greater. And the Buddha said, "You're right."

I like to think about that every time we drive up Interstate 5 past Camp Pendleton, right there next to the ocean, where you look out and see a huge expanse of water. You see only a small fraction of the entire ocean, and yet all the oceans in the world still contain less water than the amount of tears you've shed. It's terrifying.

And there's a story about the monks who came to see the Buddha and he asked what do you think: which is more, the amount of blood you've shed by having your heads cut off, or all the oceans in the world? You've shed more blood, in fact whatever animal you've been, when you've had your head cut off as a sheep, the many times you've been a sheep, even that is more than all the water in the oceans of the world. When you had your head cut off as a cow, when you had your head cut off because you were an adulterer or a highway man, or a robber: Each case was more than all the water in the oceans.

That kind of thought is to help you realize that it's time that you've had enough. When you reflect on this, it's enough to inspire you to look for release. But where do you look for release? The large canvas is there to inspire you, but you look for release right here: right where the mind is moving with its intentions in the present moment.

So when it's helpful to think in terms of that large canvas, make use of that teaching. But remember every time the Buddha would use the large canvas he would bring everything right back to what you're doing right here, right now. Try to use those teachings for their intended purpose. The taste of the ocean is salty, all your tears are salty, but the taste of the teachings, when well used, is release.