

The Karma of Pain

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When we think of the word karma, we usually think about bad things we did in the past. But that's only one kind of karma out of four. There's good karma and bad karma, and there's past karma and present karma, and those two distinctions intersect, so that there are four types altogether: good past, bad past, good present, and bad present.

Like right now: We're meditating. We're making good present karma. We have an intention to stay with the breath. We have an intention to get the mind to settle down, to see clearly what's going on. Every activity, every intention in that direction, and everything we do based on that intention, is good karma right now.

The reason we practice is to make it more skillful so that we can see very clearly what we're doing and then particularly what we're doing right now that's contributing to any stress that's weighing down the mind.

Everything we experience is a combination of past and present karma. Past karma, the Buddha says, is like a field. It's got all kinds of different seeds. Your present karma is what waters different seeds. So things coming in from the past are not totally deterministic. In other words, you can water some seeds and not others.

So you're trying to water the right seeds. This is really important. This is the first principle to remember in the teaching on karma: that what you're doing right now is important. It can make all the difference in the world.

Particularly when we look at the issue of what stress is and what pain is.

You have pains in the body that can result from all kinds of things: karma in this lifetime, karma in previous lifetimes. But the question of whether that's going to weigh the mind down is an issue of present karma—which means you can look at that right now and change it right now.

This is where the teaching on karma is empowering. You can see how you're relating to the pain, say, in the body, or to emotional pain that you're carrying around in the body and mind. You realize you can change it.

But first you've got to see it in action, and that requires having a good solid place to stay. You don't want to just jump in and start analyzing things in terms of what you've read in books or heard in Dhamma talks, because you can get things really wrong that way. You have to be able to sit and let things settle down. When they settle down, they begin to separate out on their own.

It's like different chemicals that are mixed together. As long as you're jostling the beaker around, they're going to stay mixed. But if you let it sit, they'll separate out according to weight.

So let things sit and settle for a bit. Try to get quiet. Get the breath comfortable so that

you'll want to be quiet with the breath. As for any thoughts that are pulling you away, let them go right now.

Gradually, things will begin to separate out. There'll be the breath and then there'll be the thinking.

You want your thoughts to be directed to the breath, but you begin to realize that they're not quite the same thing as the breath. As for any thoughts that are not related to the breath, you can let them go. Let them separate out as well.

We have this tendency to glue things together. Our thoughts and our sensations in the body all get glued together. Then they become a big sticky mess.

So let things sit here for a bit and separate out. Then you begin to see what's going into your experience right now. You've got the breath coming in, going out. You've got the mind talking to itself about the breath or whatever else it's talking about. There'll be several layers of command here. One conversation's going along and there's another conversation commenting on whether we want to continue with the first conversation or not. So any conversation that's related to the breath, stick with it. If it's helping you settle down, if it's helping the breath get more comfortable, stay with that.

This is where mindfulness comes in. That's should be part of the conversation to remind you, "This is where you want to stay." And then you begin to see that there's not just the breath and the talking about the breath. There are also some feelings and perceptions—pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings.

You can work with the breath to create more pleasant feelings. If there's a pleasant feeling, say, in the middle of the chest, try to breathe in a way that keeps that pleasant feeling going all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, without any breaks in-between. Don't let the in-and-out of the breath disturb the ease and spaciousness and pleasure that come with that feeling.

As you do this, you begin to see that you have some images in your mind about what the breath is doing, how the breath is coming in, how the breath is going out, what you're doing to the breath. The images may be visual images, they may be kinetic. They can take lots of different shapes, lots of different forms.

Just notice that, because those are the categories you're going to use in order to take apart any pain that's weighing down the mind. One of the first lines of defense against physical pain as you're sitting here is your breath, and the breath is affected by your perceptions. How is the way you're breathing relating to the pain? Does the pain set up barriers that the breath energy can't go through? Well, try to change your perception. Think of the pain as being permeable. Think of the breath going right through.

Ajaan Lee says that if there's a pain in your knee, think of the breath going down through the knee, and make sure it goes past that pain: through the knee down through the ankle and out through the toes.

Notice how your focus is affecting the pain. I've found that if there's a pain in the back, it's usually good to focus first in front. If there's a pain in the right, focus on the left. In other words, at least for the time being, you're trying not only to get unentangled from the pain but also to see if some aspect of the way you're relating to where things are in your body is actually a part of the problem.

So you're using the breath, you're using your perceptions, and you're using your inner conversation here to probe and ask questions: To what extent is the pain actually caused by the way you breathe? Sometimes you change the breath and the pain goes away. Other times, the pain is still there, in which case you've got to look more at the mental elements going into it.

What are you telling yourself about the pain? Are you complaining about the pain? The pain has every right to be there. After all, it's natural for the body, normal for the body to have pains. If you're looking for a totally pain-free body you've come to the wrong place, the human realm.

And if you're afraid that the pain's lasting on or if you talk to yourself about how long the pain has been here, that's a conversation you can drop because reflecting on those things doesn't help anything at all. Why do you have to keep tabs on how long it's been there? Why do you have to make forecasts about how long it's going to last? You can just be with the sensation right here, right here, and it's a lot less burdensome for the mind.

Or you could be worried about the damage the pain is going to do. I have yet, though, to know anybody who's been paralyzed by sitting in meditating for an hour. If your posture isn't straight, straighten it up.

In other words, look at whatever conversations are adding a burden to the mind and try to shred them apart. You don't have to stitch them together.

Here you are, going to all this effort to talk about the pain, and you're making yourself worse. When you can see that the effort that goes into these unskillful inner conversations is not helping anything at all but it's taking effort, why do it?

If the words come up, you can just shoot them down. Refuse to connect them into coherent sentences.

I've told you about the time I was in Thailand when I had to stay at Wat Asokaram. Their roster of monks to give meditation talks had about fourteen monks altogether and out of the fourteen, maybe two of them could give really good talks. That meant twelve bad Dhamma talks in the course of two weeks.

So what do you do? You start refusing to listen to the talks. One thing you can do is to refuse to connect the words into sentences. You can do the same with your own inner conversation that's creating or augmenting pain.

Or you can question it. The mind says something about the pain, and you say, "Is that true? Is that true?" Just keep at it and after a while the complaining mind gets frustrated.

And then you start going looking at the mental image you have of the pain. What shape is

the pain? Is the pain the same thing as the body? Is your awareness of the pain the same thing as the pain? Is your awareness the same thing as the body? These are separate things.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha divided things into aggregates, so that you can take them apart.

What's the perception?

What's the feeling?

What are the thought-fabrications you're building around these things?

What's the body in relationship to the pain?

What is your basic awareness in relation to the pain?

If you put these things together to add more pain to the mind, okay, that's your present karma right now. It's a choice you're making. You may not think of it as choice. It just seems to be the natural way things have to be. But actually, it's the habitual way you've chosen to do things. And you can change your habits.

What's your perception in relationship to the pain? What's the pain's intention? Sometimes we actually think of the pain as having an intention, trying to harass us. Question that.

Or if the pain seems to be one solid mass, ask yourself: Where's the point where the pain is strongest? And chase it down. You begin to realize that it moves around.

What you've been doing up to now is to glue things together in a way that weighs the mind down. So you learn how to separate them apart. Use your awareness, use your questioning as a solvent.

As you become more active in trying to comprehend the pain, you become a moving target. The pain is not aimed right at you. It can't hit you, because you're moving around.

And you can probe around. Ask questions about these various factors that go into turning the physical pain into a mental pain.

And that karma of probing is your skillful karma right now: Even if you don't come up with any clear answer, at least you're not a sitting target.

And there *are* answers. Years back I was listening aghast as a Zen teacher was telling me how he really liked the four noble truths because they asked unanswerable questions, like: What is the cause of pain?

Well, there is an answer! It's your ignorance; it's your craving. And where are they? They're happening right here, right now. Can you find them? They're here. They're glomming things together.

We can hear this teaching and understand it, but for it to be really useful, you want to see these things in action—which you can do if the mind is still enough.

If you find, as you're probing around, that things are getting unclear, just stop. Find another spot in the body to focus on. Get away from the pain for a while. Allow the mind to rest. And then when the mind has strength again, try analyzing the pain again.

This is your present karma. This is the karma that, as the Buddha said, eventually goes beyond karma. But in the meantime, you're creating good karma and are using it well, right here, right now as you try to understand this problem.

Because this is *the* big problem that weighs the mind down. If the mind can learn how not to burden itself with pains like this, the other problems in the world are not problems at all. Some of them may be soluble, some of them may not be soluable, but at least they don't weigh on the mind. And that makes all the difference.

You begin to realize: You're the one who's been glueing things together and weighing yourself down. Like those people who collect big balls of string: For years and years and years they collect bigger and bigger balls of string, but they're totally useless. They get in the way. Where are you going to store a huge ball of string? And if it gets too big, it's going to go through the floor.

Or the image they use in Thailand of the old woman who carries around a big bale of hay: She's convinced that someday she's going to need hay, so she's always got a whole bale of it with her, on her back. And it's weighing her down.

This is what the mind does: It's just keeps weighing itself down, weighing itself down.

Ajaan Lee's image is of someone plowing a field, and as the dirt falls off the plow they try to put it into a bag that they carry along as well. You don't get very far that way. In other words, we take the results of our karma and then we use it to weigh ourselves down. That makes it harder and harder to do skillful karma in the present.

So what you've got to learn how to do is to be skillful in how you put things together. Because that's your karma right here, right now.

And all the Buddha's teachings—on the four noble truths, on the aggregates and particularly the teaching on past and present karma, skillful and unskillful karma—are there to help you understand what you're doing so that you can do it well—and do it *so* well that you reach the point where you no longer cause yourself any suffering.

There'll be pains in the body, difficult things in life but they won't weigh the mind down.

That's a skill really worth developing.