

The Rivers of Karma

December 7, 2008

When you're meditating, you're engaging in a form of karma, which the Buddha identified with intention. The intention here is to stay with the breath, to try to be fully aware of the breath element in the body, throughout the whole body. You want to maintain that intention in the face of all the other intentions that are going to come up in the course of the hour. It's to be expected. Vagrant thoughts will come into the mind about tomorrow, about today, yesterday. And you've got to realize that those thoughts are not in line with the original intention. No matter how useful or important they may seem, they're not what you want right now. You're trying to be very clear about what your intention is right now and how to stick with it.

Because this is really all you've got: your present intention. Think about times when you're ill, when difficult situations come up in life, and you look around and there seems to be no means of escape. Actually, though, there is an escape. Your one escape will be the intentions in your mind at that time. Say that there's a pain coming up. You're ill, and no matter what painkiller the doctors give you, there's still pain. How are you going to deal with it? Your best way of dealing with it has to do with your intention. Remind yourself that if you think about how long you've been in pain, or how much longer you're going to be in pain, that's going to weigh the mind down unnecessarily. You want to simply be aware of the sensation of the pain right now, without all those other narratives. As for the questions of why there's pain and whether it's just or how frustrated you may feel about it, you've got to learn how to put those aside as well. In other words, as you're sitting here meditating putting aside random thoughts, you're getting practice for a skill you're really going to need as aging, illness, and death come closing in.

As the Buddha said there are two ways of developing qualities of mind that are really helpful in cases like that. One is to learn how to develop unlimited goodwill for all beings, yourself included, and the people around you. He says, when the mind has that unlimited quality it's like a huge river. Someone may come along and try to make the river stop, but they can't make the river stop because the river is so large. They can try to make the river be without water, they'll try to dump it out with pails, but they can't do that because there is so much water in the river. Even if you put a lump of salt in the river, you can still drink the water because there is so much more water in the river.

As you're able to maintain that unlimited state of mind, the issues that come up with pain and illness, or as death approaches, will seem a lot smaller than if your mind is limited and concerned only with the narratives that you've been carrying around all the time. This is another way in which meditation is good for you. You learn how to step out of those narratives. When aging, illness, and death come, you see it as an opportunity to handle them skillfully. Because part of that unlimited frame of mind reminds you that everybody goes through these things. You're not being singled out. This is a universal process. That helps take some of the sting away.

The other skills you need, as the Buddha said, are learning how to keep the mind from being overcome by pain and being overcome by pleasure. And again these are among the skills you learn as you're meditating. Pain comes up in the body, and you learn the appropriate ways of dealing with it. In some cases that means focusing on another part of the body that's not in pain to give the mind a sense of safe haven here in the present moment. When it has developed a sense of strength, the sense of well-being that can come from that sense of have, then you can start looking into the pain. To what extent is the pain affected by the way you breathe? To what extent is it affected by your concepts about the pain? If you regard the experience of pain as a total given, it's hard to get away from it. But if you realize you're involved in constructing the pain, your concept of it is going to have an actual effect on how you experience it.

The mind is built in this way. You've got all these pain receptors in your body, along with the various parts of your nervous system that make the decision as to which little pains you're going to pay attention to and which ones you're going to ignore. Most of this happens on a sub-conscious level, but as you meditate you train yourself to become more conscious of it. You learn how to take that ability to focus and ignore, and use it deliberately for the purpose of keeping the mind from suffering. This is a skill we learn as we meditate.

At the same time, we learn how not to be overcome by pleasure. First there are sensual pleasures, which we tend to go running to as our main escape from pain. And as long as we see them as our only escape, we don't like to look at their negative side. But it's an important skill in the meditation. If you really want the mind to settle down and gain good solid concentration to develop insight, you've got to learn how to look at the downside of sensual pleasures—how unreliable they are, and how they make you do all kinds of stupid things, or how you make yourself do stupid things just to keep them going.

But to really let go of these pleasures requires more than just seeing their drawbacks. It also requires that you find an alternative pleasure. That's the pleasure that comes from keeping the mind still. As the Buddha said, there's no true pleasure aside from peace. So you look for your pleasure, for your happiness in the mind at peace, allowing it to be still, allowing it to be centered, and learning how to maintain it—that stillness, that sense of being centered—regardless of what comes up.

Some of your first practice in this is when you finally settle down and the breath is calm; it feels refreshing. When that happens, it's very easy to lose your focus on the breath and move over to the sense of pleasure. It's like falling into a hole. You're skating on ice, and all of a sudden you skate off to where it's too thin, and fall through the ice into water. In other words, you've abandoned the cause, because you've gotten so infatuated with the effect. But if you can realize that the effect is still there, the pleasure is still there in the body, and you don't have to go rushing after it, you don't have to go gobbling it down, it will still have its good effects on the body and its good effects on the mind even as you stay focused on the breath. You see it as not something that you're going to jump on, but simply as a sign that the mind is beginning to settle down. You're beginning to see results in the meditation.

It's like a sign on the road. When you pass a sign that says you're entering

such and such a town, or there's a town ex-number of miles ahead, you don't leave the road to drive on the sign. You stay on the road.

In the same way, you stay with the breath. In this way you learn how to use the pleasure of concentration without being overwhelmed by it. Now, it's not that you're afraid of the pleasure of concentration. I don't know many times you hear the topic of jhana or concentration introduced, and almost the first thing they say before they've even told you what it is, they tell you it's dangerous. That's a really perverse approach. Right concentration is not dangerous in that way. It helps separate you from the dangers of being sucked in by sensual pleasures; it provides you with an alternative to sensual pleasures. As the Buddha points out, there's no abandoning our attachment for sensual pleasures until we can develop the sense of ease that comes from getting the mind still, centered, solidly based in the present.

This is how you teach the mind not to be overcome by pleasure or pain. Pain becomes a tool an opportunity to learn about how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself around the pain. Pleasure too becomes a tool, part of the path. You don't want to see pleasure and pain as things to run away from or to run toward, but as tools you can use to give the mind more and more freedom. That way, if the body begins to wear down and the rest of your life begins to unravel, you don't lose your bearings. You realize that your happiness isn't based on a particular narrative. It doesn't have to be based on the body. It has a deeper foundation inside. And whatever the results of past bad actions you've done, if you develop these tools of having a sense of limitlessness in the mind—limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, and a proper understanding of pleasure and pain so you are not overcome by them—you'll have your escape.

These are precisely the tools we learn as we meditate, teaching the mind to stay with the breath, and then using the breath as a tool for gaining greater and greater understanding.

This is why when the Buddha explains issues of karma, he doesn't use mechanical images. His images are all fluid. We all have unskillful decisions, unskillful intentions that we've acted on in the past, but it doesn't mean we have to suffer from them. They will have their effects but their effects are going to be mitigated or amplified by your present karma. It's as if we have two rivers coming together. If you've ever been at the spot where the Little Colorado joins the Colorado, you see two very different kinds of water. The Little Colorado is very muddy; the Colorado is clear. And right at the spot where they join it's a mixture of the two. But as you go downstream, the muddiness disappears and the water is all clear. That's because the Colorado is bigger than the Little Colorado; the muddiness is overcome by the clarity of the water the larger river.

This is what you want to do in your meditation. You want to make sure that your present karma is a bigger river of clear water. It'll take care of the silt that comes in from the little river if you develop the skills that can keep your present intentions clear and in focus. So this is our opportunity right here as we meditate, to keep this river of present karma as clear and as large as possible.