Cooking the Present Moment

September 24, 2015

We’re sitting here in a heap of old karma, this body of ours. The fact that we’re born with this particular body, with these particular features, that’s the result of past actions. Of course, the things we’ve been doing with the body since it was born, those are our past actions, too. You find them embedded in here. But that’s not all we have. We also have our present actions, our new karma, the things we’re deciding to do right now. In fact, it’s because of new karma that we experience old karma. That’s one of the more radical parts of the Buddhist teachings. He talks about dependent co-arising. The elements that make up new karma actually come prior to our experience of old karma. This is why we meditate, because we’re learning how to be more skillful with our new karma. We take the potentials that come from old karma and make them into good food. The Buddhist analogy is that karma is a field. In some versions of the analogy, karma is the soil, in others it’s the seeds. But you’ve got lots of seeds in there and lots of different patches in the field. In some places the soil is good, in some places it’s not so good. Some seeds are good, some seeds are not so good. Some are ready to sprout no matter what you do. Others are not ready to sprout at all yet. And there’s some that’ll sprout if you water them properly. It’s the ones that sprout. That’s our actual field of choice here in the present moment. But the produce coming in from the field on its own is not edible. We have to fix it with our present karma. This is where we can make a big difference. You may have the potential for pain in your body right now, but the way you relate to the pain is going to make the difference between whether you suffer from it or not. All kinds of old habitual habits may be coming up in the mind. But again, the way you relate to them is going to make the difference between whether you create more new bad karma out of them or something really good. Instead of using them as something to suffer about, you can turn them into something that gives insight, something that gives rise to concentration, all the factors of the path. So basically what we’re learning to do here as we meditate is how to prepare our produce so that it’s good edible food. We’ll work with the breath. That’s called bodily fabrication, the way you’re breathing right now. You have lots of choices. You can breathe long or short, deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow, or any combination of those. The way you breathe is going to make a big difference in how you feel your body from within right now. That’s why the breath is called the bodily fabrication. Then there’s verbal fabrication. It’s inner chatter right now. Asking questions, making statements, commenting on this, commenting on that. If you leave that verbal chatter to its old, that mental chatter to its old ways, it just wanders all over the place. But we’re bringing it to bear on the breath. So you talk to yourself about the breath, you ask questions about the breath, and then you look. Come to some answers. Then decide if you like the answers. If you don’t like the answers, ask some new questions. And finally there’s perception and feeling. These are called mental fabrication, the perceptions of the images you hold in mind. For example, the way you visualize the breath to yourself, or the way you visualize where you are in your body right now. Exactly where are you? Most of us seem to be living right behind our eyes. But as you get more sense into the body, you realize you’re there throughout the whole body. You’re any spot at all. So you have your choice. Which spot do you want to focus on? Which spot do you want to emphasize? You can perceive the breath as being right in front of you, or you can perceive the breath as being all around you. See which perception creates a better sense of well-being. The mental fabrication, which is feeling, results from the perception and the direct thought and the evaluation of the breath. The way you put those things together is going to make the difference between whether the sense of well-being or a sense of irritation, a sense of being trapped inside the body. So as we meditate, we’re learning new cooking techniques, new food preparation techniques, how to make better food out of what’s coming out of our karma field. The way you breathe, the way you think about the breath, comment on the breath, ask questions about the breath, your basic perceptions of the breath. These are all present karma. And it’s through your present karma that you can make your food edible. Now, we’re used to our old ways of fixing the food. And as with physical food, sometimes it takes a while to get used to the new food you’ve got. In the past, we may have taken whatever it was in the field and made hash out of it. Better food, more interesting food, food that’s healthier, tastier. And sometimes we miss the old food. Psychologists who focus on issues of positive psychology say that most people tend to have a happiness quotient that doesn’t really change that much regardless of what happens. An event may pull your level of happiness down or may push it up for a while, but then we tend to go back to our old level where we feel comfortable, even though the old level may not be all that good. It’s like knowing how to do nothing with food but boil it, boil it, boil it. Nothing tasty, nothing good, but it’s what you’re used to. So it may take a while to get used to relating to the breath in a new way, relating to your perceptions in a new way, having a greater sense of well-being in the body. And don’t let the lack of familiarity scare you off, make you feel comfortable or exposed, because when you’re breathing well, a lot of the internal armor goes down. And you find parts of the body that were closed off beginning to open up. And that may seem scary for a bit. But don’t let yourself just go back to your old ways, because the whole reason we’re practicing is to get out of our old ways, to realize that there’s a greater happiness, a greater well-being that’s possible. And if there’s something nagging in the back of your mind that you don’t deserve it, remember the Buddha never raised the issue of deserving. He’s here to put an end to all suffering, deserved or not. He’s here to teach you how to gain happiness, whether you deserve it or not. In other words, for him, the question of deserving or not deserving is not a question. Because who’s there to decide? Who is the Bureau of Standards that says, “This person deserves to suffer, this person deserves to be happy”? It’s not there. There are actions from the past that tend to lead to pain. There are actions from the past that tend to lead to pleasure. There are actions in the present moment that can lead to either pain or pleasure. The actions in the past that you’ve done, you can’t change. There are a lot of aspects to your body right now that you can’t change. You can’t control, you can’t order it around in certain ways. But there are things you can do with it. That’s your present karma. You take advantage of that fact. Here’s your opportunity to find a true happiness. And just because the level of well-being that comes as you practice is unfamiliar, don’t let it scare you. It’s a new skill. And as you master the new skill, you find that it changes a lot of the balance of power inside. It also changes your sense of what’s good food, what really feels good. What feels nourishing. Some of that old “comfort food” is actually bad for you. And it’s not really all that comfortable. It’s just that your old level of how you held your body, how you held your mind, was familiar. And so you felt safe. You felt you were on familiar territory. But that’s not a real sign that you’re really safe there. Because the mind can create a lot of problems if it doesn’t know how to create a sense of well-being out of whatever comes. This is the skill we’re trying to learn at the moment. No matter what comes out of your karma field, you know how to make good food out of it. Food that’s really nourishing. And that’s why you’re taking advantage of the fact that you do have freedom of choice here in the present moment. As the Buddha said, if people didn’t have that freedom, he wouldn’t teach. What would there be to teach? You couldn’t get people to change their minds on anything, change their ways of doing anything. Everything would have been predetermined. But that’s not the way things are. We have our choices. We are free to choose. We want to learn how to make more and more use of that freedom, take more and more advantage of that freedom. Explore it. Because as you explore this freedom, you find that there’s a deeper freedom inside that lies even beyond freedom of choice. But we see it by trying to be more and more skillful in our exercise of our choices right here, right now. That’s why we focus right here, right now, and pay very careful attention to what we’re doing and the results of what we’re doing. That’s what alertness is all about. And that we’re mindful to remember those lessons. And ardent in trying to improve our skills as cooks as much as we can.

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