Virtues Bright & Neither Dark nor Bright

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The Buddha described four kinds of karma. There’s dark karma with dark result, bright karma with bright result, karma that’s both dark and bright, the result being both dark and bright. Then there’s the karma that’s neither dark nor bright, which leads to the end of karma. Dark karma would be breaking the precepts, and its dark result is you fall to a lower realm. Bright karma is holding by the precepts, and you go to a higher realm. Your karma is dark and bright. In other words, it’s a mixture of breaking the precepts, not breaking the precepts. It goes to a more middling result. And the karma that’s neither dark nor bright, that leads to the end of karma, is the Noble Eightfold Path. It leads to the end of karma, and it takes you to a state of mind, a state of awareness, that doesn’t need to be maintained. There’s nothing you have to do. As Ajahn Mun said, it’s beyond all activity. As Ajahn Lee said, nirvana is easy. Everything in the world has to be maintained. Once you gain nirvana, there’s nothing you have to maintain. Of course, getting there is not easy. Once you get there, then you can put down all your burdens. What’s interesting is there’s an overlap between the bright karma and the karma that’s neither dark nor bright. On the one hand, those are the kinds of karma that the Buddha would recommend. He wouldn’t recommend mixed karma. In other words, doing things with mixed motives. He’d recommend that you get your motives as skillful as possible. But the overlap is that the precepts figure in both. Bright karma and karma that’s neither dark nor bright. The difference seems to be that with bright karma, you’re simply trying to hold by the precepts. You have goodwill for the sake of gaining a good rebirth. But you’re not just following the rules. There’s a sense of goodwill for the beings that you’re living with. One of the motivations for following the precepts is not just that you will gain good results, but you think about other beings. You wouldn’t like to be killed. You wouldn’t like to have people steal things from you. You wouldn’t like to have someone take your partner and have sex with them. You don’t like to be lied to. You don’t like dealing with drunks. Other people are like you. “Put their heart in your heart” is a phrase that they say in Thai. So you’re not just rule-abiding. You do develop some good qualities, positive qualities, as you observe the precepts. You realize this is a way of showing goodwill. It’s a way of showing compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Equanimity in the sense that you realize there are some things you would like to gain, but the only way you could gain them would be by taking the precepts, so you realize you have to give them up. Empathetic joy, you see other people are wealthy and you’re not wealthy, but you’re happy for them. You don’t think of taking their wealth away. Compassion, you realize there are people that you’re in a position where you could harm and probably get away with it, but you don’t want to. You feel for them. So it’s not just a matter of following the rules. Although you do follow the rules. I was reading someone saying that the use of discernment with the precepts is you figure out when to hold by them and when not to hold by them. That’s not very discerning at all. That’s the way of the world. As the Buddha pointed out, it’s not the case that people who lie a lot are lying more than they’re not lying, or people who kill are not killing more than they’re not killing. There’s a mix for everybody, but still there’s a lot of people who will break the precepts. Sometimes they’ll not break the others. There’s no wisdom in that. The wisdom lies in realizing there are times when you know something that somebody else might want to know, but they would abuse that knowledge if you gave it to them. They ask you about it. What are you going to do? How do you not divulge the knowledge without lying at the same time? You’ve got pests in your house. How do you live with them so they don’t damage you, your home, but at the same time you’re not going to kill them? That’s where your discernment gets tested. But that’s still in the level of bright karma that leads to a bright result. In other words, leads to rebirth. As for the precepts that fall under right speech, right action, right livelihood, what makes them special, what makes them the karma that’s neither dark nor bright, is the context. They’re based on right view. They’re based on right resolve. And they lead to right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. In other words, they’re part of training the mind. You practice the precepts, say, as a way of expressing your goodwill, but at the same time you’re also using them to develop your mindfulness, your ardency, your alertness. Those are qualities you’re going to need as you practice mindfulness, and especially the kind of mindfulness that leads to concentration. Mindfulness, of course, is keeping something in mind. So when you take on a precept, you’ve got to keep it in mind all the time. Don’t forget. Alertness. You have to be alert to what you’re doing to make sure that it’s actually in line with the precept. And ardency. You’ve got to hold well to these things. Whatever the challenges, you do your best not to break the precept. And you’re doing that as a way of training the mind to develop the qualities you’re going to need in concentration. You’re doing it to gain a sense of lightness, a sense of not having harmed anybody, and being a principled person. There’s a joy that comes in knowing that you have principles. Other people around you may break their principles, or not have any principles to break, but you know that you have principles that you hold on to. That attitude, that sense of well-being that comes from being principled, that’s really conducive to concentration. Because you’re going to settle the mind down. You should let go of your ordinary thinking. The mind gets into a state where it’s more tender than normal. It’s beginning to get snug with its object, but it’s not quite there yet. This is the part of the concentration where people are going to have visions. They tend to have visions as they’re settling down, or as they’re coming out. Because things are tender. If you’ve been doing wrong in the course of the day, harming somebody, harming yourself, it’s going to come up as the mind begins to settle down. And you have two reactions. Either it’s like an open wound, and it really hurts, or it’s like scar tissue. You’re denied that you did wrong. Well, neither is going to be helpful for concentration. Years back I was helping to lead a retreat, and in the middle of the retreat there was this one man who started breaking down and crying huge sobs. I was freaked out. It was the first time I’d ever been in a retreat like that, where I think something like that happened. People who frequent retreats tell me that’s kind of normal. Turns out that he had been a drug dealer. And as his mind was finally getting settled down in concentration, he started thinking about all the people whose lives he had ruined. So that’s how not observing the precepts can get in the way of concentration. But as you settle down, thoughts of the day will come in as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, and you realize there’s nobody harmed. You’re held by your principles. It’s easy for the mind to get settled down that way. That’s the kind of virtue that the Buddha said is pleasing to the noble ones. On the one hand, none of the precepts are broken, but at the same time it puts the mind in a good frame of mind, where you feel good about yourself. And that makes the mind easy to settle down. You practice the virtue for the sake of the path, in the context of the path as a whole. That changes the nature of what you’re doing. You’re not just hoping for good results in some future state. You’re treating it as part of training the mind in mindfulness, urgency, alertness, getting the mind prepared to settle down in concentration, the kind of concentration where you can be honest with yourself. Because it’s only when your concentration is honest that it’s going to be conducive to discernment. Because what are you going to see? You’re going to be seeing mistakes you’re making here in the present moment. The whole purpose of concentration is to help you see how you create a state of being, a state of becoming in the mind. It’s something you’re doing right now. You’re not just hoping that some good karma of the past will suddenly show up and do it all for you. You want to do the work right here, right now. It’s a very strong lesson in the power of your present karma. If you’re used to being honest with yourself, honest in observing the precepts, you’re going to be very honest and observant in what you’re doing. And that’s going to be conducive to discerning how you’re creating unnecessary suffering and how you can stop. So it’s in the attitude that you bring to the quality of virtue that’s going to determine whether it’s bright or neither bright nor dark. Whether it’s going to lead simply to a good rebirth or to something better. Either way, you benefit. But if you practice the precepts with the purpose of making them part of the path to the end of suffering, you benefit more. you

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