Karma for Freedom

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That passage we chatted just now sounds like bad news all down the line. Aging, illness, death, separation. On top of that, karma. Because for most people, karma is a negative thing. It sounds like punishment coming in from your past bad actions. We can all think of bad things we’ve done in the past, and the idea that we’re not done with those things yet, that there may be some bad results lurking here in the present moment or in the future. Sounds pretty, well, it’s bad news. But that’s not how the Buddha meant it. After all, remember, he’s teaching suffering and the end of suffering. And karma explains both. And the fact that it explains the end of suffering is what makes it positive. As the Buddha’s very clear, karma doesn’t mean that your present moment is shaped by the past. There’s that saying that you hear sometimes. If you want to see a person’s past actions, you look at their present state. If you want to see their future state, you want to look at their present actions. That’s much too simplistic. It’s actually opposed to what the Buddha himself said. He said if everything you were to experience right now were dependent on your past actions, there’d be no end to suffering at all. There’d be no path that you could follow. As he points out, the state of your mind in the present moment has a lot to do with how you experience the results of past actions. Even past bad actions don’t have to make you suffer if your state of mind is good. Because what you’re experiencing right now is the combination of results of past actions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions. You see this in the meditation. You focus on the breath in a certain way, and it doesn’t take that much time to see results, either good or bad. You have skill in the present moment. You can shape things really nicely. And if you lack skill, then the range of what you can do is limited. So this is one of the reasons why we meditate and why the meditation is focused on what we’re doing right now in the present moment. You make up your mind you’re going to breathe in one way, and you can watch the results. If you don’t like the results, you can breathe in another way. Heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow, short, long. There are lots of variations. Some people find that the variations in the in and out breath aren’t all that captivating. But when you start thinking about the breath energy in the body, then you get a real sense that it’s not just one little area of the body that’s involved, it’s the whole body involved. You can go through and make a survey. Where are the patterns of tension right now? Release those. Relax. Go through the body systematically. You can change your experience of the body very quickly. You’re taking advantage of the fact that the present moment karma has a huge role to play. In fact, if it weren’t for your present intentions right now, you actually would not be experiencing past karma. Which is one of the reasons why this is a theory of karma that really is good for putting an end to suffering. So it’s not karma to tie you down, it’s karma for freedom. And so karma explains how you can develop a skill. You look at the results of what you’ve done, and you can change what you’re going to do. We didn’t have this freedom to say nothing of meditation. Scientists couldn’t do experiments, whether experiments wouldn’t have any real value to teach us anything, because they would have been determined to make the experiment the way it was. There would be no way that you could play around with the causes. You can see which things you do would actually make a difference and which things don’t make a difference, so you can get a sense of what causes what. But it’s because we can’t do that, because we have this ability to make choices in the present moment that don’t have to be determined by the past, that we can learn things. And specifically, we can learn how to put an end to suffering. This is why the Buddha said that the Dhamma is nourished by committing yourself to the path and then reflecting on the results. You don’t just stop with the reflection, then you commit yourself for more. You learn from your reflection. Make changes in what you’re doing. And as a result, the results get better and better. This principle follows all the way through. Meditation is here to teach you about action. It’s amazing that some people think that they can meditate without having any reference to the Buddha’s teachings on karma at all. Karma is what makes meditation worthwhile. It also tells you when you can actually learn from your meditation. When I was in France recently, I was being interviewed, and the person interviewing me came from a Tibetan tradition where they talk about how meditation teaches you about the true nature of reality out there. So one of the questions was, “How does meditation do that?” And I had to tell him, “Meditation is not concerned with the nature of reality. It’s concerned with not so much what things are, but how things function.” And that’s something you can actually test as you meditate. Breathe in a certain way, the results will come out a certain way. You breathe in another way and they come out differently. You hold different perceptions in your mind, the images you have of what’s happening with the breath, where it comes in the body when you breathe in, where it goes out, how it runs through the body as you’re breathing in and out. Or maybe you can have the perception that it’s not coming in from outside, that the energy, of course, is actually originating inside the body. Where does that start? Can you change your perception? See what that does. Or just the idea that you’re watching the breath. Sometimes that creates an internal image of you like a bird perched on your shoulders, looking through your eyes, looking down at the body. How about thinking about perception of wearing the breath, being bathed in the breath? It’s all around you, in the head, in the body. What does that do? You’re learning how your present input does make a difference. Which is why when there are disturbances in the meditation, you’re not going to ask yourself, “Well, what did I do in a previous lifetime?” You’re asking yourself, “What am I doing now? And what can I change that I’m doing now?” It’s all about action and result. And specifically, what kind of actions lead to suffering, which kind of actions lead away? So when you think about karma, don’t think about it tying you down. After all, the Buddha’s teachings are about how to free you from suffering. His teachings on karma are designed to free you from suffering. They explain why it can be done. If you had to suffer from the past, the Buddha wouldn’t be able to help you. It’s because you don’t have to suffer, and the fact that you’re lacking skills in the present moment, that makes it possible for the Buddha to teach you, “Well, these are the skills you want to change,” or, “These are the skills you want to develop.” And they will make a difference. And they do form a path to the end of suffering. So this is karma for freedom. Try to have that image in mind every time you hear the word “karma,” because that’s what it is.

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