

Kamma & Rebirth—A Handful of Leaves

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You may know the story of the Buddha and the handful of leaves. He was in a simsapa forest one day—simsapa is a tree with little tiny leaves, about the size of dimes—and the floor of the forest was covered with leaves. He picked up a handful and asked the monks, “Which is greater? The number of leaves in my hand or the number of leaves in the entire forest?” They said, “Of course, it’s the number of leaves in the forest.” Then he went on to say that the things he learned in the course of his awakening were like the leaves in the forest. The things he taught were like the leaves in his hand. He chose to teach only the things that would be useful for putting an end to suffering. Other things he left aside.

It’s important to keep this story in mind when we think about the Buddha’s description of the world, of rebirth, and of how kamma works in rebirth, because these descriptions are pretty sketchy. He talks about different levels of being, but he never says that he’s going to give you a whole list of all the levels that are out there. As for rebirth, he actually discourages people from wondering, “What was I in a previous lifetime or what am I going to be in my next lifetime?”

At the same time, knowledge of kamma and rebirth was an important part of his awakening. This is where you have to make a distinction: The question about what you *were* in the past is not as important as knowing what you *did*, or the possibility of what you may have done. Because it’s your actions—not the status you had before or the status you’re going to have—that are going to determine what you experience. It’s your actions.

Why is this important? Because, as the Buddha said, skillfulness comes from heedfulness. It doesn’t come from what you are, from being naturally good or innately good or innately bad. Your innate nature is something that the Buddha said can change all the time. It’s not set in stone. And what we can do can change all the time, too. The mind can change so quickly, he said, that he couldn’t even think of a good analogy for how quickly the mind can change direction. So he taught just the features of the world and the features of kamma that are worth knowing for the sake of developing heedfulness so that you can work on developing more skillful qualities.

Like we’re doing right now, trying to develop a sense of ease, well-being, by getting the mind to stay with one object: That’s a good practice. Whether it’s an easy or a hard exercise for you, it’s worth doing, worth putting time into. Because if the mind doesn’t have a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of solidity in

the present moment, it can very easily be swayed by its desires for a quick fix or a quick happiness. And those are the desires that cause us to do a lot of unskillful things.

Even with kamma, the Buddha said that if you ask, “Well, the fact that I’m suffering this right now or that right now: Exactly what kamma did I do in the past that caused that?” his advice would be, “Don’t go there.” If you tried to trace that back, he said, it could drive you crazy, because kamma is so complex. The important things to know are the basic principles. One is that if you do something with a skillful intention—i.e., one free from greed, aversion, and delusion—the result is going to be happy. If you do something with an unskillful intention, the result is going to be miserable. And there are gradations. And because you’re doing things all the time, you’ve got lots of kamma.

Another thing he has you realize is that the fact you’re a human being means that you’ve got both good and bad kamma. And it’s also important to realize that not everything you’ve done shows up right now. There’s a mistaken belief that we have one kamma account and that what we see right now is the running balance. If the running balance is pretty good, we figure, “Well, we can just make it better and better, add more money to the account and we’re pretty safe.”

But the Buddha’s image of kamma is a field. In one of his field analogies, acts of kamma are the seeds planted in the field. Some of the seeds have sprouted already, the plants have grown, they’ve died. Others are in the course of sprouting: These are the ones you see right now. But there are a lot of seeds that are just sitting there in the dirt, waiting for the right time to sprout and grow. Which means that you don’t know what you’ve got in your karmic background. It may be that all the good seeds are showing right now, but the bad seeds will show up later. Or vice versa: Some people seem to be having lots of bad seeds sprouting right now, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t good seeds back there in the field.

And that’s as much as you need to know.

Here, too, the teaching is more of a sketch than a full explanation. It’s enough of a sketch to make you realize that you’ve got to work on your skillful qualities, and you can’t rest until you’ve discovered that there is such a thing as the deathless and you can verify it for yourself. That’s when you reach a measure of safety. If you haven’t reached that point yet in your meditation, anything can happen.

So keep that in mind as you’re practicing. If you find that you’re getting lazy or complacent, remind yourself that there’s no reason for complacency. Just because you have good kamma showing right now, as I said, doesn’t mean that the account isn’t going to wear out. You have many accounts, many different seeds, growing at different rates, ready to sprout. Sometimes their sprouting is going to depend on

what you do right now, which is why it's good to develop a good state of mind right now.

And in case there's some bad kamma back there, the Buddha said you can work on four qualities so that you don't have to suffer, even from bad kamma. The first is that you're developed in virtue and developed in discernment. In other words, you learn to see your own mind and understand what's going on in your own mind. You can talk yourself into doing the things that you know are good but you may not like; and you talk yourself out of doing the things that you may dislike but you know will be good for you in the long run. Wisdom for the Buddha is not abstract, it's more strategic.

Then, as he says, you're developed in body and mind. "Developed in body" doesn't mean that you go out and lift weights or exercise a lot. Developed in body means that you're resistant to pain. If pain comes up, you're not overwhelmed by it. You can sit with it; you can learn to not let it make inroads in the mind.

Developed in mind means that the mind doesn't easily get overwhelmed by pleasure. As the Buddha says, you might think that a great pleasure would be great to have, but if you're overwhelmed by pleasure you get careless again, and you get sloppy and you get inattentive to what's going on.

The way you develop the ability to not be overcome by pain or pleasure is through meditation.

In terms of pain, you learn how to sit with parts of the body that are painful without your having to react. You learn a series of skills around pain. You learn how to focus on another part of the body, you learn how to get the breath in that part of the body comfortable, then you can think of the good breath energy from the comfortable parts going through the pain. Don't let them be stopped by the pain. Think that good breath can go through anything, can penetrate any part of the body. Often that can take a lot of the sting out of the pain.

Then you start looking at your perceptions of the pain. Do you think that the pain is one solid mass that's getting in the way of the body? Well, think of the pain as more like little spots or little dots of sensation arising and falling away, arising and falling away, sometimes very quickly. It's not solid. If you doubt that, try to look at where the sharpest point of the pain is, and you'll find that it moves. As you trace it around, it seems to be running away from you. Or you can hold to the perception that these spots of pain are not coming at you. Instead, as they arise, they're going away from you. As soon as they arise, they disappear, so they're going away, going away. They're not coming at the mind.

You can also ask yourself if you've picked up a perception from your childhood that when pain comes it has an intention to hurt you: That might be lurking

someplace in your mind. Learn how to take these perceptions apart.

In the Buddha's instructions on breath mindfulness, this is called calming mental fabrication—in other words, the perceptions by which you shape your experience. This is one of the things you learn as you develop discernment around concentration: that the perceptions you apply to pains really will make a huge difference as to whether you're going to suffer from them or not.

As for not being overcome by pleasure: It's important, when the mind does begin to gain a sense of well-being from the breath, that you don't leave the breath to go for the pleasure. Because that would undercut your concentration, and the foundation for the pleasure would fall away. Either that or you'd just drift off into a pleasant spot where you're not quite sure if you're awake or asleep. So as you develop your powers of concentration, this is one of the skills you've got to learn: how to be with pleasure but not be overcome by it. Tell yourself that the pleasure will do its work. You don't have to maximize its effect by swallowing it or gobbling it up or wallowing in it. Let the pleasure spread around and it'll do the work it needs to do in the body.

Finally, to counteract the effects of past bad actions, the Buddha tells you to develop a mind that's unlimited—in other words, your goodwill and your equanimity are unlimited. You train yourself to wish for the happiness of everybody, no matter who. No matter how good they've been, no matter how bad they've been, you tell yourself you don't want to see anybody suffer. Now, this doesn't mean that they won't suffer. It means simply that you want to make sure your intentions around other people are something you can trust.

At the same time, you have to be able to develop unlimited equanimity, when you see that there are people who are doing things that are unskillful and you can't stop them. So you focus instead on the things that you *can* have an effect on, the areas where you *can* make a difference. In some cases, the areas where you can't help people will involve people who are really close to you. This is where it's hard.

Say that someone dear to you is ill. You have to remind yourself that you have to accept the fact of their illness. Then the next question is, what *can* you do to help them? Rather than getting upset about an illness that you can't change, or a character trait that you can't change, look for the areas where you can make things better.

In this way, you start thinking about the well-being of all beings. It takes you out of your narrow concern with your own sense of being pained by something. Think of all the beings in the world: A lot of people out there are suffering right now. So when you're suffering the results of bad kamma, you're not the only one. This thought helps to take a lot of the sting away.

The Buddha gave a good example of this when he was injured by Devadatta. Devadatta rolled a rock down the mountain, hoping to crush the Buddha. The rock was turned off course by another rock. The rock shattered, some of the stone slivers shot out, and one of them went through the Buddha's foot. So they had to get the stone sliver out, and then he had to rest. Mara came along to taunt him: "What are you doing, you sleepyhead? Are you moping around because of what happened?" And the Buddha said, "No. I'm lying down here with sympathy and goodwill for all beings." That included the people who tried to injure him. In that way, he wasn't focused just on his own problems. He took a larger perspective. And this larger perspective is what makes the pains of your past kamma much less.

The Buddha compares it to a river. You've got a lump of salt, and if you throw it in the river, you can still drink the water because the river is so much bigger than the lump of salt. But if your mind doesn't have this sense of well-being, this expansive sense of goodwill, it's like a small cup of water. You put that same lump of salt in there and you can't drink the water, because it's too salty. So try to make your mind like a river by making your goodwill and equanimity unlimited. And do your best to develop *all* the qualities that are needed so that you don't have to suffer from past kamma.

At the same time, remind yourself that the possibility of there being past bad kamma is there for everybody, so you can't get complacent. Here it's important that you adopt the right attitude, not so worried about it that you're making yourself miserable. Just learn how to be matter-of-fact about the fact that there's work that needs to be done and here you've got the opportunity to do it. You can trust in the good effects of the good things you're doing right now.

But always have that little voice in the back of the mind that says if it's not really good yet, you're not going to rest satisfied. The Buddha said that that was the secret to his awakening: not letting himself rest satisfied or content with skillful qualities. If there was a way he could make the mind more skillful, he would do it. It was because of his sense of urgency, his sense of the dangers that are there.

Even when you've done a lot of good, and at the moment your karmic field is sprouting nothing but good seeds, remember that you're not totally safe until you've had at least your first taste of awakening. At that point, the Buddha said, the amount of suffering left for you is like the dirt under a fingernail. Here was another comparison. He picked up some dirt under his fingernail one time and asked the monks, "Which is greater? The dirt under my fingernail or the dirt in the entire Earth?" Of course, it's the dirt in the entire Earth. He went on to say that the amount of suffering left for someone who's reached the first glimpse of

awakening is like the dirt under the fingernail. The possibility of the suffering that's left for you if you don't is like the dirt in the entire Earth.

We live in a world of complex interdependencies—which the Buddha never taught as a reassuring thought. It's a scary thought. In complex systems, things can change very quickly, going from one extreme to another in the flash of an eye.

You hear the planes going overhead. There are people up there saying to themselves that they've got to stay ready for a war. That's their way of being heedful. The Buddha's way of being heedful, though, is to say that whether there's war or no war, there's always a danger in being unskillful. When that sense of danger stays alive, your sense of heedfulness will help keep you on the path and get you to a point where there is no danger.

That's what all these teachings are about: to spur you on to the development of good qualities and to reassure you that when those good qualities are fully developed, there'll be no suffering in the mind.

The Buddha says it's like removing an arrow. Once this arrow is removed, you're free to go where you like, because where you'll like to go and what you'll like to do at that point will be nothing but skillful.