

The Power of Present Kamma

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A lot of us, when we first hear the teachings on karma, think about the bad things we did in the past, which is one of the reasons why karma is a very unpopular teaching. Things that were past, we hope to leave past. But karma says, “They may still have their fangs.” Of course, “karma” doesn’t mean just bad karma. It also means good karma. In fact, the Buddha, when he introduces karma, introduces it in a very positive way, connecting it with generosity and gratitude, both of which are really good parts of human life.

The Buddha says that generosity has meaning because our actions have meaning. They have meaning in the sense that we choose to do things. That means that people have meaning, too. When we give meaning to other people, we give meaning to ourselves: that it’s worthwhile helping someone else, either materially or in terms of our knowledge or in terms of our time. If we didn’t have freedom of choice, all of this would be meaningless. We’d be just mechanical robots, pre-programmed, with no choices at all, in which case generosity would be meaningless.

And so would gratitude. We have gratitude to people for things they’ve done for us, realizing that they could have *not* done those things, but they chose to do them. Often they had to go out of their way to be helpful. This help starts with your parents and goes to your teachers and other benefactors. The fact that they had freedom of choice means that we should be grateful for what they’ve done for us. And, as the Buddha said, gratitude is a sign of a good person. If you’re not grateful for the help you’ve been given, then it’s very unlikely that you’re going to be generous and give help to others.

So the teachings on karma are very closely related to these two very positive parts of human life. They show that they do have meaning. Gratitude is appropriate. Generosity is appropriate and meaningful. And as for things done in the past, the Buddha says, you don’t necessarily have to suffer from bad things done in the past. After all, this is a teaching on how to put an end to suffering, and there’s no caveat saying that he’s talking only about undeserved suffering. Even “deserved” suffering is something you don’t have to experience, putting deserved in quotes there.

He talks about how your state of mind right now is what really matters. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to develop a good state of mind so that when results of past bad karma come, they don’t have to make an impact on the mind. The Buddha talks about the qualities you want to develop to counteract the impact of past bad karma: virtue, discernment, an ability not to be overcome by pleasure, an ability not to be overcome by pain, and having an unlimited mind, which means developing the four brahmaviharas. Now all of these abilities are things that we have to fabricate in the present moment.

The word fabrication, *sankhara*, doesn't mean we just make them up out of thin air. We have to take the good potentials that come from the past and turn them into actualities. But it turns out that our present karma is what really makes all the difference. When the Buddha describes dependent co-arising, our experience of present karma actually comes first, and after that we experience the raw material from the past. Then, out of that, we make what we experience as the present. So, that's one of the reasons why we meditate. We're training the mind to fabricate its experience right now in a skillful way.

The Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication, and they're all very directly related to what we're doing right now. As he said, if you do these things in ignorance, it's going to lead to suffering. But if you do them with knowledge, it turns everything around: These three kinds of fabrication actually become part of the path. And they're the skills you need to master so that when bad things come in from the past, you don't have to suffer from them.

The first fabrication is bodily: your breath, the breath coming in and out right now. After all, it's through the breath that you experience the body, move the body, and do things with the body. Even your primary sense of the solidity of the body has to come through the breath. Your sense of the coolness and warmth of the body has to come through the breath. Without the breath, you couldn't move the body at all. The breath is the mediator, both for how you experience the body and how you use it. So bring some knowledge to this process. When you're breathing in, breathing out, how does it feel? It stands to reason that, because this is the force of life, if it feels bad, something is wrong.

You want to breathe in a way that feels good so that you can be here solidly, so that you can create good karma in the present moment steadily. If the mind isn't steady, it's like trying to write as you're riding along in a bouncy car. The writing is going to be all over the place. If you're going to write something neatly, you want a still place where you can sit down and write. It's the same with the mind. If you're going to create anything good in the present moment, it has to come from a sense of stability and stillness. So use the breath to help create that sense.

And then you engage in the second kind of fabrication, verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation, *vitakka* and *vicara* in Pali. Directed thought means choosing a topic. Evaluation means expanding on it, either making comments or asking questions. These two activities constitute the way we talk to ourselves. We focus on a topic and then we make comments about it. So here the breath is the topic. And we're commenting on the breath.

In this way, we're putting bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication together. We do this by evaluating how the breath feels and, if it doesn't feel good, asking ourselves how to change it. If it *does* feel good, how do you maintain that sense of feeling good, how do you maximize it and spread it around, and how do you keep watch over it to maintain it?

That voice in the back of your mind that's telling you what to do as you meditate: You want to make sure it's well trained so that it knows what to do. Part of this comes from hearing

Dhamma talks and from reading books, and part of it comes from your own experience. You need to keep the voices in your mind trained and alert because you have to keep on top of the breath. You can't just say, "Okay, this is a comfortable breath and I'm just going to let it go on automatic pilot."

As with a car: If you put it on automatic pilot, sometimes you ram into somebody else if you're not careful. So you have to make adjustments. Something may feel good for a while, then it's not so good. It doesn't feel quite as refreshing, quite as light or energizing or whatever quality you want to feel in the body right now. So try to be on top of it.

The commentary you're making, even though it's very subtle and very minimal, is something you have to keep going to get the mind to settle down. When the mind is really solid, you can put the directed thought and evaluation aside. But they're always there available for use if you begin to notice that something's not quite right.

Then there's a third kind of fabrication: mental. Mental fabrication consists of feelings and perceptions. Feelings here are not emotions. They're feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels you put on things, the images you have in your mind. And again, when we meditate, these are directly related to the breath. We have an image of the breath, of what's happening when we breathe. And then you notice that there are certain feelings that come out of that. If your image of the breath is restricted, or if the breathing is becoming labored because of the image, well change the image.

Think of the breath's being able to penetrate everything, coming in from all directions through all the pores, going deep, deep into the body. Or you can think of the breath energy surrounding the body with a kind of cocoon. There are lots of different images you can hold in mind to help making the process of breathing more effortless.

So you're engaged with all these forms of fabrication right here. And as you're doing them with knowledge, you turn them from a cause of suffering into a path to the end of suffering. That's quite a shift. And the more knowledge you can bring, the more effective they are.

As you get more hands-on experience with these aspects of fabrication, and thinking of them in these terms—bodily, verbal, mental—then you can apply that same insight to other things as well. For example, the unlimited states of mind require the three kinds of fabrication, too.

You want the breath to be calm. Then you direct your thoughts to all beings. You comment on how you would like to see them be happy, which means that if they're doing unskillful things right now, your wish is this: Is there some way that they can stop doing those unskillful things? You may not be able to think of how that might actually work out, but at least holding that idea in mind is really helpful, because it helps you engage with all kinds of people: people who are skillful; people who are unskillful. You can still have goodwill for them and not be a hypocrite.

Developing goodwill requires mental fabrication as well. You want a feeling of well-being in yourself so that you can dedicate it to others. It's very hard, when you're not feeling well-being, to think of other people's well-being. And you want to hold the perception in mind of all beings and their happiness and what might be involved in their finding happiness—in line, of course, with the principle of karma: They're going to have to act on the causes if they're going to be happy. So if there's any way that you can help them to be skillful, you're happy to do it. In other words, you don't hold grudges. You don't decide that because someone did something really awful, you'd like to see them suffer first. You've got to put that kind of thinking aside because it doesn't help anybody. This falls back, of course, to the directed thought and evaluation.

So developing those unlimited states of mind—which make it easier for the mind to deal with unpleasant things as they come up from your past karma—requires these three forms of fabrication, too. In fact, you find that they apply to all areas of life. As you go through the day, you want to maintain your equilibrium. Okay, stay with the breath. Have a sense of how the breath energy is going in the body so that when anger comes up, or fear comes up, they don't hijack your breath, and then, from your breath, hijack your ways of talking to yourself or perceiving things. Now, perceptions will come in, but don't let the unskillful perceptions lay claim to all the forms of fabrication going on. At the very least, have the breath calm. That enables you to think more calmly and to be able to choose your perceptions with more awareness.

So the fact that our experience of past karma is filtered through our present karma is really important. And learning the skills of present karma through the three forms of fabrication helps you realize how the Buddha could find a path to the end of suffering and talk about karma and yet not have karma get in the way. In other words, saying that you have to suffer this or suffer that before your awakening: That's not part of the equation at all.

You learn these skills and then whatever the suffering is, it's something that can be overcome. Even though there may be bad things coming in from the past, you still don't have to suffer from them because your present karma is what determines what you experience. And that's something that you can master. That's a skill that you can work on to turn these fabrications from a cause of suffering into the path. That, as Ajaan Lee said, is a sign of a wise person. You take what you've got, good or bad, and you learn how to make good use of it. That's how we progress in the world. That's how we progress in life.