

The Larger View

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One of the reasons we have those reflections and chants before the meditation is that they remind us of the larger picture. They help get us out of the narratives of our past couple hours. And in a way, we're following the example of the night of the Buddha's awakening. His first knowledge was remembering his own past lives—lots of them. If you think you have narratives, the Buddha had lots and lots of narratives: all the times he had been a human being, different kinds of animals, devas. But just seeing the thread of his narratives didn't necessarily give him any insight into any pattern, because as he said someplace else, people can have memories of past lives and yet not be able to make sense out of them. Sometimes you're good in one lifetime and you go to a good destination in the next. Sometimes you're good in one lifetime and you go to a bad destination in the next. There are times when you're doing all kinds of bad things and you can still go to a good destination in your next lifetime—or you can go to a bad destination. So just looking at the one thread, it's hard to see any larger pattern.

It was only in the second knowledge that he had really begun to understand the pattern of action: how actions lead to results. Skillful actions based on right view, based on having respect for the noble ones and their teachings, lead to good results—sometimes immediately, sometimes much later. Bad actions, unskillful actions based on wrong view, with disrespect for the noble ones, lead to bad results. The results may take time, or they may be immediate, but the connection is there. And he was able to see this only when he'd looked at the larger picture: seeing all beings dying and being reborn in line with their actions. Then, once he understood the importance of views and actions, he applied that knowledge to the present moment: what kind of views and actions he was engaging in right then and there.

And it's important that you see your views as a kind of action. We have a tendency to think of thinking as one thing, and action as something else—like the contemplative life versus the active life. But thinking is a kind of action. Holding on to a particular view is a kind of action that will then have a huge impact on other actions you do. So even your views fall into the teaching of karma. In this way, you can see how your actions right now are causing suffering right now. That's the important thing to see in the present moment. If you haven't gone through the larger picture, just seeing that can be very depressing. The same if you're coming from a narrative of today, the events of today, that's not an especially good narrative: You sit down and see yourself causing more suffering while you're sitting here. It seems to pile up on you.

So you have to stop to think and look at the larger picture. It's not just you; everybody goes through this. Everybody, except for the arahants, has all kinds of unskillful thoughts, so in that way we're all in this together. This is also why we have the chant spreading goodwill,

compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, extending these thoughts, these attitudes, to all beings. Because again, it helps us to see the larger picture: We're all suffering. We all want happiness and yet we're all doing stupid things, some more stupid than others, but all our actions are based on our desire to find happiness of some kind. Some people are extremely deluded and have lots of disrespect for the noble ones, really have very bad wrong views, and so they create a lot of suffering for themselves and others. But you have to have goodwill for those people: May they find true happiness. May they understand what's required for true happiness and start acting on that knowledge.

And then, based on goodwill, when we're aware of people who are suffering, we extend our compassion. And again, it's not only for people who are experiencing the results of past unskillful actions but also people who are engaged in unskillful actions right now. You've got to have compassion for them. Empathetic joy is both for people who are currently happy and for people who are doing wise and skillful things that will eventually lead to happiness. When you think about it, it's all over the world: men, women, children, people on every continent, every country. The human race has all kinds. And people's skillfulness has nothing to do with their national background or their race or their gender or anything like that. It's all made up simply of skillful intentions, which is a factor independent of all of those things.

And then you look at the human situation and see a lot of things that are pretty sad and you can't do anything about them. That's where you have to develop thoughts of equanimity, realizing that we all have our own karma. We all have done skillful things; we all have done unskillful things. And regardless of how we want those actions to come out, they're going to come out in line with the quality of the intention behind them.

There are some people who say the teaching on karma is hardhearted: You see someone suffering and you say, well, there must be some karma back there that's causing this suffering. But that attitude is hardhearted only if you reserve your compassion for people who are totally pure. After all, you have your own past bad karma. Why should your compassion be limited only to totally innocent people? You have to have compassion for everybody, regardless of how skillful or unskillful they've been in the past.

The teaching on karma gives you more levelheaded attitude toward people's suffering—your own suffering, the suffering of other people—and it puts it in a much larger perspective. It's simply a question of action and result.

You've got to be careful about your actions. That's the take-home from all this. Whenever the Buddha would teach about the universe as a whole and the way karma plays itself out over many, many, lifetimes, over huge cycles of time, the conclusion always was: Karma is what causes these things to happen, so you've got to focus on what you're doing right now because this is where you're making your choices. The script is being written right here, and the way the storyline is going to go is dependent on the choices you're making right here. And you always do have the freedom that regardless of what your situation is, you can choose to do the skillful

thing. You want to make the most of that freedom, the most of that opportunity. The more you make the most of it, the wider that door of opportunity opens.

So as you're sitting here meditating and finding that thoughts of greed, aversion, or delusion come up—or fear, jealousy, whatever—you'll always want to remember the larger picture. And regardless of what's coming up and what your mind is telling you about how you have to obey these things, or fall in line with them, and regardless of what it's saying about what these thoughts tell you about yourself, always remind yourself that you do have the choice to do something skillful here. The mind may be saying that you're a pretty miserable meditator, that you don't have much of a chance, but you can say, "Well, maybe I won't have a chance some other time, but right now I have the chance. Let's make the most of it now because I can't make the chance happen back in the past, and I can't determine right now what choices I'll be making in the future, but I *do* know what I'm choosing to do right now: to do this thing skillfully."

When you've taken the larger view, it's easier to break things down into individual actions like this. The mind's habitual way of falling in line, say, with anger may be an old habit and it's going to take a while to uproot it, but for right now, think of it simply as an action, as a choice, that's totally unrelated to what kind of person you think you are and what the narrative of your life has been so far. This is one of the things that meditation shows you: that the narrative is not set in stone.

We're used to reading novels and stories where there's a narrative arc that seems inevitable. But that's what makes the story hang together: It tries to make things seem pretty inevitable. And even the surprises, when they come, have to be prepared for. But as a meditator you can surprise yourself at any time. The anger you've given in to many, many times: You can surprise yourself. Say, "Today, I'm not going to give in to it." The desire you've given in to many times in the past: You can say, "I'm not going to give in to it right now." The mind will say, "Well, a few minutes down the line you're going to give in to it, so why not give in to it now?" "Well, that's a few minutes down the line. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, but right now I'm making the choice." As the Buddha said, even if you just tell yourself you would like to do something skillful, that's a skillful thought right there. Even before you've carried it out, you've set the mind in the right direction.

When you look at the larger picture, you'll see that there are lots of stories of how people have turned themselves around, done unexpected things. Fact is often a lot stranger than fiction because the mind can change very quickly. As the Buddha said, the mind can change so quickly that there's no adequate simile for how quickly it can change. So we can take advantage of that fact and use it for our own benefit, for the benefit of others. The mind doesn't have to be set in its ways.

It helps to depersonalize things when you step back like this and take the larger view. It reminds you of possibilities that you have, that you might not have thought of before. And if

your personal narratives are getting stagnant, it helps open the windows and the doors, flush out all that stagnant water, and let in some fresh air.