

An Issue of Control

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All too often, the Buddha's teachings on karma are viewed as a holdover from his culture—that without really thinking, he just picked up an assumption that everybody else shared and tacked it on to his teaching. The reason people say this is because they don't want to have to take on the teaching in karma—which is a shame, because it's central to the Buddha's teaching. As he said, it's the beginning of right view, and it's totally in line with his teachings on the four noble truths.

If you check through the Canon, you find there are only two sets of teachings that he says are categorical, in other words, true across the board. One is the distinction between skillful and unskillful action—the word here is “karma”—and the fact that skillful actions should be developed, and unskillful ones abandoned. The other categorical teaching is the four noble truths. And the two teachings are connected.

Craving is an unskillful action because it leads to suffering; all the other factors that lead to craving are unskillful, too. As for the factors of the path, they're skillful karma. And skillful karma exists on two levels: a skillful karma that keeps you going around in the cycle of rebirth, but in a pleasant way; and then the very skillful karma that takes you out of the cycle—the whole point being that the really important thing in your life is what you're doing.

This is why we meditate. Karma, as the Buddha said, is intention. Where are you going to see it? You have to see it in the present moment. When you're looking in the present moment, that's the main thing you want to look for—that, along with all the other factors that cluster around it. There's attention, the things you pay attention to; perception, how you label things; the intention itself; and then the contact among all these things. This contact is what spurs you to act. You see things in a particular way. You're focusing on a particular issue, and you're going to act in line with that.

Now, the Buddha says the most useful way of attending to things is to look at them in terms of the four noble truths—these categorical teachings—and realize how important those truths are. The rest of the world tells us that what other people are doing is important. They try to invade our homes; they even speak of invading our brains—getting an iPad and planting it in your brain—and the message always is that what somebody else is doing someplace else is really important, more important than what you might be doing right here and now, whereas the Buddha says, “No, what's important is what you're doing right now.”

His teaching on karma really was very different from all the other teachings on karma that were current in his time. Some people thought that karma was deterministic: Something you'd done in the past was going to totally shape what you're experiencing right now. Others would say it's all irrelevant; what you're doing has no impact on anything. But from the Buddha's

point of view, things that come in from the past have an influence, but you have choices in the present moment. It's as if your past actions yield potentials here, and you have the choice of what you're going to focus on, what you're going to do with those potentials. For example, as you sit here with the body right now, certain parts of the body have a potential for pain and others have a potential for pleasure. How you're going to experience this hour depends on what you're focusing on and how you focus on it.

It's best to start with the potentials for pleasure. That's why we focus on the breath. Find a good sense of breath energy. It doesn't have to be especially strong or outstanding right now. But if you shelter and protect it, give it some space, don't squeeze it out as you breathe out, don't put too much pressure on it as you breathe in, and allow it to just feel really nice and unhassled, then you find that the sense of well-being carries over from breath to breath to breath. And as it carries over, it gets stronger. It builds momentum. This shows you the power of your present intention right here.

As for the potentials for pain, you can put them aside for the time being. Sometimes they'll really seem to nag at you, and other times they lose their importance. They don't press on you so much when you're focusing on the breath. We were talking today about a rash that really bothers you when you're not meditating, but then seems to not really matter at all when you are. That's because at that point, you're focusing on the potentials for pleasure, and you're not getting into the vicious cycle of the rash.

I was talking this evening on the phone to someone who's got a really bad cold right now—a really bad cough. He found that while he's meditating, he can suppress the cough response, and the body gets some rest; the lungs get some rest; the muscles around the ribs get some rest. So this gives you a sense of the range of choice you have in the present moment. What you're going to focus on and how you focus on it is really going to make a difference in what you actually experience.

When you have this sense of skill with the pleasure potentials, you can start looking at the pain potentials. Why is it that as soon as you focus on them, the mind gets pained as well? That's the big issue. The simple fact that there's pain in the body: That, you simply have to accept as a fact of life. It's suffering or *dukkha* in the three characteristics. But you don't just write it off. You look at it. What are the ups and downs of that pain? What makes the pain worse? What makes it better? Is there anything you're doing right now that makes a difference?

Always the Buddha has you explore this line between where you can make a difference and where you can't. This is the line between self and not-self: your sense of who you are, and what your powers are on the one hand, and what you can't control on the other. He doesn't have you write things off totally as beyond your control. He tells you to explore. Where is that line? Does the line change positions? Why would it change? What does that tell you about your sense of self? In the sutta on not-self, the Buddha starts his discussion with the issue of control.

If the body or feelings or perception, fabrications, consciousness were self, then you could say, “I want it to be like this,” or “I want it to be like that.” But you can’t have total control over any of these.

The Buddha’s constantly focusing on the issue that your sense of self is built around control. Some people say when the Buddha’s teaching not-self, he’s saying there really is no permanent essence to anything. But that just makes it a tautology with what he said about inconstancy: Things change. And that’s not really the issue. The issue is that you’re *clinging* to things that change—clinging to things that are really not totally under your control and, as a result, you’re going to suffer.

You’re going to suffer even if you try to cling to things that are permanent, like the experience of the deathless. It is actually possible to cling to that—to feel passion and desire for it, and that passion and desire constitute what clinging is. That’s because you try to control it. At that point, the suffering comes in the clinging totally in and of itself, which at that point is superfluous. You’ve got something really good, and yet you’re afraid that you’re going to lose it. But in trying to cling to it, you do lose it. That’s why the experience of the deathless comes to stream-enterers as something that they realize and then lose contact with: because they’re trying to control it. So the issue is not whether it’s permanent or not; the issue is the fact that the mind constantly wants to cling, constantly wants to control.

Now there are some areas where your control is useful, and this is why we have the path. You need a certain amount of control over your mind so that you can follow the path. This is why the Buddha has us explore that line between what we can and cannot control. How far can you push those three characteristics, and what can you find that is relatively constant, relatively caseful, relatively under your control?

The best you can do with the amount of control you do have is to get the mind in a state of concentration. So explore that. Get to know how well you can exert an influence on the present moment. This is where you really learn about the issue of karma: the extent to which you do have some control in the present. Things are not totally determined. Otherwise, the question of skillful or unskillful action would be meaningless. If things were totally determined by the past, everything would have been determined beforehand. You would have no choices.

The Buddha wants you to explore the choices you actually do have right here. What are you going to focus on? How are you going to focus on it? You can focus on the pleasure potentials in a way that can give rise to really intense pleasure. You can focus on the pain potentials in a way that gives rise to intense pain. Or you can focus on them in a way in which you know there’s the potential there, but you don’t let it have inroads on the mind.

This is the opportunity we have. This is where we really do have a choice, and we have a choice in the place where we really want it. Some people like the idea of determinism because it lets them off the hook. Whatever bad things they did, well, they weren’t really responsible. But if you come at them at a point where they’re suffering from pain, and you say, “Would you

like to have the choice not to suffer?” that’s where nobody really wants determinism. They want to have that opportunity not to suffer, and the Buddha says it’s real.

So take that as a working hypothesis. As he said, if everything were determined from things you’d done in the past or from some god in the past, or if things were totally chaotic, then it wouldn’t make sense to try to follow a path. It wouldn’t make sense for him to even try to teach a path. So this is the underlying assumption that we work on, and the reason we take on this assumption is because we’d like to have that choice not to suffer. Liking not to suffer is not what makes it true, but it is what allows us to take it as our working hypothesis. It’s our conviction in the Buddha’s awakening that convinces us that this is a worthwhile path to explore.

So focus on what you can do right now to create a sense of ease, pleasure, well-being, refreshment in the present moment. Breathe in a way that feels especially refreshing to the heart and any other parts of your breath-energy body that feel especially sensitive. Allow them to have the energy they need.

Explore the potentials you have right here because it’s through this kind of exploration and mastery that you come to understand what the Buddha taught about karma. It’s not just a theory. It’s something that allows you to act and to benefit from your actions in a way that you might not otherwise have believed possible.