

# *The River of Karma*

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We often hear that the Buddha didn't talk about metaphysical issues. And it's true that there were a lot of metaphysical questions that he deliberately put aside: whether the cosmos was finite or infinite; eternal or not eternal; whether you had a soul inside your body that was different from your body, or whether your body was your soul; and when an enlightened person passed away, whether that person could be described as existing or not existing, or both or neither. In fact, he didn't even take on the issue of whether or not you had a self; or what your self might be if you did have one.

Those are issues that the Buddha put aside. But there was one metaphysical issue that he talked about in a lot of detail, and that was the issue of karma: the power of your actions. He addressed it because it's very relevant to what he taught and what we're doing right now. The fact that we're doing something: That's karma. And if you're going to try to put an end to suffering through your own actions, you need some clear answers on a whole string of questions: "What *can* you do? What's the range of your action? Do you have freedom of choice? Do your actions have any consequences? And what determines those consequences?" Those are metaphysical issues, but they're very relevant to what we're doing as we meditate—because meditation is an action, too.

The way the Buddha approached action was very distinctive. There's a common misbelief that everybody in his time believed in action the way he did: that there was rebirth based on action. But that's not the case. A lot of people said that karma has no consequences at all, or that you don't really have any free choice, or that everything's either very random or totally determined. And some people believed in rebirth, but said that it's not determined by your actions; it's already written into fate. Other people said there's no rebirth at all; you die and that's it.

So these are issues the Buddha had to address, especially if he was going to teach a path to the end of suffering, because a path is composed of actions. And you have to understand your actions if you're going to do them skillfully.

In fact, a lot of his teachings on action come from the kind of lessons you learn by developing a skill. Think of any skill you've mastered: dancing, cooking, carpentry, plumbing, electricity, music, learning a language, learning how to teach. All of these things require that you observe your actions and learn from them.

If you couldn't learn from your actions, there'd be no way to develop a skill. The fact that you *can* learn from your actions means there's a pattern behind them. If there were no pattern, there'd be nothing you could learn today that would help you deal with the same situation

tomorrow. But when there is a pattern, then when you meet up with certain circumstances, you can learn how to deal skillfully with those. And the next time you meet up with the same circumstances, you try the same approach. You get results.

But then sometimes you notice, “Well, I tried the same approach, and it seemed to be the same sort of circumstances, but it didn’t get the same results.” In cases like that, the Buddha has you assume, not that there’s no pattern, but that there is a pattern that you haven’t observed carefully. That’s what encourages you to go back and be more careful in how you observe things.

This also assumes that you have the power of choice, in which you can choose to act one way or another. In your freedom of choice, there is a certain amount of “patterned-ness” to the principle of action, but it’s not totally mechanical. In other words, it’s not deterministic or fatalistic. You can change the way you think; you can change the way you act; you can change the way you speak. And this has an important power in either giving rise to stress and suffering or putting an end to it.

So what we’re doing right now as we’re meditating is to master a skill. Each time you stay with a breath, you want to be able to remember: What lessons have you learned from dealing with the breath in the past? Are they relevant now, or are things different? You try the approaches you’ve learned from the past. When they work, you stick with them; when they don’t work, you’ve got to learn how to adjust. You’ve got to learn how to observe again. This means there’s some wiggle room in the principle of action.

As the Buddha once said, if you had to meet up with the results of every action you did in the past – in other words, if you killed something, then you’re going to have to get killed, or if you stole something, you’re going to have to get stolen from, down to all the details – it would be impossible for anyone to practice to attain awakening. We’d all have to go through who knows how many lifetimes. And of course, in the course of those many lifetimes, we’d probably do more actions, which would then lead to more need to come back. It would be an unending process.

But fortunately, that’s not how karma works. The way it works is that each action *tends* to lead to a certain kind of result, but the way you experience that result is going to be complicated by many things: other actions you’ve done and also your state of mind in the moment when the fruit of the action ripens.

This is where meditation becomes very important. You don’t have much control over what you did in the past. In fact, right now you have no control. But you *can* control your state of mind here in the present moment. And that will make all the difference in how you experience the fruits of past actions.

Here, there are two things in particular that are important. One is developing unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity – in other words, working on the *brahma-viharas*. They help to create an unlimited state of mind. The analogy the Buddha

gives is of a big lump of salt. If you took that lump of salt and put it into a cup of water, you couldn't drink the water because there was so little water in the cup. But if you threw the lump of salt into the river – and assuming that the rest of the river is clean – the fact that there's so much water in the river means that you could still drink the water. It's not too salty. In fact, you probably wouldn't even taste the salt at all. It's the same with bad actions from the past. If your mind is expansive, then the results of those actions are going to be mitigated by the good karma you're creating in the present moment.

The good state of mind you're creating: That *is* a kind of karma. This is an important principle to keep in mind, that when you attain a state of concentration you're not running into some cosmic principle or "ground of being" or whatever. You want to view it as a kind of action, learn how to do it skillfully, and then observe it.

This is where the four noble truths come in. You observe the action and ask, "Okay, where is the stress here?" At that point, it might be very subtle, but after a while you begin to notice: There is a level of stress. And you notice it because it goes up and down. So what do you do? Well, what *did* you do when it went up, and what did you do when it went down? You begin to notice the connection between your actions in the present moment and the level of stress you experience. In this way, you develop more skill in the meditation: through this series of questions where you see the cause, the action that's raising the level of stress, and you let it go.

You also develop the factors that allow you to do this: the concentration that allows you to stick with this, even to stick with pain. This is another one of the things that makes a huge difference in how you experience the results of past actions: how you deal with pleasure and pain. If your mind gets overcome by these things, you're going to fall prey to lots of bad stuff from the past. But if you learn how to use pain as a guide to figuring out what the mind is doing right now, you're not wallowing in the pain. You're trying to figure it out. You become more aggressive toward the pain in trying to understand it, so that you're not just victimized by it.

The same with the pleasure: You try to use the pleasure. What kind of pleasure is good for the mind? You learn how to analyze that. What kind of pleasure is bad for the mind? Okay, learn how to develop the pleasure that's good, i.e., the pleasure that comes from concentration, the pleasure that comes from generosity and virtue. You develop these forms of pleasure so that they can put the mind in a place where it can observe things clearly.

So there are the two things: You develop the *brahma-viharas*, and you learn how not to be overwhelmed by pleasure and pain. Instead, you use them as tools. In this way, you mitigate the bad effects of past actions. In fact, you learn to see into the nature of action more and more clearly, so that you can actually come to the end of action. As you take apart all the various levels of fabrication and intentions in the mind in the present moment, you finally get to something that's unfabricated. That, the Buddha said, is the end of action.

So it's important that we learn how to understand the principle of karma and see how it plays out in our mediation, so that we don't have to come back and get killed again and get stolen from again – just keep killing and stealing and never get out of the cycle.

Understand that you have freedom of choice right now. The principle of karma – in terms of the Buddha's similes for it – is like the flowing of water. There are eddies. There are whirlpools. But you can divert the water; you divert it in the direction you want it to go. Sometimes it's coming along really strong, and it's hard to divert. But when you learn the proper skills, you can manage it. It's like those levees they've built along the Mississippi River. They've been able to wall in a whole river to keep it from spilling out in areas they don't want it to go. You can learn how to wall in your karma and divert it to the direction of release, liberation.

So you're not stuck in the gears of a machine. You're actually along a river here, and you want to divert your boat so that eventually you can get across the river. You know those levees they have across the Mississippi? They're not going to last forever. And your ability to deal with the river of your karma is not going to last forever, but you've got the ability now to learn the skills that can get you across.

You can use the current in the same way that, if you have a sailboat, you can use the wind to get across. You can use the current to get across the river. Learn how to divert it in the proper direction. It's when you understand the currents: That's how you can cross. That's what the teaching on karma is all about.