

The Karma Snake

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The Buddha once said that if you're going to grasp his Dhamma, you have to grasp it in the right way. It's like grasping a snake. If you grasp at the tail, it's going to bite you. If you take a forked stick and pin it down by its neck, then no matter how much it writhes around your arm, it's not going to harm you at all.

It's strange that the Dhamma would be like a snake, but the Dhamma that he taught, of course, is words. It came out of the Dhamma of his heart, which is something that lies beyond words. But putting things into words always runs into the problem that words are conventions, and conventions are easy for people to misunderstand and misuse.

This point applies particularly with the teaching on karma and rebirth. There are lots of ways you can misunderstand and misuse these teachings. But there are lots of ways also, when, if you grasp them properly, they're extremely helpful for the practice. They're issues that the Buddha admitted were not things that he could prove to people beforehand. The proof would lie in taking them as working hypotheses and applying them to your life: your practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment for the sake of putting an end to suffering. If you use the teachings for other reasons, trying to assign blame, say, outside, or deciding that there are certain people you're not going to help because they've obviously got bad karma, that's an abuse of the teaching.

Or if you're going to justify injustices in the world, that's an abuse of the teaching, too. Just because someone is poor or powerless right now doesn't mean that they only have the potential for poverty. You can't see all the past karma of even one person, let alone all the karma of all beings. There's a statement that floats around in Buddhist circles, that if you want to see someone's past actions, you look at their present state; if you want to see their future state, you look at their present actions. But that's much too simplistic. It's as if we had one karma account, like one bank account, and what you see right now is the running balance.

The Buddha's image is of a field in which lots of seeds are being planted all the time. Some seeds were planted a long time ago, and different seeds sprout at different rates. So what you see right now are simply the seeds that are currently sprouting. As for seeds that have already sprouted and stopped producing fruit, you don't see those. And the ones that are still there in the field, waiting to sprout, you don't see those, either. So just looking at someone's present

situation, you have no idea what all is in their karmic past. So it's no reason to justify abusing them or keeping them poor. Because after all, you've got lots of seeds in your karmic field that you don't know about, either.

So when you see someone else who's suffering from some bad seeds right now, the proper reaction is to have compassion. Because that's how you would want people to treat you when your bad seeds sprout. If your compassion is so exacting that you can give it only to people who are totally innocent of any wrongdoing, there will be nobody to receive your compassion. We have to have compassion for everybody, regardless of their past actions, because we're all in this together. And although it may seem as if the teachings on karma focus your attention a lot on the past and future, the Buddha would always bring the issue back into the present, because the future and past are very much intimately connected with what you're doing in the present.

It's not as if the present is something that stands outside of time, because what you're doing right now will have an impact not only now, but also into the future. So you want to think about that. It can have an impact for a long time to come: You want to think about that, too. It makes you a lot more careful.

The Buddha's test for a teaching is: Does it lead you to do skillful things? And the teaching on karma is very much one that focuses on the power of your actions right now. And the same with rebirth: That allows for your actions to have lots of ramifications and reverberations throughout time, so you want to be extremely careful about what you're doing.

At the same time, when you're focused on the present, you want to keep in mind lessons from things you've done in the past, heard in the past, picked up from the past. That's what mindfulness is all about. We're trying to remember what we can that will help us shape the present well, right now. We're looking at the present in the context of the past and future, so that we can shape the present in a good direction. That's what the teachings are for, particularly right here while you're meditating. Karma's extremely relevant to meditation, because you're doing something.

There are a lot of metaphysical issues the Buddha didn't touch: Is the world eternal? Is it infinite? Those are questions he didn't answer. Is your self the same as the body? Is your self something else? Didn't touch that either. Do you have a self? Do you not have a self? Didn't touch that one. Because, as he said, none of these questions are conducive to the path to the end of suffering. But the path to the end of suffering *is* a path of action. And if the Buddha's going to teach us how our actions can lead to the end of suffering, he's got to explain action. Is it real? Do you actually have choices? Do those choices lead to results? And what

kind of results? How far can those results go out? Those are questions he had to address.

Because you are doing something right now as you're meditating. It's not as if meditation is simply being without doing. Each time you choose to stay with the breath, that's an action. It's an intention. Each time you say, "It doesn't matter, I'm going to go someplace else": That would be another intention. So you're trying to ride herd on your intentions here. And remember what you experience right now is a combination of several factors, including past and present karma. So when a thought comes up in the mind, you have to ask yourself, "To what extent am I engaging in that thought now, and to what extent is that thought simply just the reverberation of something that I did in the past?" Especially when you find your mind overwhelmed with all kinds of thoughts coming in, it's good to remember that you've got some past actions that may be coming up now, and in cases like that you've got to ride out the storm, to find some corner of the mind and of the body where you can stay focused on the breath energy, and make that your spot.

It's like the huge windstorm we had here years back. The Santa Anas were supposed to calm down that night at midnight, but when midnight came, they actually got worse. Trees were falling down all over the place. What could you do? You couldn't go outside. You just had to hunker down and stay in your hut, wait until the storm had passed, and then you could come out. Meanwhile, it wasn't the time to go out and enjoy the orchard. Well, it's the same when there are lots of storms in your mind. You've got to find a safe place inside, and just stay with the in-and-out breath, with the word *buddho*, or whatever meditation word you find is helpful, and say, "This is it. This is what I've got to hold on to."

And as long as you don't engage those thought storms, you're not engaging in any present karma with them, they'll run out. Because that's the good thing about karma. It's also the scary thing about karma. The good thing is that bad karma can run out, but the scary thing is that good karma runs out, too. So, what are you going to do? You want to get on the path that leads you beyond karma. That's what the noble eightfold path is: the karma that leads to the end of karma. And the good news is that you can use karma to do that. Given that karma is a complex system, one of the features of a complex system is that you get out of it by working within the laws of the system. Those laws create the system, but they can also get you out of the system entirely. It's like the rules of mathematics. Certain equations you plug in different numbers, and suddenly you find that you've divided something by zero and then you're outside of the system entirely.

So you can use intentions to get beyond intentions. Because that's what nibbana is: beyond intentions. It's something deathless, something unconditioned. It's the only true happiness, the only reliable happiness, the only harmless happiness, and that's why you want to go there. Only, it's not a *there* to go to, but it is a dimension. And where do you find that? It's a kind of freedom, and it's right next to your freedom of choice here in the present moment.

That's another reason why we meditate: to get really familiar with what it means to have freedom of choice right here and now. Most people have this potential, but they've got it buried with so many misunderstandings that it's almost as if it were not there at all. But it is. It is there, even though it's buried, and what we're trying to do is uncover it.

Simply the fact that you have the power to choose one thought over another is an exercise of that freedom. So choose good thoughts. Choose ones that will be helpful. And if you can get a state of mind that doesn't have to think, okay, that's even better, because you can watch things very carefully in that stillness. But you want to keep focusing on where your freedom of choice is right now and use it in the best way possible. Because as I said, eventually as you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing, you find that your actions get more and more refined, until finally things open up. You see things very clearly in the present moment, and you realize that there's a way not to choose to do anything at all: not to choose to stay, not to choose to go. That's when you open up to a different kind of freedom. And that's the right use of the teaching on karma.

So, grasp it well. It has its convolutions, just like the snake coiling around your arm, but if you make sure you grasp it properly, they're not going to harm you at all. As the Buddha said, the workings of karma are so complex that if you tried to think about all of them you'd go crazy. So think about only the aspects that are really helpful: What are you doing right now? Is it skillful? What will its results be? What can you do to make sure that you get better and better at your skill? For instance, as you're staying with the breath, how you can get more stably concentrated, and more reliably concentrated, and not get worked up about the things that eat away at your concentration? One of the worst things you can do with concentration is be impatient about it. You want to be steady and consistent in your efforts, but you also need to have a lot of patience because you're dealing with something very complex in your mind.

Past karma, present karma: In the beginning it all seems mixed up in a big jumble. But as you stick with this thread of making up your mind to stay with one thing and carry it through, then you can pull out other threads as well, until the whole mass gets untangled.

So use the teaching for its proper purpose. It's a working hypothesis that really works.