

Old Kamma & New

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Ajaan Lee divides concentration practice into three factors: the right object, the right intention, and the right quality. The right object here is the breath, or whatever topic you've decided to focus on. You might be repeating the word *buddho*. Or you might be analyzing the body into elements. You might be analyzing it into its different parts. Whatever the topic you've decided on, try to stick with it. It's the stick-to-itiveness that makes the difference. Otherwise, it just becomes one more place for you to stop off in your daily rounds.

The right intention is your intention to stay here. That's the kamma in your meditation. We don't usually think about meditation as kamma, but that's what it is. It's good kamma. A lot of our connotations around the word kamma are negative. We think of kamma only when bad things happen, except for good parking kamma. But actually, every intention you have is a kind of kamma. So you try to make it skillful. The skillful intention now is to create a state of concentration in the mind and let go of everything else that comes in.

As for the right quality, you want to have a sense of ease and congeniality with your object. When you're working with the breath, remember that it's your friend. If you find yourself fighting with the breath, that's not the right attitude to have. You want the breath to be comfortable, because if the mind is going to stay here, having a sense of ease and comfort is really helpful. Even though there may be pains in some parts of the body, there are lots of parts of the body where you can develop a sense of ease and well-being—parts that you can make comfortable just by the way you breathe.

So, experiment for a while with the breathing. And remember that the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's also the energy flow throughout the body, and that connects with the in-and-out breath. So once there's a sense of ease in one spot in the body, see if you can let it flow into other spots.

For example, if there's a pain in some part of the body, think of the easeful energy going right through it. If there's a pain in your hip or in your knee, don't let the breathing stop at the hip or at the knee. Think of it going all the way through and out the foot. That loosens up a lot of the tension that tends to develop around pain.

So those are the three factors: the right intention, the right object, the right quality.

Now you find, particularly on the issue of intention, that other thoughts will come into the mind while you're sitting here. And they'll come unbidden. Think of those as old kamma. You're not responsible for them right now. In fact, how you deal with them right now is your new kamma. In this particular case, you want to learn how to say No.

Sometimes we get upset. Really strange things come into the mind, and we feel bad about it. Just remind yourself: "This is past stuff. What you're responsible for right now is what you do with what's coming in." The Buddha said to regard the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the intellect as old kamma. These are the spheres of sense by which old kamma's going to come at you. There's not much we can do about it, except that we can change the state of mind in the present moment so that what comes in from the past, if it's negative, doesn't have to have a huge impact on the mind.

To do that, the Buddha said to develop the mind in virtue—in other words, learning how to say No to things that you know are unskillful. You also want to develop it in discernment so that you can see where the act of identifying with these things is going to weigh you down. And you also want to see that it's unnecessary.

This is where the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self are really useful, even as you're just getting started in the practice. Anything that comes up that you know is going to be negative, just say, "Hey, this is inconstant. It's going to be here for a while and then it's going to go. If you latch on to it, it's going to weigh the mind down. So why do you want to identify with it? You're not required to identify with it." That right there is a huge opening to freedom.

We had someone come here the other day who had been molested as a child, and a lot of the memories of that were coming back to him and really weighing him down. I had to remind him, "Well, that's past kamma, the fact that these memories are coming back and you're having these reactions to them." That's old kamma. But what you do with these things, that's your new kamma. And that's what you're responsible for now. You don't have to carry around your past all the time.

So discernment is what allows you to see, "Okay, this is present kamma. That's past kamma. The present kamma is what matters." The Buddha talks about people coming in dark and going in dark, coming in light and going in light, coming in dark and going in light, or coming in light and going in dark. The coming has to do with your past kamma, good or bad. And he says it doesn't matter how you come. What matters is that you're going in light—in other words, you're doing good things right now. After all, we are the owners of our actions, so you just keep

pumping good kamma into the present moment. That's why we have that reflection before we meditate, to remind ourselves: This is good kamma, some of the best good kamma there is.

Three other qualities are also good for dealing with old kamma. One is training yourself not to be easily overcome by pain: learning to see the pain as something separate from your awareness. There will be pains in different parts of the body, of course. It's a natural and normal part of having a body. The potential for pain is always there. As Ajaan Suwat once said, you can take an iron stake and stick it in any part of the body and it's going to be painful. The fact that you've got a body leaves you open to the possibility of pain.

So you have to learn how to live with pain and not get pushed around by it. If there's a pain in the knee, you occupy the area around that but not in it. You don't have to go into the pain yet. And as I said earlier, try to make the area on both sides of the pain—both the side that's closer to you and the side that's further away—filled with good breath energy. Keep reminding yourself you don't have to lay claim to the pain.

Ajaans in Thailand talk about learning how to separate your awareness out from the pain. You want to see awareness as one thing; pain as something else; the body as something else. The body's just elements. Your sense of the body sitting right here is composed of the four properties of earth, water, wind, and fire. Pain is not the same thing as any of those four properties. Can you learn to see it that way? Can you learn to un-glom the glom? When you can deal with pain in that way, then negative things coming at you in any way are not such a big deal. You learn how to step aside.

Another quality that's useful is not being overcome by pleasure. We learn this through the concentration. All too often, you hear that you should avoid the pleasure of concentration because it's really seductive and it's going to get in the way of your insight. But that's not the case. You have to learn some important things about pleasure if you're going to keep the mind well concentrated. And the first thing is that if you drop the breath to go to the pleasure, you're going to ruin the concentration. It'll be nice for a while, it actually may be very pleasant, but it's like trying to sit on a cloud. It's all very fuzzy and there's no real substance there. But if you stay with the breath throughout the body, then even if the breath gets still, you can be with the stillness. If you can see it, the stillness is one thing; the pleasure is something else. You don't go trying to wallow in the pleasure. That's how you train your mind not to be overcome by pleasure.

And then finally the Buddha says to learn how to dwell with an unlimited awareness. This relates to the brahmaviharas. You want your goodwill to be all

around. You want your ability to feel compassion to be all around. You want your ability to feel empathetic joy to be all around. And the same with your equanimity: all around. In other words, you want to be able to tap into these things whenever you need them. In cases where some people are difficult, learn how to have goodwill for them regardless. As for the difficult things they do, learn how to have equanimity about them. Regardless. When good things happen to people you don't like, learn how to have equanimity. When bad things happen to people you do like, learn how to have equanimity. Be able to draw on these things whenever you need them, because we live in a world where good things happen to people we like and bad things happen to people we like; bad things happen to people we don't like and good things happen to people we don't like. If you don't want your mind to be driven around by those things, you have to learn how to develop equanimity. And if you're going to be dealing with people you like and don't like, you have to have goodwill for them so that you can trust yourself.

So these four brahmaviharas are attitudes you want to be able to tap into when you need them, whichever one is appropriate. As the Buddha said, when your mind is like this, it's like a wealthy person. If a wealthy person is charged with a two-dollar fine, it's no problem at all. But if you can't develop your mind like this, it's like being someone who has only two or three cents to his name. When the two-dollar fine is imposed, they're going to throw you in jail because you can't pay it.

It's the same way with the kamma coming in from the past. Bad stuff comes in from the past. If you've got this expansive mind state, it'll hardly make a ripple. If the mind is narrow; lacks discernment; lacks virtue; is easily overcome by pleasure or pain and is very narrow in its likes and dislikes; letting its likes and dislikes take it over, that same bad kamma is going to drive you around. In other words, it's going to push you in a direction where you're going to be making more bad kamma in the present moment.

So when you have this expansive attitude of wealth in your meditation, then when bad kamma comes you can just let it drop at your feet. It's like those arrows that they say that Mara shot at the Buddha prior to his awakening. They never even came close to the Buddha. They fell to the ground and turned into flowers. In your case, the bad kamma may not turn into flowers, but at least the arrows don't hit you. You're not making yourself a target. You don't pick up the arrows and stab yourself with them. That's the important thing.

So as you're sitting here and things come up in the meditation, say, "Well that's just old kamma." Plunk. Just let it fall on the ground. Even if it's a shower of arrows, let them all fall on the ground. You've got your intention here in the

present moment to stay with the breath, to develop these factors: the right object, the right intention, and the right quality. That's your refuge right here. That's what repels the arrows.

So always keep this distinction between new kamma and old kamma in mind, because it makes a huge difference in how you deal with things coming up in the mind.

We talk about the committee of the mind. Well, a lot of the members of the committee are just old kamma. You want your skillful new kamma to be the chairman of the meeting who can decide who's speaking out of order and who has the right and who doesn't have the right to vote on what you're going to be doing right now. As long as mindfulness, alertness, and ardency can play the role of chairmen, then no matter what comes in, it doesn't have to hit you. And you don't have to pick it up. It doesn't have to drive you around. You're in charge.