

## *The Karma of Narratives*

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It's often thought that meditation is all about not thinking, but actually the Buddha said that one of the purposes of meditation is to learn how to think whatever thoughts you want to think and not think the ones you don't want to think. That involves mastering two skills. One is simply the skill of learning to turn off a thought when it's bad, and the other is the ability to develop your discernment as to which thoughts really are worth thinking and which ones are not.

For the time being, put everything aside, every thought except the thought for what you're going to be doing here as you meditate: sticking with the breath. After all, directed thought is one of the factors of the first jhana, so you've got to direct your thoughts to the breath and you've got to evaluate what you're doing. It's in the evaluation that you develop discernment, so you're trying to figure out how to get the mind out of everything that's not related to the breath right now. That's the purpose of your thinking right now.

Try to make the breath as interesting as possible. Think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the whole energy flow in the body. Notice how that energy flow feels. How do you sense it? Does it feel like a flow or does it feel more static? Start with what you've got. Don't force it too much. In fact, the only forcing you can do is to relax. Wherever there's tension in the body, that's a sign that things are not flowing well, so just tell yourself, "Relax." Go through the body section by section until there's a greater sense of connectedness in the body, and then think about maintaining that.

The problem is the other thoughts that come in unrelated to the breath. For the time being, you want to put those aside. Learn to see them as not interesting. This is why we have the reflections beforehand on aging, illness, and death. A lot of the things that we could be thinking about are all subject to aging, illness, and death. They're all going to end, so the question is: Why bother thinking about them?

Then there's the reflection on karma. This is really helpful in getting a handle on your thoughts, because we do bring a lot of narratives along with us. When you're dealing with your narratives, think about how the Buddha dealt with his narratives on the night of his awakening. In his first knowledge, he was able to remember not only issues in this lifetime, but also issues going back many, many, many lifetimes: hundreds and thousands of eons, he said—where he was born,

what he looked like, what his name was, his experience of pleasure and pain, what his food was in that lifetime and then how he died. That was the story for each of those lives: birth, appearance, name, pleasure, pain, food, death. And in those pleasures and pains, you can imagine that there were a lot of issues that he could have picked up on and gotten snagged on, but he didn't.

But the question still was, what was the pattern underlying all this? That's when he went into the second knowledge, seeing all beings in the universe passing away and then being reborn in line with their karma, realizing that karma was what made all the difference. Actions pushed people up, pushed people down, depending on whether they were acting on skillful intentions, whether their intentions were informed by right view or wrong view. It was karma that determined everything.

Then, from that larger point of view, he was able to focus in on the present moment and look at the four noble truths as they were showing themselves in the present moment. Where is the stress right now? What's causing the stress right now? What can be done right now to put an end to stress?

But notice that pattern. He got out of his narratives by thinking in terms of karma. And so we can apply thoughts of karma to the narratives we bring along with us.

As you sort through them, on the one hand you can look at the content of the stories in terms of karma. The problem with the principle on karma is that there's a lot that we don't know about our past actions, so we have to take it as a working hypothesis that some of the bad things that happened to us in this lifetime are the result of karma that we've done in previous lifetimes. You can try to think of it in terms of a much larger arena than just one lifetime. That helps take a lot of the sting out of it, because the stories of our lives are many and they go up and they go down in all kinds of directions.

As the Buddha said, you see someone who's endowed with all the pleasures you can imagine and you can tell yourself you've been there. This is nothing strange to you. You can see someone who's really miserable, sick, poor, without any help, without any family: You've been there too. Different genders, different races, different species, all kinds of variations: We've all been through these things. And against that larger canvas, a lot of the particulars of a story in this lifetime don't seem so overwhelming.

So the principle of karma helps you look at the content of the story and get it into perspective, a perspective where you can see that the issues of the stories are not worth getting worked up about.

But the teaching on karma also it helps you look at the process of story-making. It too is a type of karma. When you're thinking about an old issue, sometimes you actually think it through and come to some sort of a resolution, and that's useful karma. Other times, you just sit there stewing. That's not skillful karma.

So when you find yourself getting involved in a narrative, you want to ask yourself, "Is this going to go someplace good or is it going to go someplace bad? What is my intention with regard to the narrative right now? Am I going to try to find some resolution so that I can learn how to put the whole issue aside or do I just want to keep going back over and over again the things I did wrong to other people or the things other people did wrong to me, or the pleasures I used to have and I'm missing them now?" Like picking at a scab on an old wound: Is that what you want to do? Or do you want to learn how to look at these things in a way that helps you put them aside, have some insight into what you may have done wrong in the past so that you can learn from it? Because one of the best uses of going back through issues in the past is learning: Where was your mistake? How did it happen? What could you have done otherwise? That's useful thinking.

There was a medical school that was trying to figure out how to sort through and select the best candidates from all the various people who were applying to learn how to be brain surgeons. As you can imagine, the people who apply to be brain surgeons all have very good grades. But as the school realized that just because someone has good grades doesn't mean that he or she is going to be a good surgeon, so they had to work through what questions to ask at the interview that would help to ferret out the people who would be potentially good and the people who would be potential disasters. And they landed on two.

The first question was: Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently? If the person couldn't remember a mistake, then the person was out, because the assumption is that not that we never make mistakes. We make mistakes, but the important thing is learning how to recognize a mistake. And the follow-up question was, if they talked about a mistake: What would you do differently so as not to make that mistake again? And if the person hadn't thought about what to do differently, that person was out, too.

So when you look through your old narratives, you can ask yourself: "What did I do that was wrong and how would I do it differently the next time around?" This way, you're not beating yourself up over your past mistakes. You're actually learning from them.

This is how the Buddha taught Rahula, his son. You do your best, when you're planning an action, not to intend to cause harm. But then as you're actually

engaged in the action, you look and see what are results are coming about. If you see any harm, stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue with the action. Then, afterwards, you look for the long-term results, and if you see that you did harm, you resolve not to repeat the mistake and then you go talk it over with someone else who's more experienced on the path so that you can get some idea of how not to repeat that mistake. Don't let yourself get down on yourself for the mistakes, but you also resolve not to repeat them. That kind of reflection on the past is useful.

So you want to develop the skill to learn how to think and how not to think. If you find yourself getting entangled in an unskillful thought that part of the mind really likes, you have to be able to pull yourself out. This is why we spend so much time putting aside distractions as we meditate, as we focus on the breath. It's like when they teach you boxing. The first thing they teach you is how to pull out of a difficult situation, how to back out without exposing yourself in a way that would make it easier for the opponent to hit you. Here we're learning how to pull out of thoughts, regardless of the thought, in a defensive way. Whatever comes up right now, no matter how good or fascinating or interesting or whatever it is, if it's not related to the breath, you don't want it.

At the same time, you're using your powers of observation to see what you're doing, what you're doing well, what you're not doing well, and developing an attitude you might call professional. In other words, when you see a mistake, you don't beat yourself up over the mistake. You just try not to repeat it. You try to compensate for it. You're using your powers of judgment in the same way that a craftsman like a carpenter would use. The carpenter's shaving with a planer, and all of the sudden "Whoops!" the planer does something he didn't mean it to do. He learns how to compensate.

You use your powers of judgment as you would on a work in progress. Because our path, for everyone here, *is* a work in progress. If you see it in that way, then painful narratives can lose a lot of their pain and thinking about them can be useful. You learn when to think about them and when you don't need to think about them. And you're able to carry that through.

Those are some of the skills that we're trying to master as we meditate.