

Cooking with Kamma

June 20, 2018

The Buddha compared kamma to seeds planted in a garden or in a field. Each of us has a huge field of seeds: some of which were planted just a moment ago, some of which are being planted right now, and a lot of which were planted a really long time ago—so long ago that we can't remember: in another lifetime, other lifetimes in the past. It's like those seeds of the chaparral plants that can lie dormant for many, many years and then give rise to a plant only when the conditions are right. So when you look at kamma coming up—and it's coming up all the time, your past kamma—you see it right here as you're meditating.

You make up your mind to do one thing and then something else comes in, totally unintended. Your intention to stay with the breath, that's a kind of kamma in the present moment. But then these other habits that pull the mind back: A part of them come from your past kamma, the part that just appears on its own. And then you've got the question, are you going to stay with the breath or are you going to go to the new topic? That becomes your present kamma: whatever you decide to do. So we're making kamma all the time. We've been making it many, many times.

So we have to learn how to manage our kamma field, because it's from the plants growing in our kamma field that we create the food we feed on in the present moment. On the one hand, you want to look at the ingredients over which you have some control, but you have to realize that your control isn't total. This means that you have to look more at your skill as a cook. The really skilled cooks are the ones who can take almost any ingredient and make good food out of it.

This is what we're learning as we're meditating—to be good cooks: how to pay attention to things that we want to pay attention to, how to look at them from the right angle, what the Buddha calls appropriate attention, so that when something comes up, we're not just complaining about the bad things that are coming up, but we figure, "Well, what can be done with this? How can this be turned into good food?"

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this a lot: people's tendency to complain. You look in the Buddha's description of the path. Right complaining is not one of the factors. But right resolve is. Right resolve means being resolved that whatever comes up, you're going to treat it skillfully. Another factor is right effort: the

desire to get rid of anything unskillful that's going to come up in the mind and to encourage skillful things. Those are your cooking methods.

The prime example of what we have to cook is what the Buddha calls the ways of the world. There's gain and loss; status, loss of status; praise, criticism; pleasure, pain. We all like the gain and status and praise and pleasure, but we can't have them without the other side as well. So you have how to learn how to look at these things in such a way that you don't get carried away by the positive things or upset by the negative ones.

Ajaan Lee talks about how status can be bad for you. You tend to forget yourself. Whereas loss of status can be good: You find out who your true fiends are. When people criticize you: If the criticism is true, then you've learned something about yourself that you may not have known otherwise. If it turns out to be false, then you've learned something about the person who made the criticism. You're developing a skill.

The same principle applies not only outside, but also inside. As you're sitting here meditating, you could sit here in a way that makes you miserable for the hour. And I've known people who've done that. Or you can find a way to create a sense of bliss. Even though there may be pains in the body, you look at the different sensations in your body right now. You've got quite a range. It's not just that everything is pain or everything is pleasure. It's usually a mixture, together with a lot of neutral things.

So the question is: Where do you focus the mind? How do you focus it? And then when a sense of pleasure comes from that focus, how do you make use of it? Ajaan Lee recommends letting it spread around the body. Once it's spread around the body, then maintain that sense of full-body awareness, full-body pleasure. At that point, you've got three of the four establishing of mindfulness, right there. You've got body, filled with a feeling pleasure and filled with awareness. These are all things that we have already. You just learn how to make use of them and turn them into your concentration food: the sense of rapture, the sense of well-being that comes when the mind gets settled down like this.

The Buddha describes this in his analogy of being a meditator as being like a good cook who learns to read his master's desires. Sometimes the master will say out loud what he likes, what he doesn't like. Other times he doesn't. He just doesn't eat certain things and he eats a lot of other things. The good cook will notice that and provide more of what the master seems to like. In the same way, you have to look and see: What does your mind like right now? And then create a lot of that. You've got the potentials here, all this food coming in from your

garden. The question is, what are you going to make of it? You can make it a basis for concentration. You can make it a basis for insight.

When unpleasant things come, you can ask yourself, “Why am I suffering from this?” All too often, when there’s a pain or something you dislike, the natural reaction is to suffer. But, as the Buddha’s pointing out in the four noble truths, the suffering’s not necessary. There’s the suffering in the three characteristics, which is in the way that things change. But that, he says, isn’t the suffering that weighs the mind down. The suffering that weighs the mind down comes from craving and clinging.

Craving and clinging he defines in different ways. There’s delight and there’s passion, which can take all kinds of forms. So what form are they taking in your mind right now, telling you that a certain unpleasant event has made you suffer, or a certain physical pain is making you suffer? Learn how to separate these things out and see to what extent the pain is coming from past kamma and to what extent the suffering is coming from your present kamma. After all, without the clinging and the craving, there would be no suffering. That’s how arahants live. They still have their seeds in their kamma fields that are sprouting, but they’ve learned how to fix them in ways that they don’t have to suffer at all.

So the suffering is optional. Pain is random and can be explained through the principle of kamma, but that doesn’t really explain all that much. In other words, exactly which act in which lifetime gave rise to this particular pain right now? The Buddha said if you try to trace that out, you’d go crazy. The important principle is: What are you doing right now? What are you making of the raw materials you’ve got? That’s the part of kamma that he explains in a lot of detail. All of his meditation instructions are just that: cooking instructions—what to think about; how to think about it; where to focus; what to do with pain; what to do with pleasure. These are all things that we learn as we’re sitting here practicing.

So remember that the teaching on kamma is very closely related to what you’re doing right now as you’re meditating. And remember, too, that meditation is a doing. Sometimes you hear people say that it’s not a doing; it’s just “being.” Well, what you *are* is the result of what you *do*. It’s the result of your intentions. So learn how to shape your intentions well with appropriate attention so that whatever comes up, your first question is, “What good use can be made of this?” And use your powers of observation and your powers of ingenuity to come up with something good to eat.