

The Anatomy of the Present

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When the Buddha talks about staying with the present moment or being in the present moment, he doesn't tell you to just stay with staying or being. He's constantly saying that there's work to be done there. You don't know how much time you have, but you do know you have this present moment, so you focus on the work you can do right now.

This implies, of course, that the present moment is not totally determined by the past. If it were, you wouldn't be making any decisions. You wouldn't have any choice as to what to do with the present. You'd just be sitting here watching things that are inevitably happening. You wouldn't have any control. Now, some meditation methods *will* have you tell yourself, "Okay, whatever comes up is coming up from past karma. I'll just be with that and be okay." But those methods aren't the Buddha's. The Buddha was very much opposed to that idea that the present is fully determined by the past.

Ordinarily, he wasn't the sort of person who would go out and argue with people, but there were two issues over which he *would* seek people out and ask them, "Did you really teach this?" and then point out the dangers of those teachings. One was the teaching of determinism: that what you're experiencing right now is totally shaped by the past—either by things you did in the past, or by what some creator god did in the past, or by impersonal fate. The other dangerous teaching was the teaching of randomness: that there is no pattern of cause and effect operating in the universe. Things are just happening by chance, so you grab whatever good things happen to come your way while you can. In both cases, the Buddha said, you're making it impossible to assume any responsibility for the choices you're making in the present moment.

If what you're doing right now were determined by something done in the past, then people who kill and steal and cheat would not really be responsible for what they're doing right now. And they couldn't change their ways. But the whole point of the Buddha's teachings is that you *can* change your ways. You're acting in ways that are causing suffering, but you can learn how to act in ways that don't. In fact, the Buddha saw it as a teacher's primary duty to give you a basis for deciding what should and should not be done. If everything were predetermined, or totally random, even the idea of "should be done" or "should not be done" wouldn't make any sense.

We see the power of the present moment in his analogy of the lump of salt. He said that you may have bad karma coming in from the past, but think of it as being like a big lump of salt. If you were to put the salt in a little tiny cup of water, you couldn't drink the water because the salt would be too much for the amount of water. But if you put that same lump of salt into a large, clean, clear river, you could still drink the water in the river because the amount of water is so much greater than the salt.

The water here stands for your state of mind in the present moment. The large river represents a mind that is developing thoughts of unlimited good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. It's developed in virtue and developed in discernment. And it's trained so as to not be overcome easily by either pleasure or pain. When your mind has these qualities, it's like the large river, so that whatever past karma you've done in the past doesn't really pain you that much. This gives you a sense of how things are not totally determined by the past. They're determined largely also by your state of mind in the present moment.

In fact, the Buddha actually gives priority to the present moment, and especially to what the mind is doing right now. There are some statements to this effect scattered around the Canon. It's interesting that they're rarely discussed. One is the pair of verses that starts the Dhammapada: "The mind is the forerunner of all things." This means that everything you experience is shaped first by the mind. That's quite a radical statement, as is another statement, that all dhammas, all things you experience through the senses, are rooted in desire. It's because of your desires that you have these experiences. So you're not simply on the receiving end of experience. The mind is not just a byproduct of physical processes. The mind, through its desires, is actually the agent making things happen.

You see this in the Buddha's analysis of the present moment. When he explains in dependent co-arising how suffering arises, the list of factors leading up to suffering is quite long. And halfway down the list is your experience of contact at the senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. Sensory contact is where we tend to locate the present moment, but the Buddha is saying that this aspect of the present moment is shaped by a lot of factors that go prior to it in the present, including the factors and sub-factors of fabrication, intention, and attention. These are the things that prime you either to suffer or not to suffer from what happens at the senses. And all of these preliminary factors have a purpose. They don't just sit there. They aim in a certain direction.

For instance, when the Buddha talks about the role of fabrication, he lists three types. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication, your feelings and the mental labels you apply to things. He also says that we shape our experience of the rest of the aggregates through fabrication, and that fabrication does it for a purpose. We take the raw material coming in from the past and we shape it into a feeling or into a perception because we have purposes in using these things. So our purposes are what determine how we're going to experience things.

And as I said, one of these prior factors is intention. That intention is your present karma. What's coming in through your senses comes from your past karma. Sensory contact comes after intention in the list, which means that your present karma is actually prior to your past karma as you experience it. There's another passage where the Buddha equates that past karma with your experience of the world. We know the world through the senses. So even our experience of the world is shaped by our intentions and desires.

The question is: How is this possible? How can present karma come before past? Well, look at the point of view that the Buddha is coming from. He's coming from an analysis of the present moment as it's experienced *in* the present moment. He's not looking at the present moment as it fits into the narratives of history or time, or into the confines of the world. In fact, for him, the narratives and the world are things that are contained in the present moment.

After all, this was the point of view from which he gained his awakening. His third knowledge, where he was looking at things purely in the present moment in terms of the intentions and views that shape the present moment, came to him after he had gained two other knowledges: the first, in which he saw his previous lifetimes; and the second, in which he saw all beings dying and being reborn throughout the universe based on their actions. Those first two knowledges were expressed in terms of narratives of worlds and beings, whereas the third knowledge, in the focusing on the present moment, was not a narrative, and had none of those terms at all.

He asked, "How do you become a being?" It's based on your desire. "How do you understand the world?" It's through how you experience things at the senses. And those experiences of the senses are shaped by your desires. The question then is: How do we take on an identity as a being? How do we shape the world? That's the process the Buddha called becoming. It encompasses worlds and identities in worlds, but it happens here in the present moment. The present moment is what you should take as the context for your understanding of time, your understanding of worlds, or your understanding of beings, including yourself. The present moment comes first. When you take that perspective, then you begin to see that if you can change your desires in the present moment, it's going to have a huge impact on your experience of the world.

You don't have to define yourself in the confines of the world as other people are defining it for you. You don't have to define yourself in the confines of your old narratives. You can step out of the world. You can step out of the narratives, by stepping into the present moment and looking at these things as processes rooted in your desires.

Then the question becomes: Which desires are skillful and which ones are not? That's where the work is done. That's our work in the present moment: to look at our desires and ask, "Are they really leading us in the direction we want?" We all want happiness. Are our desires working in line with that overarching desire? Or are they working at cross-purposes?

The Buddha's analysis of the present gives us a much larger scope for how we can change the way we act, change the way we shape our world, change our sense of ourselves so we don't have to be limited by our old ways of defining ourselves or the ways other people define us. There's a lot that can be done right here. But, as the Buddha said, we don't know how much time we have to do this work, yet we *do* know that we have the present moment. So let's make the best use of what we've got.