

The Power of Present Karma

October 6, 2021

When the Buddha gained his second knowledge on the night of his awakening, it answered an important question. He'd seen in his first knowledge that death was followed by rebirth and that people can change from one lifetime to the next. Some people back in his time had claimed that whatever you were in this lifetime you'd be in the next lifetime: Animals would continue being animals; people, people; brahmans, brahmans. But he'd seen that he had changed, going from the highest to the lowest and then lowest to the highest levels of the cosmos, and the question that came was: What determined the changes?

In the second knowledge, he realized that it was your actions. But he remembered why he had come to this knowledge. Many other people, on arriving there, got interested in the question, "What is it that stays the same from one lifetime to the next? Who or what is it that gets reborn?" And they got stuck right there. He realized that the way out was to look at the actions, and he looked very carefully.

As he said later, he knew of people who'd seen that someone did good in a particular lifetime and then were born in a good place; others did bad and were reborn in a bad place. So they came up with a very deterministic view that whatever you did, good or bad, was going to determine where you would go in the next lifetime.

But there had also been other people who had seen the opposite: Someone did something really good in this lifetime but then went to a bad place, and vice versa. Those were the people who said that action had no power at all.

So who was right? He had to look more carefully, and he noticed that, in the cases where someone did bad and then went to a good location, it was because either they had had good kamma prior to that, or good kamma after that, or, at the moment of death, they developed right view.

Similarly with the opposite: Someone who'd done good may have had bad kamma in the past, bad kamma after that, or developed wrong view at death and so that person went to a bad destination.

But, even in the cases where people did good and went to a good destination, just the one act of goodness was not enough. It had to be supported by other good acts and by right view at death. The same with people who had done something bad and went to a bad destination: The act had to be seconded by wrong view at death.

That showed him the power of present actions: that the attitude of the mind at one moment of death could counteract a lot of other things. It wouldn't erase them—a moment of right view does not erase the bad things you've done in the past—but it can help you avoid some of the immediate consequences of bad things, and it opens the opportunity for you to practice so that you can be like *Āṅgulimāla*: You can gain an escape from your past bad kamma through your practice.

That's what inspired the Buddha to look into the present moment in his third knowledge, to see what is it about choices made in the present moment that have such power.

This is why we're looking at the present moment right now. For a lot of us, the present moment doesn't seem to have much power. But think about it: You're sitting here and you could make yourself absolutely miserable or make yourself very happy, just by the attitude you decide to adopt. If you have habits that are unskillful, you can change those habits. There *is* that element of freedom—there's that element of totally new input into the process, right here, right now. So, what are you putting in?

Try to put in the intention to understand the mind, to understand its actions. The best way to do that is to get the mind still, so that it can watch and see what you can make out of the potentials that are here.

There's that passage where the Buddha talks about the potentials for the different factors for awakening. He doesn't get very specific. In some cases, he says, "There's the potential for rapture," or, "There's the potential for equanimity," or, "potential for stillness." In some cases, you can figure out what these potentials are from other passages in the Canon. Like the potential for stillness: You try to bring the mind to the establishings of mindfulness. But in other cases, it's up to you to find out where those potentials are. Still, the fact that he reminds you that they are there: That's important. That alerts you to possibilities. You want to keep that in mind.

So, even when your defilements are roaring in your ears and churning up your stomach, don't let them have everything. You have the power to make a change. Is there someplace in you right now where there's the potential for stillness? Someplace in the mind? Someplace in the body?

Ajaan Lee likes to focus attention on the spot where the diaphragm meets with the breastbone. Of course, that's right next to your heart, which may be pounding, but it's not strange that there can be quiet spots right next to active spots.

Still, wherever you find there's an opportunity for stillness, go there. I knew a woman one time who said that no matter where she focused in her body to be

aware of the breath, it seemed like she would mess up the breath energy, except for one spot, which was the base of the spine.

So find a spot that's still—there's the potential there—and then bring what the Buddha calls appropriate attention to it. In other words, try to figure out where it fits in the scheme of the four noble truths.

What's going on in the mind? There are things, he said, that you want to see as inconstant, stressful, not-self. A lot of your thoughts are just that. He says, "Learn to see them as alien, an emptiness," to take some of their heavy reality away.

At the same time, you want to develop factors of the path. So which factors are you able to put together right now? As long as you can hold on to right view, you've got the potential right there. That becomes the potential for right resolve; right resolve becomes the potential for right speech; and so on down the line. Which may be one of the reasons why, when the Buddha was talking about the power of the mind at death, he focused on right view. As long as you hold on to that, you're safe, because that will alert you to the good potentials in the mind, or the fact that you should be looking for the potentials, and you don't just give up.

Because that's a really sad thing: Most people, when they get really exhausted—aging, illness, and death come and they drag them down—just throw in the towel. You should always be confident that there's *something* you can do.

There's a passage in the Canon where two old brahmins—120 years old—come to see the Buddha and they say, "You know, we've never done anything meritorious in our lives."

And the Buddha says, "Quick, do something meritorious. Give something away. Do something. Don't just complain!"

The forest ajans make a lot of this. There is no Right Complaining in the path. Because, what is complaining? It's basically giving up—saying, "Well, there's nothing I can do. I'm just going to sit here and moan about what I don't like." There's always a potential someplace. Try to find what goodness you can in the mind, what goodness you can find in the body, and see what you can do to make the most of it. The potentials are there.

Think of Ajaan Lee with the breath. He'd learned a little bit about the breath energies in the body when he was in India, but it was when he was really cornered that he began to make the most of them. He was up in a jungle in northern Thailand. He'd walked three days into a spot where he was planning to spend the Rains retreat and, shortly after he arrived, he had a heart attack. He had no medicine; there was no doctor. The only way he was going to survive was if he could pull himself together to the point where he could have the strength to walk out for another three days at the end of the Rains.

As he explains in his version of a story that comes from the commentary about a man condemned to death, the man said, “When people die, where do they die? They die right at the breath.” So he focused on the breath. That’s basically what Ajaan Lee did. If he was going to die, it would be because his breath was going to run out. What could he do to make sure that his breath didn’t run out? What could he do to make the most of it?

He ended up finding the method that we’ve been practicing: working with the breath energies. He was able to pull himself together and, at the end of the Rains, walked out of the jungle.

So the breath may not seem promising—just in, out; in, out. In fact, one of his fellow ajaans once questioned him about this: “What is there to see in the breath? There’s nothing but in and out.” And, as Ajaan Lee told him, “If that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.”

But it’s not all there is, which means you have to look again. If you hold in mind the possibility that there’s more to it, you’ll find that there is. Don’t let your narrow views keep you confined. You have to learn how to step out of them.

That’s some of the mystery of the present moment: Not everything in the present moment is determined by the past; you have to have some input from the mind right now.

You look into dependent co-arising: The intentions of the present moment come prior to sensory contact. Now, sensory contact, as the Buddha said, is old kamma coming at you. This means that you actually experience your present kamma before you experience your past kamma. But we pay so little attention to it—because we’re more interested in the things coming in through the senses—that we don’t really realize what we’re contributing.

So, try to gain a sense of what you’re bringing. You have some preconceived notions, you have some perceptions, you have some intentions. Air them out. Open them up.

Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He could have fallen in line with what everybody else had done with that knowledge, but he asked questions from a different angle. In a way, he asked the obvious question—if action is what makes a difference, then focus on action; if the way you pay attention makes a difference, focus on the way you pay attention.

Try to get down to the nuts and bolts of how the mind puts experience together, and you find that you can put something really good together with those nuts and bolts: You can put together the whole path. You’ve been fabricating your experience all the way up to now; try to fabricate it so that it fits in with the different factors of the path.

And remember that right view is not just seeing things in terms of the four noble truths or knowing the duties, but it's also remembering that the whole purpose of this is to find the deathless. That's your motivation. Right motivation is implied there.

Just like the Buddha on the night of his awakening: It's because he kept his motivation in line with his original motivation—which was to find what was not going to age, grow ill, or die—that he got past the trap that had trapped other people with that second knowledge. In the same way, you're here because you've been suffering and you want to find a way out, so that you're no longer trapped.

Being convinced that there's a way out opens the possibility. If you're convinced that there's no way out, then there's nothing you're going to do. You're trapped. You're trapping yourself. But, if you're convinced there's a way out, it opens the possibility that you'll find it. There are many people who've gone before you and say that there is. So it's there to be found.