

## *Karma Storms*

*February 17, 2022*

We come to a quiet place like this and we like to think that our minds will settle down right away. There's nothing outside to disturb us, but the problem is that we come with our karmic baggage: habits of mind that we can see in the present moment, and also old karma that we can't see where it's coming from but nevertheless shows up—old karma in this lifetime, old karma from previous lifetimes. After all, we *are* in the human realm. This is a realm where people come when they have mixed karma, both good and bad. So we can't be surprised when the bad karma comes up: You sit down and all of a sudden you're assailed by all kinds of thoughts. You can call them "karma storms."

I had a student one time who for years wanted to go on tudong out in the forest and be alone. Finally, after a couple of years, he managed it, and for the first couple of months out in the forest his mind was a total mess. He realized that part of dealing with the mess was going to require learning an attitude of patience. He said, "This may be a *parami* I don't want to work on but it looks like it's the one I have to work on." So he learned some patience. He learned some endurance.

Endurance doesn't mean just putting up with things. It means finding something to do in the meantime, both in terms of finding a source of pleasure inside someplace, and remembering that anything that's coming up in the mind over which you have no control is past karma. This is what the result of past bad karma is like. Do you want to keep on creating more of that? No. So you figure out what good karma you can do in the meantime. It might be little things like being more generous, being stricter with yourself about the precepts, or figuring out something to do with your mind in the meantime, giving it someplace to hold on. Think of a storm coming through, and you have to find a place to hide out. You can't go outside until the storm is past.

Like explorers in Antarctica: They got in their tents when a big storm blew up. They couldn't go outside. They had to stay inside. Even though they wanted to walk how many miles that particular day, it wasn't going to happen. So they found the best shelter they could find and just stayed there, hid out. That's part of what you've got to do.

But part of endurance is also learning how to think in positive ways. What good things *can* you do right now? One important thing is just learning how to have the right attitude.

In my own case, I got to Wat Dhammasathit, got to practice with Ajaan Fuang, finally got up onto the mountain behind the monastery, and I was all alone on the mountain. All of a sudden, thoughts of my childhood, thoughts of my teenage years, thoughts of my college years came and assailed my mind.

Learning to think about it in terms of karma really helped me analyze the issues from the past. It helped to depersonalize many of the issues. In a lot of the cases where I felt I'd been a victim of unfair treatment, I told myself, "Well, who knows? Karma's not keeping score only in this lifetime." In fact, there's no beginning to the keeping of scores. There's no place where you can trace back and say, "This person was the first to set things in motion," or "This person was the first to respond in an excessive way." When there's no beginning point, the score becomes meaningless. That helps to depersonalize things. It takes a lot of the sting out of things that you're thinking about.

But also, you have to look in terms of the karma of the present moment. What are you doing right now? What good things can you do right now? You may not be able to do what you want with your mind: You read about all the stages of concentration you'd like to try out—the first jhana, second jhana, third, fourth, up through the formless ones—and yet you have trouble staying with the breath at all. Well, find a theme that you *can* stay with. If you can't be with the whole body, find one small part of the body and stay there.

Think about your mind as being like a committee. There are *lots* of members in there. Some of the members may be totally out of control, the whole meeting of the committee may be in chaos, but try to find one member of the committee that you can identify with, that you feel safe identifying with, and see what you can do with that member.

The Buddha's advice is when you try to direct your mind to the topic that you want to think about and it won't stay there, you think about the drawbacks of going with whatever thoughts that are pulling you away. But sometimes that doesn't work. The next one is simply to say, "Okay, those things are there, but I'm not going to pay attention to them." That requires that you have some little corner where you can go to hide out and wait till the storm blows over.

This principle applies in meditation; it applies in life in general. You're minding your own business living a perfectly decent life, and all of a sudden something comes up and hits you upside the head karmically. You have to keep reminding yourself: The fact that you've done bad things in the past doesn't mean you're a bad person *now*.

A lot of people are embarrassed to think about the fact that they may have committed some pretty bad karma in the past. But we're *all* in that boat, simply that some people's karma is showing now and other people's is going to show later. Because you can't look into your karmic account and figure out what the running balance is or when good things are going to come, when bad things are going to come.

The Buddha's image is more like a field. You plant seeds, and some of the seeds sprout quickly, some seeds sprout slowly. What you're seeing right now are the seeds that are sprouting right now, but you don't know what else you have planted in that field. You don't know what else other people have in their fields. Use this thought to depersonalize the issue.

And remember that patience *is* a virtue, endurance *is* a virtue. Our society doesn't encourage much of it. We want things to go well *right now*, but sometimes there are obstacles. And as in the case with any obstacle, there are those that are quickly resolved. You can see what the problem is, you can get around it. Others take a lot of time, and you have to figure out some way to make yourself equal to the task. That's why the Buddha gives those images of goodwill and patience as being so large: large like the Earth, large like the River Ganges, bigger than whatever disturbances there may be.

So when a bad karmic storm comes whipping up, remind yourself you've been through worse. After all the human realm is one of the better realms to be born into. We've all been through the lower realms, but here we are: We survived. The question is how to survive with as much good karma as you can.

Don't let the fact that old bad karma is showing itself be an excuse to create more bad karma. It should be your signal that, okay, this is what bad karma is like when it shows its results, and you don't want it. So do what good karma you can in the meantime. That includes developing qualities like patience, but also looking around to see what other opportunities there are to do something good. Lift your spirits. Learn how to give yourself a pep talk.

As I said, you've been through worse. You can take this. And if you have the right attitude, working on patience when patience is called for, you can come out unscathed.