

The Lessons of Good Karma

April 14, 2016

We look around us and we see a lot of people who have mastered a particular profession or a particular skill, who are very good at that one thing, but whose lives otherwise are a mess. They can be real bastards, horrible in their dealings with others or in the uses to which they put that skill.

The Dhamma's different. To really learn the Dhamma, you have to become a good person. This doesn't mean that you have to start out good, but it does mean that you have to develop a full range of virtues, all around, if you're really going to understand what the Buddha's talking about—and “understanding” it means not just understanding the words, but getting to the meaning, to where they're aimed.

The word “meaning” in Pali—*attha*—also means goal. So when we talk about the meaning of the Dhamma, we're also talking about its purpose. It's meant to take you to a goal. This is not just “meaning” in terms of translating it into other words. It's meant to translate into changes in your mind, bringing about an experience, an understanding, an attainment within. To gain that experience and an understanding and attainment requires lots of virtues.

The techniques of the meditation don't demand too much. You can learn how to focus on the breath, but as the Buddha said, you could be a person of little integrity and yet still do the meditation in the sense of getting the mind to be quiet for a while. But then you'd start misusing that quiet state, and that would get in the way of the deeper attainments, the really good part of the Dhamma, what the Buddha called the “essence of the Dhamma.”

To get to the essence you have to start with being honest and observant. As he once said, “Let a person come who is honest and observant, someone who's no dissembler, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma.” Honest, in the sense of being willing to observe what's really going on in your mind, and in your behavior, and being willing admit to yourself and others any mistakes you make. Honesty is not just a matter of the way you treat other people. It's also a matter of the way you treat your internal conversation. Of course, you observe and see what's going on first, then you admit to yourself what you've done, and then you can learn. So this comes down to honesty and an ability to really see things and notice what's going on and not just be apathetic and let things pass by.

In another passage where the Buddha's teaching karma, he starts with the virtues of generosity and gratitude. For most of us, when we hear about karma there's that, “Oh darn” moment, where we start thinking about all the bad things we did in the past and all the bad things that are going to happen to us in the future because of that. But the Buddha doesn't start with that issue at all. He does say that certain actions tend to lead to certain results, but the

fact that a past bad action has happened doesn't mean that the future can't make some changes in how it's going to be experienced.

He gives the analogy of a crystal of salt. You've got a crystal of salt, say, the size of your fist. If you put it into a cup of water, you can't drink the water because the water is way too salty. But if you put it into a large, expansive river of clean water, you can still drink the water in the river. In the same way, if you develop an expansive mind, the things that happen from the past, even though they may be large crystals of salt, don't necessarily mean you have to suffer. So when the Buddha's teaching karma, it's not solely for the purpose of making you feel bad about you've done in the past. He always emphasizes the fact that you have to realize you've made mistakes in the past, but you can resolve not to do them again. Then you develop an expansive mind: a mind of goodwill, a mind of compassion and empathy, a mind of equanimity. A mind that is trained not to be overcome by pleasure or by pain. A mind developed in virtue and discernment. These qualities expand your mind, so what comes in from the past doesn't have to make you suffer.

What the Buddha does emphasize when he introduces the topic of karma is the need to be responsible and to focus your attention on your present karma, and not to worry about the past. Your focus on the present moment is not simply for the purpose of being fully present to everything in the present. It's for the purpose of looking closely at the choices you're making, and the results they get. What are you doing right now? What's happening as a result.

When he was teaching karma to his son, basically what he was teaching was how to be honest and how to be observant, that his son would be a good enough person to learn the Dhamma to begin with. First, he reminds his son of the virtue of being truthful. Then he tells him, "Look at your actions. What are you doing? When you do something, what do you expect is going to come from that action? If you expect anything harmful, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it.

"While you're acting, if any harm comes up"—because, after all, some of your actions have immediate results; you don't have to wait until the next lifetime. It's like spitting into the wind. You don't have to wait for the next lifetime for the spit to come back at you. "So if any harmful results are coming up, you stop what you're doing. Don't feel that you're committed to the action. If you don't see any harm, you can continue with what you're doing. Then when you're done, you look at the long-term results." This is where the honesty has to come in, and the ability to be observant, seeing what you did and being truthful about it.

If you made a mistake, you go talk it over with someone else, someone who's more advanced on the path so that you can get some good ideas on how not to repeat the mistake. If you see no bad results, then take pleasure in the fact; take joy in the fact that you're making progress on the path and try to continue with the progress, training day and night.

The Buddha's teaching a lot of good qualities of the character here. He's teaching compassion: You don't want to harm anybody. He's teaching integrity, teaching the ability to

take responsibility for your actions. He's also encouraging a desire and a willingness to learn, and he's showing you how to do it.

So this is how you become honest. This is how you become even more observant. This is how you make good use of the teaching on karma. Instead of getting upset about things you've done in the past, you say, "Look, I can focus on the present moment and that'll make all the difference." And then you can learn from what you do in the present moment.

In another place where the Buddha introduces karma, the main emphasis is on generosity and gratitude, focusing on the fact that people do have choices, and the fact that it's because we have choices, the choices that we will be responsible for, that generosity means something. A lot of people don't like the idea of responsibility. They'd rather have karma-free zones in large areas of their lives where they can do what they want and not have to deal with the results, or have someone else protect them from the results. But that's a childish attitude.

If you wanted to live in a world where your actions had no results, that would also mean that generosity would have no meaning. Gratitude would have no meaning. Actions would just be thrown around, without any consequences—but they wouldn't have any meaning at all. It's because we are responsible for our actions that they do have meaning. So when other people help us, we have to think about the extent to which they went out of their way: That might not have always been easy for them. And you want to have gratitude for that.

Gratitude here is something that's stronger than appreciation. We can appreciate the sun. We can appreciate the sky and the trees—appreciate just the way things are that enables us to live. But gratitude is something different. Gratitude is for actions that people have done. The word in Pali, *kataññu*, literally means having a sense or an awareness of what was done—and that deserves a special quality of the heart more than just appreciating how nice things can be. You realize that somebody had to do something, to go out of his or her way, for some of your conditions in life to be good. If you don't have any gratitude for that, it's very unlikely that you're going to go out of your way to help others.

This connects with what the Buddha said about generosity. The fact that we have choices and our choices have results means that when you think of being generous to someone else, that's a good thing. That's to be encouraged. It really does have meaning. There's a sutta where the Buddha says that if you're stingy, there's no way you're going to be able to attain jhana; and there's no way at all that you're going to attain any of the noble attainments. It's good to think about why. If you're generous, if you take something over which you have rights, no one can force you to give it away, but you decide of your own accord that you want to give it away: The internal dialogue that goes with that is good for the mind – the dialogue where you can overcome your greed, overcome your aversion, overcome all the unskillful things that would get in the way of being generous and freely give something away. You've lifted yourself above your defilements, and it was a free choice.

This is why there are lots of rules for the monks around how they treat the generosity of lay people. Monks are the beneficiaries of generosity so we have to be very careful that we don't abuse that position. And one of the things that the Buddha says is that if someone asks you, "Where should I give?" you say, "Give where you feel inspired; where you feel that it will be well used and well taken care of." That's it. You don't go out fund-raising. You don't go out making hints that you'd like this or like that. You wait for people to make the offer. If they make the offer—if they say, "Let me know what you need"—that's a special case. But even then, you don't want them to abuse their generosity. Ajaan Fuang said that he was always very careful around this issue. The only things he would ask for would be Dhamma books and medicine. That was it – in other words, things that were really necessary.

The reason why there are all these rules around generosity is because the Buddha wants to preserve the free choice involved in the gift, because of the lessons learned in that internal dialogue: how to give up a particular object, how to give up a little bit of money that it costs to buy something or how to give up the time that you could use for something you want to do, and instead you make a gift of that to someone else to help them, or you give your energy or you give of your forgiveness in places where it's hard.

That internal dialogue where you can talk yourself into doing the right thing is a good exercise for the mind, because after all, as you get the mind into meditation, you're going to have to be giving up a lot of other things that again, are your right to hold on to. You have the perfect right to sit here and think lustful thoughts for an hour, or angry thoughts for an hour, but then what would you gain? The mind would get even more lustful, get even more likely to be angry. You would shorten your fuse. But once you learn to give these things up of your own free will and learn how to talk yourself into putting them down and letting them stay down, you've learned an important skill. This is one of the reasons why generosity is so essential throughout the practice.

Luang Pu Dune used to like to say that the whole practice is one thing all clear through, from the beginning to the very end. It's all about letting go. Well, to let go requires an internal dialogue, where the good side of your nature takes charge over the greedier or more narrow side of your nature so that you can develop the goodness that's required for the Dhamma - so you can actually understand and see the Dhamma, experience the essence of the Dhamma.

So look at your opportunities to be generous as opportunities to see and understand the Dhamma, to practice that internal dialogue that's needed in areas where you discover that you're more attached than you thought you were. Certain things you can give away and it's no big deal, but certain of your defilements, certain types of greed or aversion, things you really like, you're really attached to: You tend to identify yourself around them - "This is the way I am and it's going to take a long time for me to change" – that kind of attitude. If you haven't learned how to be generous, it's going to be hard to give up these things that are even stickier, where the attachment goes even deeper. So it's good to make a practice of generosity so that

you can begin chipping away and learning the skills you need to give up the things over which you have a perfect right to keep, but are really not in your own best interest to keep with you. You'd be much better off letting them go.