

How to Save the World

January 2001

A chant we have regularly—that we're the owners of our actions, heir to our actions—is basically a reflection on the teaching of karma. Ajaan Fuang once said to me, "That's the one thing you're asked to believe: the principle of karma," which is the principle of action. This means, one, that action really does take place. It's not an illusion. There were actually people in the time of the Buddha who taught that action was illusory, that the only real things in the world were substances that didn't change, and because action was movement and change, it didn't really exist. The Buddha said, "No, that's not the case. There really is action." Two, you really are responsible for your actions. It's not some outside force like the stars or who-knows-what acting through you. You do have the choice to do things. Three, actions have results, and the quality of the results depends on the quality of the intention underlying the action.

This is a very empowering teaching. It's not a difficult thing to believe. Some people prefer to have the power but not the responsibility that comes along with it. Once there's the power in our own mind to act for good or for evil, we want to reap the results of the good actions and leave the other results behind. That's where there's some resistance. But otherwise, karma is basically a teaching that you are in charge. You do have the power to shape your life. You don't have to depend on outside forces.

It's also teaching you that what you do is not insignificant. Sometimes you can think about cosmic time, and say, "Oh, eventually the Sun is going to go nova and the Earth is going to be burnt to a crisp, so what does it matter what we do?" That's a very defeatist way of thinking. Because, of course, who knows where you're going to be at that point? Most likely in some other world, experiencing the results of the actions that you do now and on into the future.

The teaching on karma is also telling you that what's important in life is what's you're choosing to do right here right now, rather than what's happening someplace else, some other time. Think about what the media is telling you. You read newspapers, look at TV, and they're all telling you that the important things in the world are things that somebody else is doing someplace else. As for you, you're expected to have a lot of free time to sit there and read and listen, as if your life didn't have anything else going on. That's the basic message. Well again, the teaching on karma is that what you're doing is *the* big factor shaping your life. You need to have a strong sense of its importance, so that you'll be careful and watch for what you're doing. Think about the consequences of your actions. When you do, you'll find that your life really does take on new shape as you act in more and more skillful ways.

The things you have to watch out for are greed, anger, and delusion. We were talking today about a person who was teaching that now that Buddhism has come to America, it should get rid of these teachings that look down on greed, anger, and delusion—as if somehow American

greed, anger, and delusion were different or better than Asian greed, anger, and delusion. Actually, they're all pretty much the same. They all lead to suffering.

To watch out for these things, we really have to train the mind. Action here is not just a matter of what you do and what you say. It also covers what you think. Of course, what you think is going to determine what you do and what you say. The intentions that shape your life come out of the mind, which is why the central part of the practice is meditation, like we're doing right now: working with the mind, training the mind, in the same way you'd train a vine in a particular direction. You keep bending it, bending it, bending it, without letting it snap, but directing it in the direction you want it to grow, and ultimately it'll grow there.

You find that acting properly—in terms of your words and deeds—is a lot easier if your mind is on good terms with itself. This is why we work so much with the breath, because the breath can provide a comfortable place for the mind to be, a place where it gains strength, a place where it rests and gains nourishment. That has an impact both on the body and on the mind. As the mind gets a greater sense of well-being being with the breath, just sitting here watching the breath for a while and letting go of everything else that tends to weigh on the mind: Just that simple act, as long as you keep it up, is very liberating for the mind. You can keep reminding yourself that you don't have to pick up thoughts and worries about this and concerns about that. You can drop them for at least a while and give the mind a chance to rest and recover. It's part of the basic care and feeding of the mind. Once the mind starts feeling stronger and has a greater sense of well-being in the present moment, it's a lot easier to be kind to other people.

There's a lot of talk about people who want to be kind to themselves, to do something good for themselves, so they go off and buy something for themselves. But that's not necessarily real kindness to yourself—and it's especially not helpful to other people. It's better to be kind to yourself simply by the way you breathe. Learn how to take advantage of this free resource you've got, because otherwise it goes unused. And it's a renewable resource. It's not the case that the more you use it, the more you train it, the more you use it up. Actually the better you train it, the better it gets.

As you start feeling a greater sense of well-being, it's a lot easier to be kind to other people. It's a goodwill that comes out of a goodwill for yourself and naturally overflows without your having to worry about who you're kind to and what your motivation is. If there's not this internal sense of well-being, there's going to be a sense of calculation, "Well, if I help these people, they'll help me, or at least they'll respect me as a good person." All kinds of issues of self-image and expectations start getting mixed up in all this. But if there's simply a sense of well-being in the present moment, it just flows out naturally.

So, one really direct and visceral way of showing kindness to yourself is by watching the breath, getting to know the breath, learning how to make the most use of the breath in giving rise to a sense of well-being right here—starting at one spot in the body, wherever it's easiest to

focus on the breath, and then moving around to other areas of the body, realizing that the quality of energy in the body is all related to the way you breathe, and it can be made healthier. When there's a sense of connection between the different parts of the body and a sense of well-being in the way you breathe, the mind is more and more inclined to stay right here.

Once it stays right here, two really good things happen. One, it's staying with a sense of well-being; and two, when intentions do form in the mind, you're right here to watch them. You can see them as they arise; you can see what they're coming from. All too often, intentions seem to just come out of the blue. You want to do this, you want to do that, and you jump ahead and do it, simply on impulse, without stopping to think, "Well, what's lying behind that?" That's because you're not completely there. But if you're really here watching what's going on, you can't help but say, "Oh, this kind of motivation, this kind of intention lies behind that impulse." Is this something you want to follow through with? Well, look at the quality of the intention. If you detect no signs of greed, anger, or delusion, go ahead and act on it. Then look for the results to see if something unexpected comes up.

This way, the mind is in an excellent position to learn from its own actions. After all, that's how the Buddha learned: from noticing his intentions, acting, and then looking at the results, making adjustments, so that the next time he acted, if there was a mistake the first time, he wouldn't repeat the same mistake.

This requires a willingness to make mistakes and a willingness to learn from them. All too often people come up to me and say, "How can I be guaranteed...?" And the essence of the question is that they want to be taught a way to practice so that they're immune from ever making mistakes. Well, you can't do that. Everybody's going to make mistakes in life. The question is how to deal with them once they've been made. Again, if there's a sense of well-being that comes both from the meditation and from your resolve to do what is most skillful, the resolve to stick with that intention, to keep it in mind and to be alert for any times that you stray away from it: That sense of well-being makes it easier and easier to not be too harsh with yourself but at the same time not to be too lenient. You begin to find the right level of being the teacher: the right times to use the carrot, the right times to use the stick.

In this way, the meditation becomes not just a good place to rest the mind from time to time, but a center that you can use throughout life—and particularly to get to know what's going on in the mind and to bring peace to all the warring factions inside you. As we were saying this morning, it's as if there's a committee in there and they have all kinds of agendas. But if you approach the committee as a person centered, well-nourished, energized through the meditation, it's a lot easier to sort through the issues to see which voices you want to identify with or at least take up with at any particular time. Then you can see through the various smokescreens and other issues that create problems within the mind.

The Buddha said that the ultimate source of quarrels and problems in the world is from the mind's ability to complicate things. He used the word *papañca*. And the complication comes

through various levels of self-deception inside. As you learn how to peel away those levels of self-deception, a lot of the issues get resolved.

And again, when you put the mind in a state where it's centered and balanced here in the present moment, it's easier to look at your thoughts objectively, to look at your intentions objectively, and to sort things out inside. Once things are well-sorted out inside, there are no issues at all. Kindness and compassion come naturally out of a mind like this.

So when you want to look after the world, the first place to look after is right here inside. That's basically what the Buddha's teachings on action tell you. Start right here. Straighten this factor out. Once this factor's all straightened out, then you're creating no more issues for the world. And you're actually a helpful influence, a helpful energy in the world. It's a helpfulness that comes not from neurosis or co-dependency or anything neurotic, but as a natural expression of well-being. As one of the texts calls it, "an ornament to the mind": a natural expression of the goodness you've developed within.