

Karma-ism

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There's a saying in Thailand that Buddhism is "karma-ism," that that's the essential teaching: the nature of action. And it's wise to reflect for a while on what the implications of that are, and why that is the central teaching.

The Buddha once said that the basic questions we face coming from suffering are two: One, there's a sense of bewilderment: "What's going on? Why is there so much suffering?" And then the second one is a search, "Is there somebody who knows a way out of this suffering?"

And it's important that we keep those two questions in mind. The question, "What's going on?" is important. What does it mean for things to be *going on*? How do things *go on*? And in particular, what are we contributing to the going on of things?

This is why meditation focuses on the mind. Not just to get the mind into pleasant states: You attain the pleasant states so that you can understand, "Exactly what is the mind doing? How does it normally act? How does it fashion reality?"

When you start seeing that, then you can begin to take apart the question of finding a way out of the suffering. And again it's a question of what you *do*.

So the problem is an issue of what you're doing right now, and the solution lies in finding a new way of doing things. That's why it's so important to understand the nature of action—and why it's so important also to clear away other questions that tend to get in the way.

Because for a lot of people when they come to meditation, the big questions are, "Who am I?" Or, "Where am I? What kind of person should I be?"

The question, "Who am I?"—when you think about it for a minute, you realize that it's a question an amnesiac asks: "Who am I? Where am I?" It comes from forgetting. And there are actually some teachings that say the whole process of meditation is learning how to remember what you've forgotten.

But when you look at the early teachings, you find that the Buddha says that that's not a skillful way to approach the issue of suffering. Once you start defining yourself, he said, "What is it that defines us? It's our attachments, our cravings." Things that we're attached to: That's what defines us. If you're attached to certain feelings, you're defined by your feelings. In other words, self-definition is an activity, it's something you do. And it's all bound up in suffering.

So no matter how you answer the question of who or what you are, you're going to get tied up in suffering. Even if you can find fluid answers for yourself to have a fluid self, that still doesn't solve the issue, because there's still suffering in act of defining yourself.

So the Buddha's advice is just to drop the whole issue and focus on what's doing right now? What are you doing right now?

You should be focusing on your breath, reminding yourself to stay with the breath, to

be alert to the breath, and to make an effort to be more consistent in those things.

Because those qualities – mindfulness, alertness, and effort – turn into activities that open things up inside you.

So we practice the meditation not just to get into nice mental states but also to notice *how* we get there. Learn how to take them apart as activities. We get the mind into concentration because good stable mental states are the easiest things for us to unravel, so that we can see what it means to act, where the intention is in the present moment, and exactly which parts of that intention make the suffering go on.

Sometimes there's the question of where the suffering came from in the past, but that's not the big issue. The fact is that we continue producing it over and over and over again right now. That's the issue, and that's also where we can attack things. You can't go back and attack the past, you can't go back and change the past, but you can change what you're doing right now. This is important.

As the Buddha once said, there'd be no point in his trying to teach people to be skillful if they couldn't actually become more skillful. But we *can* become more skillful. By being observant, by watching, by being mindful and alert, by making an effort, we can develop more and more skill in the way we act, and in particular, in the way we manage our own minds.

When people come to the meditation, they tend to bring habits they've developed in their outer activities as well, or attitudes they've picked up from the people around them, often without even realizing it. Thinking, "Well, this is just the way you have to do things. This is the way you have to think, this is the way you have to deal with, say, anger: either give in to anger or repress it." For most people, those are the two options. Give into lust or repress it. Give into distraction or repress it. And so a lot of people, when they come to meditation, swing between these two extremes.

And as in so many questions, the Buddha says you've got a false dichotomy there. Look for other alternatives. Learn to think outside the box. Is there a way you can be aware of the anger and not give into it? Not get overcome by the tension or the pressure it exerts on your blood vessels or on your nerves? Is there a way to be aware of lust and not give into it? Not identify yourself with it, yet at the same time not denying that it's there?

The Buddha gives us the tools for dealing with these things. Look at the basic steps in breath meditation: being aware of the breath coming in long, out long, in short, out short. Being aware of the whole body of the breath. Just opening up to that much helps give you a new perspective on the things going through your mind. If you try to maintain a whole-body awareness, you find yourself less likely to latch onto thoughts just because they pass through the the larger range of your awareness.

Then he says to calm bodily formations, which means calming the activity of the breath, all the physical processes going through the body. How do you calm them without stamping them out?

These are some of the basic skills we develop as we meditate. It's important to realize meditation is just that: It's a process of developing skills. You learn how to manage your

mind more skillfully, sort out the various voices and ideas in the mind that really are not all that helpful from the ones that are.

And you find that once you've learned how to manage your mind better, a lot of other things in life become a lot easier. Once you develop the proper attitude, the proper skills inside, these can be applied to other areas of life as well.

In this way, you begin to see places where you're causing unnecessary suffering. Once you see that the suffering is unnecessary and that you're causing it, you don't have to tell yourself to let go. You just automatically let go. In that way, you develop more and more skill. You find yourself causing less and less suffering, both for yourself and for the people around you.

At that point there's no issue of "Who are you? What is your identity?" You don't have to think in those terms at all. The question is, "Okay, what's the most skillful thing to do *now*?" And as you develop in mindfulness, develop in concentration, the mind is in a much better position to see that. As you learn to ask the proper questions, you learn to think in ways that might not have occurred to you before—so that ultimately you get to a point where you are no longer causing yourself suffering. And when there's no suffering, the questions of Who are you? Who's the person who's been suffering? Who's the person who's not suffering? — They just don't matter.

As Ajaan Suwat once said, once there's ultimate happiness, who cares who's experiencing it? Because it's right there, it's actually more than you could conceive of what you'd wanted. But it's there. Once the question of suffering is answered, the other questions just don't occur to you anymore.

So we're here developing skills. And one of the most important skills is learning how to ask the right questions.

As you work at bringing the mind to stillness, maintaining the mind in that stillness, understanding the various levels you go through: If you learn how to ask yourself the right questions, they'll take you to where you want to go.