
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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1 June 2022

In these Wednesday night gatherings, we usually start with a short breathing meditation. For the sake of anyone here who is new to this meditation practice, I will explain what it is about and how you do the meditation.

Breathing meditation basics

Breathing meditation is said to be an effective means for quickly overcoming all disturbing thoughts and emotions.

Mental distraction – when the mind wanders after some object – is one of the main causes that allows disturbing thoughts to arise. We start generating various thoughts or worries about certain things, which brings stress and so on. Usually, when such a disturbing thought arises, it doesn't stop and we tend to occupy ourselves with that same thought, continuously going after it. This brings much disturbance and suffering to our minds, such as mental stress, anxiety, tension and worries.

So, if you look at the initial cause, or the first stage of disturbing thoughts and emotions, it is a mental distraction. Our mind is distracted, wandering off to external objects. In order to prevent such wandering thoughts, we will engage in this breathing meditation. While it is a simple technique, you will find it very effective in preventing the mind from wandering.

The main breathing meditation practice

First, we should choose a comfortable sitting posture and make sure the body is completely at rest. Then, we should check the breath. It is important that our breathing is as natural as possible. We should not force it or try to make it too fast or too slow.

The actual meditation is to simply place our complete focus or attention on breathing in and out. When you breathe out, be aware that 'I am breathing out'. When you breathe in, be aware that 'I am breathing in'. Just keep the mind on this awareness – 'I am breathing in' and 'I am breathing out'. This breathing technique will help calm all outwardly directed thoughts, letting our mind just rest inside us, in peace and stillness.

If you find it difficult to keep your mind on breathing, you can mentally start counting as well. Breathing in and out is counted as one round or cycle. Then, as you continue breathing in and out and focusing on it, that's the second round. As you go onto the third and fourth rounds, keep mentally counting each round.

Breathing meditation is an effective means to train our minds to remain calm and focused within. This, however, doesn't mean that suddenly our minds will stop wandering and become calm as a result of our short time here. Rather, if we wish to see any result from our practice

– in terms of calming the mind and having some control over wandering thoughts – we need to do this meditation at other times too: if possible, consistently, over a long time. Then, you will really see the effectiveness of this meditation practice in stabilising the mind.

When we engage in breathing meditation we should make a deliberate effort to keep the mind on the breath. If the mind goes outward, leaving the object of meditation, we should make a conscious effort to bring it back to the object. It might then stay on the breath for a little while, but then wander – again, we just bring the mind back to the object. We are trying to train or discipline the mind, and this technique is very effective for achieving this.

A meditation on the nature of the mind

There is another meditation technique for overcoming disturbing thoughts, whereby we don't make a conscious effort to try to control our thoughts, but rather just observe them. We simply watch whatever thought arises. If the mind goes somewhere else, we don't try to bring it back, but rather be aware of where it is going and exactly what's happening to the mind. If the mind goes somewhere else, we watch it, again knowing what is happening.

So, we simply watch and observe the mind. Here, it is important that we only observe and watch the thought – we don't go after it and allow it to dominate our mind and take it outwards. We just observe and watch it. This technique is effective for calming the mind.

Another effect of this meditation technique is that it empowers us not to fall under the influence of random thoughts. This is because, in this meditation we simply observe the arising of thoughts; we remind ourselves to simply watch the thought arise but not make any judgment. We don't worry about whatever object arises in the mind: we don't admire or criticise it. Most importantly, we don't go after it. Somehow, by doing that, the thought automatically dissolves.

The benefit of this is that you will be able to overcome random thoughts. Watching our thoughts like this is like watching waves in the ocean. No matter how high an ocean wave rises, you know it will eventually subside; then the ocean will automatically become quiet. In the same way, we can see how an agitated mind automatically becomes calm if we don't go after its thoughts and get caught up in them. We just simply watch a thought, distance ourselves from it, and consider ourselves as an observer, watching the thought arise in the mind. By doing that, we will find the thought dissolving of its own accord.

We will do a few minutes of breathing meditation. [*Pause for meditation*]

The law of karma

The Lord Buddha said, 'You are your own protector and your own enemy; be your own witness when you do any good or bad actions.' This quotation summarises the Buddhist law of karma, or cause and effect.

According to the law of karma, all the happiness and suffering we experience are the result of our own karma or actions. What the above quote is saying is that if the actions we do through our three doors – body, mind and speech –

are positive or wholesome, the result will be happiness. If the actions of any of our three doors are negative and unwholesome, the result is suffering. This is what the first two lines of the quotation mean when Buddha says that you are your own protector and enemy.

In the next two lines the Buddha says you should be your witness to your own actions: in other words, as a witness to our own actions, we need to recognise when we do good or do bad actions. We will then know exactly what sort of consequences will arise from our actions and hence we will become more responsible for ourselves.

We need to understand the connection between our karma and our actions of speech, mind and body – we accumulate karma through the use of our body, speech and mind. Whenever we use these three doors, we create karma. It is said that every karma or action we create will leave an imprint or tendency within our mental continuum. This tendency then becomes a seed for our future experiences. Therefore, according to the law of karma, when we create positive karma, we leave a positive seed, imprint or tendency in our mind, which will yield a positive result – happiness. But negative actions will leave seeds or tendencies in our minds that will yield negative results – unhappiness or suffering.

The law of karma and individual responsibility

Here, the Buddha is explaining to us how the law of karma works and who is responsible for abiding by that law – each of us, as individuals, is responsible for abiding by it. If we go back in human history we will see how people have evolved systems of law and order to maintain peace and safety in society. Societies have made and passed many laws that have to be policed to ensure compliance. Those who break the law are imprisoned and so forth. This is how things work in the material world.

The law of karma, on the other hand, is our personal responsibility. We need to regard it as beneficial and understand that it is our responsibility to observe it. Under the law of karma, there is no need for someone else to point out to us which actions are good and which are bad, and which will bring happiness and suffering. And it is not the case that when we don't observe the law of karma, the consequences of our actions will fall onto some other beings.

With a proper understanding of the law of karma, we can be fully responsible for the actions we do and the ones we reject. We don't have to rely on other people to advise us about what to do and what not to do.

We can also see that people with no knowledge of the law of cause and effect may act irresponsibly. But if others try to encourage them to be more responsible for their actions and try to give advice or force them to take responsibility, it may not be as effective as when they act of their own accord. People are usually not interested in being told. For example, if you are not interested in doing a certain course but are pressured into doing it by someone else, you won't put enough effort into it and hence the result will be completely unsatisfying.

Types of karma

In terms of the results of karma or actions, there are three types:

- the empowering or environmental result
- the result concordant with, or similar to, the cause
- the ripening or maturing result.

These three types of results vary according to the karma we have created. For example, the karma of stealing – taking the belongings of others when they have not been given – has three results.

The **environmental result** includes the immediate worry and guilt you feel straight after the after stealing: worrying that maybe a neighbour or someone else might have seen you stealing; or hearing the sound of a car you may suspect could be police. The environmental result of stealing also includes finding yourself living in places where your possessions are unsafe or that are prone to natural disasters, etc.

The **result similar to the cause** has two subdivisions: similar to the cause, in terms of *habit*; and similar to the cause, in terms of *experience*. In the case of stealing, the result similar to the cause in terms of *experience* is suffering from poverty, not finding acceptable clothes to wear, experiencing meagre living conditions, and so forth. The results similar to the cause in terms of *habit* would be that, even in the future, one has a tendency to steal things.

The **ripening or maturing result** is the primary or substantial result – the ripening result of stealing will be rebirth in a lower realm.

In Buddhism, the practice of karma is a fundamental and essential practice. There is a saying that meditation begins with the right motivation; lamrim practice begins with reflecting on the preciousness and rarity of human life, and Dharma practice begins with the law of karma. Thus, if we are to follow Dharma practice, we must begin with the theory and practice of the law of karma.

The three types of results of karma, in terms of *when* we experience the results, are:

- the result experienced within this lifetime or the same lifetime in which we have created or accumulated the karma
- the result experienced in our immediate future life
- the result experienced in any lifetime after the immediate future life.

Q&A

Question: We accumulate karma all the time. How do we know which karma will produce its result first?

Answer: I think it depends on the immediate causes and conditions that will cause a specific karma to ripen into a result. For example, if you plant a seed in the ground, the time it sprouts will depend on the weather conditions, temperature, and so on – when the right conditions come together, the seed will ripen; otherwise, it will take longer.

Certain actions are considered to be extremely negative karma. They are called heinous karmic crimes. It is said these karmas will produce their result immediately after

we leave this life, causing the person to have a lower rebirth straight away. There are so many different factors involved. A major factor is how forceful the specific karma is. The more forceful it is, the quicker the result it produces.

Question: Regarding the quote 'be a witness to your own actions' – there is an assumption that everyone would know what is right and what is wrong. But that's not the case, is it?

Answer: Yes, we can get it wrong! [laughter] Generally speaking, each person will know whether the actions they have done in their past are good or bad. But when we look back, we can also get it wrong.

The point is that the best way for us to take personal responsibility is to bear witness to all the deeds we do in life – that's the point being made here. Each individual needs to utilise their own intelligence or wisdom. If we don't utilise this, we can sometimes get it wrong. For example, some religions preach animal sacrifice rituals as a way to achieve happiness. Many people believe that. But such a practice is an act of killing, a negative action that will result in suffering.

So, the best thing is to use your own intelligence and wisdom; based on this, you become your own witness and you are able to discriminate between good and bad deeds.

Question: Is there any way we can know when we have reached complete enlightenment?

Answer: First, to reach enlightenment, an individual must do a lot of study, practice and meditation. Someone with a lot of wisdom and experience will know that when you talk about complete enlightenment, it means eliminating certain mental obscurations and gaining certain realisations. Therefore, they will know themselves whether they have that knowledge or whether they are ignorant of it.

Question: Is there free will with the concept of karma?

Answer: When we are overpowered by karma and delusion, we do not have much control or choice of our life. However, if we follow spiritual practice, then through this practice, we can purify all the negative karma that we have accumulated from the past. Not only can we purify it, but we can also stop creating new karma. From this perspective, we have free will and choice so that we can change our future. We can achieve liberation, and hence our future is not completely predetermined. We can alter it.

While in Buddhism we have the concept of the law of karma, some other spiritual systems hold the concept of an all-powerful creator, an Almighty God. We have to understand that the concept of karma is not the same as the concept of an Almighty God as the Creator of all things. Karma is the source of everything, but it is not like an all-powerful creator.

As we said before, we can purify bad karma and create good karma to find happiness and get rid of suffering. Through our present karma or actions, we can prevent past negative karma from producing its result altogether, or cause it to produce a lesser result, or delay the time of result. It is incorrect to think we have to accept what we are going through now, and that we cannot change it

because it is due to our past karma. Sometimes, people use the excuse of karma to not do anything about their situation.

But the main cause of their inactivity may be that they lack enough interest, or are too lazy, or think that doing something is too difficult. Instead, they simply blame their situation on karma. They don't take any action to help other beings who are suffering and just say, 'Oh, they are suffering because of their karma'. That is not the correct understanding of karma. If we think karma means everything is predetermined or fixed and cannot be changed, it is like subscribing to the theistic concept of creationism.

We will continue the teaching on karma next time. Another way karma is categorised is in terms of whether it is definite or not definite in producing its result. Basically, if we don't purify accumulated negative karma, then its result is inevitable.

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