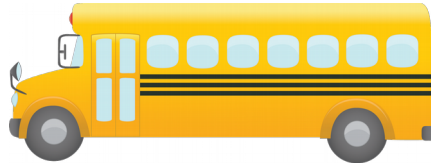


Working Through our Karma



Resolving past karma

The Buddha's teaching on karma often gets associated with the teachings on rebirth and are therefore somewhat neglected in the Western world where we do not believe in such things. This is the case despite the fact that many people come to the teachings looking to resolve suffering rooted in the past. The Buddhist understanding of how to do this is very simple however and actually does not require a belief in rebirth. People can act to resolve bad karma, the dark events of the past – whatever their cause, by making good karma in the present.

This is not blaming ourselves for whatever bad things that happened in the past, it is not to dwell on the past at all, but to see and concentrate on the potential for positive action in the present. The ability to do this is one of the benefits of strong mindfulness, of a mind strongly rooted in the present. This swings the overall balance of the mind, or of the situation we are in, from unhappy to happy. I have developed a lot of faith in this. I notice how if my mood is happy overall then issues from the past or painful memories are not a problem they are rather a source of motivation to strive on.

I saw this very strongly when my father was made redundant at work and to everyone's complete surprise and dismay committed suicide. What really helped me was not to dwell on the past (or to blame his heartless bosses) but to throw myself into what I could do to help the situation in the present – initially this was drawn out of me by looking after my mother and brother who had found his body and were in deep shock. Then looking after everyone, including myself, through all the grief.

Keeping in credit

I also notice in the present how inescapable karma is. If someone does something for me and I do not repay that in some way then I feel uncomfortable, there is a sense of being in debt. This seems to apply in general as well, feeling in debt to the world rather than in credit is an unhappy state. In contrast being in credit with the world is a joyful feeling – this is what makes generous people so genuinely, lastingly happy.

Let me poke fun at the modern consumer attitude for a moment, by way of contrast. Surviving at the most voluntary end of the voluntary sector as I am, where there is no money involved at all; if I read between the lines am I not hearing the unhappy ones saying: “I am too busy to do anything for you but I'm not too busy for you to do something for me. And above all else, I am always too busy to do anything I don't like.” “Hmm...no wonder you're unhappy, I think to myself...”

We can draw a parallel between the resolution of past karma we have already considered and the management of karma in the present. Here too it is not a matter of needing to resolve a particular situation, to repay a particular person. Although this might always be appropriate it is not always possible. If a doctor gives us a life-saving operation we cannot give him or her an operation in return. That would be silly. What we can do is to be grateful, and then in turn this will motivate us to do things for others, for the world, in return.

If we are mindful enough, what remains in the centre of our attention is the goodness (or otherwise) of our actions of body, speech or mind. Then we will be clearing our minds of karma as we go (like the windscreen-wipers of a car clear the screen to keep our vision clear as we go along) and entering fully into the present. This is the very best we can do, our highest potential within the world of karma. Yet it is also here in the present that we can naturally experience the insight into the nature of the world that is the escape from karma altogether. The key to this is to see our common humanity through the development of mindfulness of the body.

I offer this for your reflection.

Ajahn Kalyāno

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