

Supported by Peace

December 30, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

karma, consequences, work, calm, peace, agitation, suffering, ease

Gil Fronsdal

The teachings given yesterday morning on karma are an important aspect of Buddhism. It is important to appreciate that all our actions have consequences and to be careful with what we do. We want to do things that help us be healthy. We want to do things that are wholesome, helpful, and supportive, and that move us toward freedom. It is also useful to avoid those actions that have the opposite effect.

This is an important teaching, but it can be heard as if now we have a lot to work on. It might seem that we have to track, monitor and think about every single action. We might feel we should try to do it just the right way. This idea of karma can be taken as a teaching where you have a lot of work. Sometimes it can feel exhausting to hear this kind of teaching,

Sometimes when vipassana meditation practice is taught, it can lend itself to the idea that there is a lot to do. There are a lot of instructions. When you hear all the instructions, one might ask: “What do I do now? Do I do this now? I am experiencing a lot of emotions. What should I do? Am I supposed to go through the list of RAFT or RAIN or whatever it might be?” We could end up being busy.

But that is not how it is supposed to be. Finding some degree of calm, peace, or ease as we did in today’s meditation can be the reference point for not making things worse. When we see the mind caught up in preoccupations, we lose touch with that peace and ease. We are not being peaceful anymore. We are making things worse in a sense.

If we are feeling peaceful, and then start rushing and feeling tense, we are making things worse. If we start complaining about something, we are making things worse in a sense for ourselves and others. We have this reference point of some degree of peace and calm. That can be used as a reference so we don’t make it worse. It is not a lot of work to do this. We just try to stay close to the peace. We stay attentive and notice when it stops feeling peaceful. We notice when we start feeling agitated, stressed, contracted, or tense.

With time we start becoming quite sensitive and familiar with the feeling, sensations, and the experience of things getting tense, tight, contracted, or agitated. We recognize it earlier and earlier. Then we might ask, “Is this really necessary to do?” Maybe it is not. Come back to the peace. We can still do and care for things from this calm place.

The attentiveness of mindfulness, this attention to the moment and to consequences, can be very simple. It means staying calm and peaceful the best we can. We try to notice when we are ready to lose it. Losing it only makes the situation worse. One of the fundamental principles of the teachings of karma is – don’t make it worse.

It might be difficult to figure out whether we can make it wonderful for people, or do wonderful things for the world. It might feel like a burden to carry that responsibility. It is nice to be supportive and do nice things for people, but the minimum is to not make it worse.

Making it worse is probably some kind of activity. We have to work to make it worse. If we are hesitant to do meditation because it seems like a lot of work, we are probably overlooking all the work that we do when we make situations worse for ourselves and other people.

Don't make it worse. Trust this place of calm, peace, and settledness.

Use this modicum of peace and calm as a reference point. It doesn't have to be dramatic. It might be that there is a feeling of agitation, but there is also a little sliver of calm. There is a sense of this. That becomes a better reference point to highlight how we are tense, contracted, or agitated. Then we stop and take a good look at that. Become familiar with this. We bring our attention to this

Sometimes when I meditate or in daily life, I give myself instructions to stop for suffering. I go about my life peacefully and happily. When I start suffering, get agitated or tense, that becomes a mindfulness bell. Okay, here is something I should pay attention to. Now I should notice. Here is something for me to learn. "What did I just do? What did I just believe? What is arising out of me? What is the reactivity that is happening here?"

Those questions to investigate and look at the situation begin to take some of the authority away from it. It slows the automatic nature of it. I don't have to go barreling into or participate in this suffering-producing state that I am in.

For some people, there are very strong counterforces to being peaceful and calm. One of them is the belief that

it is not okay to be peaceful and calm. This is the belief that I'm supposed to be agitated or that I'm such a terrible person that I have to make up for it. I have to try to run around and fix everything. I have to make everything safe, good, and tidy. Being peaceful just means that I'm a lazy good-for-nothing. My worth is only found in doing. If I don't do something, I will have no inner worth. Peace implies some kind of not-doing. Where is my worth if I just sit and be calm?

It is not necessary to think this way. It is possible to do all the things we are supposed to do – our responsibilities – with calm and peacefulness. We can do it peacefully. We can do it calmly. Some people have found that they do things better that way. It is more effective and has a better impact on others and oneself. By the time some activity is over, we feel more settled and focused. If we do something in an agitated way, by the time it is over we feel exhausted and tense by it.

So this idea that Buddhist practice is a lot of work is a misunderstanding that is easy to come up with. I like to think that it is almost the opposite. It is the undoing of work. It is the undoing of all the different forces that are work, and that are exhausting or tiring. It is discovering a place of ease from which we can do things. It is a wonderful thing. Enjoy it and trust it in a deep, profound way.

Sometimes the instructions we give in meditation are not prescriptive. They are less about what we do and more about what we notice. It is less about what we are doing, and more about what we are undoing. If the attention is on our breathing, then let's notice how we add extra work and attention to breathing. It is like we are trying too hard. Let's trust that it is possible to do it in a peaceful, relaxed way.

If we bring attention to our body, we might feel that we have to fix every ache and pain in the body. We get busy focusing on pain. We try to get rid of the pain or do something with it as opposed to just being peaceful with discomfort. "Oh, I'm supposed to pay attention to discomfort. Let me do it peacefully with no agenda and no work."

There are all these wonderful instructions we give on emotions that can seem like a lot of work. What is it like to be with emotions in a peaceful, calm way? Use the instructions on emotions to support a peaceful and calm way.

A lot of thinking makes things worse. A lot of thinking is difficult and stressful. What is it like to hold the thinking peacefully and look upon it kindly? What is it like to not get too caught and preoccupied by our thinking?

Our actions make a difference. Our actions have consequences. Actions that are done peacefully will have peaceful consequences, at least locally. Actions that are done in an agitated, unpeaceful way will have unpeaceful consequences.

Hopefully, that simple teaching will encourage you to stay peaceful and not use Buddhism as a lot of work. It can be ongoing. It can be continuous. It can be the center of our life, but it is more of an undoing than a doing. It is like we put a lot of work into staying at ease, and staying close to the place of ease.

There is a paradox there. If we put a lot of work into that, we can't get tense in order to be at ease. But we can have continuous attention. We can have a heightened awareness that keeps us close to that place of ease and peace. There is a heightened awareness which is itself an expression of peace. That becomes a protection. This easeful mindfulness is a protection. It becomes a shield from all the ways that we can get caught up in excessive work in the mind and heart.

If one thing is taken from this talk, try to live a life where you don't make things worse. Whatever situation you are in, don't make it worse.

I look forward to coming back tomorrow. Next week I will start the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. I'll start with the

Buddha's instructions on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. We will go through it over a few weeks like we did last year with *Ānāpānasati*.

Thank you.