

Buddha's Meditation and the Study of Karma  
Sesshin Talk 3/Day 5  
Tassajara Zen Mountain Center  
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Once upon a time, there was the unborn. It was like a river. But then the river became a road and the road covered everything. And because the road was originally a river, it was always hungry.\*

Our deepest unconscious wish, our deepest intention in our cognitive unconscious, is to be in this river of constant change. We want to return there, and we also want to maintain the road. We want to change. We want to be different from how we are, and we want to keep ourselves the way we are. So we are conflicted. We have conflicting values, conflicting feelings and thoughts. We're ambivalent. When we are in the river, we want to get hold of something, so we build a road. When we have a road, we are starving for the river, for the life of the flow of our experience. Out of this painful conflict, this spiritual pain, of trying to grasp for something where nothing can be grasped, then making up something that we can grasp and alienating ourselves from reality by this illusory exercise, out of this has emerged the zazen of the Buddha ancestors. The Buddha samadhi has arisen from this painful, conflicting, pulsating, boxed-in constricted life, this life that is trying to burst out of its confinement at the same time it keeps patching the walls of the prison.

This samadhi transcends and brings peace right in the middle of this causal situation. When the samadhi has arisen, it seems that some people might be able to learn about it. So the samadhi speaks and it teaches, and first of all it teaches karmic cause and effect.

The Buddha's teaching on cause and effect emerges from Buddha's zazen. When we receive this teaching deeply and study it, we can engage and enter Buddha's zazen and teach others karmic cause and effect, and if they listen to it, study it, and accept it, they too can practice the zazen of the Buddha. The teaching of cause and effect is based on Buddha, is based on Buddha's way of being, which is Buddha's meditation. Buddha is a meditator. Based on Buddha, based on enlightenment, comes the teaching of cause and effect. Based on Buddha, based on enlightenment, comes the teaching of the precepts.

The precepts are based on Buddha's meditation. So it also taught and understood that if you are practicing Buddha's meditation, in a sense the precepts are already included. In Buddha's meditation the teaching of cause and effect is clearly realized. There is nothing in addition to Buddha's enlightenment. It completely includes the teaching of cause and effect, the reality of cause and effect.

The problem is that when people hear that zazen completely includes the precepts, they sometimes think that if they are sitting, precepts aren't necessary. Dogen says, "When you're practicing zazen, what precepts are not upheld and maintained?" And this is true, when the zazen is the zazen of Buddha. But some people hearing this teaching can say, "Hey, we practice zazen. Precepts aren't necessary because they're already included. The precepts are based on zazen. We practice zazen, so we don't have to worry about the precepts." To this I could say, "Okay, maybe so, but teach them constantly. Don't worry about them, but have deep faith."

When precepts are not practiced and taught, what happens is moral degeneration and people dreaming the zazen they are practicing includes moral cause and effect and the precepts. This attitude that we don't have to look at cause and effect can lead to the implication that cause and effect are not important. Thinking that an act and the consequences of actions are not important can lead to thinking that there really are not any consequences. And this destroys the Buddha-dharma in our hearts. We have to have Buddha-dharma in our heart to practice Buddha's zazen.

Another difficulty is that the process of karmic cause and effect taught by the Buddha, the teaching that comes from enlightenment and the process being described and taught, is selfless. There is no self in the process. There is no self of the actor. There is no actor doing it. There is no self in the action. There is no self in the consequence. And again, when people hear this, they can slip into wrong view. They can think, "Well then there isn't any consequence. There isn't any action. And nobody is responsible." The selflessness which is in the process can be misapplied. To think or say that there is no retribution for good and bad action eliminates the Buddha-dharma from our heart. Once that happens, we can't practice zazen.

Part of the conflict here, in Dogen's teaching, is that he is teaching the way of zazen of the buddhas and ancestors, and that's primary. But when people misunderstand this teaching, he has to say how important karmic cause and effect are. Then he has to run back again to say zazen is most important. So he goes back and forth, back and forth.

Wanting to change ourselves, wanting to be different from what we are is not compassion. This desire has a cause, and this cause is that we are already constantly changing and we want to get with that program. But we can turn this into seeking, which is not compassion. And wanting to maintain ourselves is not in accord with reality, so trying to maintain ourselves is grasping. Zen teachers are well known for recommending no seeking and no grasping. Seeking is birth, grasping is death. Seeking and grasping are samsara. Not seeking is no birth. Not grasping is no death. It is the practice of nirvana. And from the practice of nirvana come the teachings of cause and effect.

You have to sit. I have to sit. We all have to sit. Buddha has to sit too. We walk, Buddha walks. How are we the same? We are the same in not seeking and not grasping. How are we different? In seeking and grasping.

The teaching of cause and effect is a provisional teaching. It is not an ultimate teaching. But it naturally emerges from the ultimate in response to beings who are in conflict, who are holding on to the road and yearning for the river. Or in the river and trying to go to the road. It's a teaching for us when we're like that. Receiving this teaching, we can enter the ultimate. Entering the ultimate, we can give it up and join hands with people and share the practice of giving close attention to karmic cause and effect.

Transcribed by Jennifer McMullen

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\*Note: Tenshin Roshi quotes and references the opening to *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri in the sections of the talk that speaks of the river and the road.