

## *Kamma & Rebirth*

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We're born into this world without an instruction booklet. There's nothing to explain which issues in life are important, which are the important things to know. We do know when we feel suffering and we know when we feel relative ease, but that's about as much as we know. As we grow up, there are people to explain things to us. This is where human beings have an advantage over animals. There's nobody to explain anything to a dog or a cat about how to live. There's that wonderful story by Mark Twain where the mother dog explains the human world to her puppy. Of course that's fantasy. What's interesting about that story is the mother has her information all garbled up. "Presbyterian" is the name of a dog breed; "heroism" means "agriculture" — that sort of thing. Actually, getting garbled information can be one of the dangers of the human world, too. Our parents have taught us things from childhood and they may have gotten things all mixed up as well.

So there are a lot of things we don't know, and we have to make a lot of decisions based on uncertain information. What are the important issues in life? And what is this life, anyhow? Is it part of a longer story or is it just this story, the whole story right here, right now: birth, aging, death? And how about our actions? We seem to decide what to do. We seem to make choices, those choices seem to have results, and there seems to be some sort of pattern to the results. Some actions seem to lead to good results, other actions to bad results. But are things as they seem? We don't really know.

So we find ourselves acting on assumptions as to what leads to happiness and what leads to pain, those two things that we do know when we experience them. But the question is, is the quest for happiness really worthwhile or should we be looking for something else? There's really no hard proof for any of these issues, so we act on assumptions.

When you come to meditate you're already acting on certain assumptions. One is that the training of the mind is worthwhile. That means you believe that your actions are important and that knowledge and training will make a difference in how you act. Those are big assumptions right there, but when you look at your life, you've seen that acting on those assumptions has brought you at least some happiness.

That's called a pragmatic proof. It's not an empirical proof. An empirical proof would be able to trace the energy that goes from our decision to act to the actual action, and from the action to the results that we experience. You'd have to run experiments with controls and actually be able to measure happiness in a very precise way. But you can't do that. All those tests that they say they've run about measuring the happiness in

different countries or measuring the happiness of people in different social groups, with different levels of income: When you ask people to rate their happiness on a scale from 1 to 10, what kind of science is that? What's your 8 compared to somebody else's 8 on a scale of 1 to 10?

So there's really no empirical proof for any of these things. But there is a personal pragmatic proof. You find that when you act on certain assumptions, things seem to turn out in a particular way, and some assumptions lead to better results than others. That's the kind of proof that the Buddha has you act on. He teaches about the principle of action, that action is real, and that your intention is what determines the result of the action. There were people in the Buddha's time who said that action was unreal, that it only seemed to exist. But the Buddha said to look at how those people lived. Did they live as if action didn't exist? They chose different courses of action and preferred some to others. This shows that on a pragmatic level they still believed that action was important and that some actions were preferable to others, some were more skillful than others. They really would have an impact on your happiness.

There were also people who said that your actions didn't really lead to happiness or pain. Happiness and pain were self-caused and very arbitrary. And yet those people had a theory all worked out as to why this was so, and why it was important to believe this, and how to live in response to that belief. In other words, they still believed that knowledge was important, actions were important, and one way of action was preferable to another.

This is how the Buddha recommended that you look at the issue of action. What series of beliefs about action lead you to act in a skillful way and give good results? There's a sense of greater or lesser happiness that you can know only for yourself. You can't compare your happiness with somebody else's. But you can look inside.

So the Buddha never tried to offer an empirical proof for his teaching on kamma or the teaching on rebirth. The people who claim that science has proven either of these, or that they have proven these principles to themselves in an empirical way, are not doing the Buddha's teachings any favor. You can't really prove these things empirically, and people who really understand empirical proofs will look down on Buddhism for making that sort of claim. The Buddha himself didn't try to give an empirical proof. He did say, though, that if you act in certain ways you will find a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of wellbeing in life. And these actions will depend on certain assumptions.

For instance, the question of rebirth: If you believe that this life is all we've got and the end of life is uncertain, would you be sitting here meditating? Maybe, maybe not. It's all pretty arbitrary. Would you be kind to other people? Maybe, maybe not. But if you did go on the assumption that this is part of a longer story shaped by your actions, and that your actions are shaped by your mind, you'd be sure to put more effort into training the mind to be meticulous and careful. You'd take whatever time and effort is needed to get the mind in good shape.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha recommended that we take his teachings on kamma and rebirth as a working hypothesis. He said that he learned in the course of his Awakening that this life is actually part of a longer story of many lifetimes that have been going on for a very long time and could potentially continue going on for a very long time to come. In other words, the principle of rebirth is true. And it's also true that one of the reasons for training the mind is ultimately to be able to put an end to that story, because there's a greater happiness that comes when there's no more rebirth. But he also stated that even if this were not the case, you'd live a happier, better life by assuming that it is.

So when you wonder about the Buddha's teachings on these topics, remember that we're all acting on assumptions. The problem for many of us is that our assumptions are not articulated or we haven't worked out the consequences of the assumptions we have articulated. This means that when we encounter a fully articulated assumption, it may seem strange. We have to reflect back on ourselves: What are our assumptions about action, about life, about happiness, about how the principle of causality works in our lives? And then which assumptions really lead to the greatest happiness if we act on them, if we keep our actions consistent with what we believe?

That's the role of faith in the Buddhist teachings. For many of us in the West, faith has gotten a bad name. We've had it pushed on us as a virtue from some circles: The less a particular proposition or idea makes sense, then the more faith you have in it, the better—which is a real insult to the human mind. It's an insult to be told that we have to take irrational and inconsistent doctrines on faith and that we have to believe them more strongly than we believe the evidence appearing right before our eyes or in our very own hearts.

Fortunately that's not how the Buddha teaches faith. For him, even taking things on reason is a type of faith. Just because something is reasonable doesn't guarantee that it's going to be true. But when something is reasonable, it's a lot easier to act on it and not feel torn up inside. He also asks that when you take something on faith, you have to remind yourself of how little you really do know. The assumptions you act on may seem the most reasonable, and so far in your experience they may have given the best results when you act on them, but the more clearly you realize that this doesn't constitute real knowledge, the more you're spurred to continue practicing until you really do know.

The Buddha gives the example of an elephant hunter in the forest. The elephant hunter wants a big bull elephant to do the work he needs done. So he goes into the forest and he sees big footprints. Now, because he's an experienced elephant hunter, he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that these must be the footprints of a bull elephant. After all, there are dwarf females with big feet. They can't do the work he wants done. But he sees that the footprints *may* indicate a bull elephant, so he follows them. Notice that. He does follow them. He doesn't say, "Well, I don't really know, so I

might as well give up. I'll follow something only if I know it'll lead to a bull elephant." He wants the elephant but he doesn't know for sure where it is. These seem to be the most likely footprints, so he follows them. Then he sees scratch marks high up in the trees. Again, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that those must be the marks of a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. They could have made those marks. But he keeps following the tracks. And finally he comes to a clearing where he actually sees a big bull elephant. That's when he knows that he's got the elephant he wants.

The same holds true with the practice. When you experience the pleasure of jhana, when you attain psychic powers: Those are just footprints and scratch marks. The real thing is when you've had an experience of the deathless. You realize that these assumptions that you acted on—the power of your actions, the truth of causality—are principles that have held good from the time of the Buddha until now. Your assumption that if you act in certain ways, the results tend to follow a pattern; your assumption that it's worth your while in this short and uncertain life to devote as much time as you can to the training of the mind: You've found that those assumptions worked. They've led you to a genuine happiness you know for sure. You know that this happiness doesn't depend on the aggregates, doesn't depend on space or time. It's not going to be touched by the death of the body. That's when you know you've found the bull elephant. That's when you really know that the Buddha's teachings are true.

So the realization that you're taking certain things on faith, but you don't really know them: That's meant to be a spur to continue with the practice. Whatever doubts you might have are not considered a vice or something to be denied, for that would create lots of dishonesty in the mind. Instead, you acknowledge them and take them as an incentive to practice further until you get to the point someday when you really know for yourself. For sure.

It's in this way that the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth are not an insult to your intelligence. Instead they're a spur to use your intelligence even further so that you can get yourself out of the ignorance into which we are born and into the knowledge of a happiness that doesn't die.