

# The Rhythm of Kamma

*April 12, 2006*

We meditate because we have good will for ourselves and goodwill for the people around us. We've reflected on our lives and we realize that the major cause for unhappiness in our lives comes from our mind—from the fact that the mind isn't trained, that it gives into greed, anger, and delusion; fear, and impatience. If it's going to learn how to resist these states, it needs training, training in mindfulness, training in alertness. Once the mind is able to resist these states through mindfulness and alertness, we'll be less likely to act on greed, anger, and delusion. We're not the only ones who will benefit. The people around us benefit as well. So goodwill, both for ourselves and the people around us, is what underlies what we're doing.

But you notice that the Buddha's teachings on the brahmaviharas or sublime attitudes that we chanted just now, don't end just with goodwill. Three other qualities come along as well: compassion, appreciation, and equanimity. Compassion and appreciation follow very naturally from goodwill. In other words, if you wish for your own happiness and for the happiness of the people around you, then when you see suffering, you want to see it end. That's what compassion is about: *May all beings be free from all stress and pain.* "All beings" includes ourselves as well as everybody around us.

When you see that people are happy, you appreciate their happiness. You don't get jealous or resentful, you don't get irritated by their happiness. You realize that happiness has to come from a cause. If that cause is their good behavior in the present moment, it's easier to feel appreciation for their happiness. Sometimes, though, it comes from things they did in the past, while their current behavior doesn't seem to be all that inspiring. In cases like that, appreciation is a bit harder. But you keep remembering: These things come from a cause. Try to appreciate that fact. Don't make it your duty in life to put an end to somebody else's happiness.

So these three qualities go together as a cluster: good will, which is a wish for happiness; compassion, which is a wish to see an end to suffering; and appreciation, which is a wish for the continuation of happiness that's already there. You can work on these qualities in your breath. In fact, your attitude toward the breath provides the foundation for these sublime attitudes so that they're not just thoughts that come floating in and floating out without a foundation. You learn how to work with your breath with the attitude that whatever you can do to make it comfortable, you're happy to do, you're happy

to give that much attention to the breath. You're happy to spend the time that's needed, because you see the benefits. The breath—this flow of energy—is probably the most intimate part of our mind's relationship to the body. In fact, it is so intimate that we tend to overlook it. We tend to focus on things outside and miss what's going on at this point of contact between body and mind.

So turn around and look at this, get sensitive to how the body feels from the inside. Work with the properties of breath and fire, earth and water, if you find that a helpful way of looking at the body. Or just work with the breath, the flow of energy. Some parts of the flow come in and go out. Others stay in the body, flowing from one part of the body to another. Some spin around in place. There's a lot you can learn about the breath if you really take the time, if you really pay close attention to it. Because it's all right here. It's simply a matter of whether you choose to look here or someplace else. And looking here, you want to look continuously.

The result is that, as the mind and the body become more comfortable with each other, you find it easier to wish for your own happiness, easier to wish for the happiness of other people. Most of the time when we resent other people's happiness, it's because we're fairly miserable. When we want other people to suffer, it's because we're suffering ourselves. But if you're able to give rise to a level of well being inside, it's a lot easier to wish for other people's well being. This is why working with the breath is such an important part of developing these attitudes.

But it's inevitable as you're working with the breath—just as when you're dealing with people outside—that not everything will go the way you want it to. It's fun when you're playing with a sense of the body to be able to manipulate the breath, to change the flow of the energy. But there are times when you find that you can't, or whatever you seem to do just seems to be mucking everything up. This is when that fourth sublime attitude comes in: equanimity. Sometimes equanimity is translated as a nonreactive awareness, or just total indifference, but that's not the case. You notice that in those phrases that we chanted just now for developing the sublime attitudes, the first three all start with "may": "May all beings be happy," or, "May all beings be freed from suffering," "May they not be deprived of the good fortune they have obtained." The "may" is the expression of a desire, an aspiration.

Equanimity, however, is just a plain indicative statement, a statement of fact: "All living beings are the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions, borne of their actions. Whatever they do for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir." There's no "may" in there at all. This is just the way things are. Equanimity basically means accepting the principle of karma, that your present experience is shaped to some extent by your present intentions, but there is also a large part

that can be shaped by your past intentions. You can't do anything about your past intentions right now.

This principle applies to you; it applies to all the people around you. On the outside level it means that sometimes no matter how much you want to see somebody else be happy, there's nothing you can do. Or of the many things you can try to do, nothing works. That is what you have to accept with equanimity. If you can't accept it, you're going to waste a lot of your energy trying to help someone who can't be helped, rather than devoting it in another area where somebody *can* be helped.

The Thais have an expression for understanding karma, what they call the "rhythm" of things. The teaching on karma doesn't say that you have a single karma account, that the karma ripening right now is the sum total of all your past karma. Instead, it says that specific actions will bear fruit at specific times. If someone is experiencing bad karma right now that doesn't mean that all they have is a load of nothing but bad karma. It means that a particular unskillful action is bearing fruit right now. That person may also have other good actions in his or her past that have not yet borne fruit. So you can't judge the total karmic past of people by their position in life, by their current level of happiness and pain. The teaching on karma is not meant to be used that way. You can't look at somebody and immediately gauge their karma account.

What it does mean is that there's a rhythm to life. Sometimes you're experiencing the fruit of bad karma, sometimes the fruit of good past karma. You have to learn to adjust your attitude to fit in with the rhythm. In other words, if the past karma is such that nothing seems to be working right now, you have to develop patience, develop as positive an attitude as you can. Focus on what areas you *can* affect, i.e., your intentions right now. Make sure your intentions are good; make sure your intentions are skillful. As for the things that you can't affect, well, just let them go. Sometimes the rhythm of karma is such that it may take a while. So you learn patience, which is another skillful attitude.

So, the teaching on equanimity doesn't mean you just accept everything as it is. It means that you accept the fact that there are some areas right now where you can't make any difference. You have to learn to accept them with equanimity. Then turn your attention to the areas that can be affected: your present intentions. Those are always open to your manipulation. Those can always be under your control in the present moment, if you learn to focus specifically on them and not let yourself get tied down by things that you can't change.

We meditate because we want results. It's not the case that we can always get the results we want right away. It's like making scrambled eggs. The right way to make scrambled eggs is to put them over very low heat, stir and stir and stir, and

they can take a while to begin to coagulate. If you get impatient, you turn up the heat. But if you do that, you don't get nice, soft scrambled eggs. You get rubber. It's the same with the mind. When things don't go the way we want them to, we start getting more controlling, we start getting more rigid in our attitudes about what we want to do. We try to force things. Sometimes, they can be forced; sometimes they can't.

So equanimity means realizing that when things can't be forced, you've got to step back. Whatever you can't control, you let it take its own time, to develop or go away at its own pace. You focus your efforts instead on the skillfulness of your present intentions, which may require patience and equanimity, doing your best to put as much positive energy into the situation, and not getting upset because the results are not immediate. The important point is that you be secure in your confidence that as long as you put in positive energy, there will have to be positive results—if not right now, then someplace down the line. That's what you control, the fact that you're putting in positive energy, putting in skillful intentions right now. As for when these things will bear fruit, that's up to them, that's up to the jagged rhythm in the whole mix of your karma.

So it's important that you understand what equanimity means. It doesn't mean that you're totally non-reactive to everything, that you're just a piece of wood lying around that doesn't react. In Pali poetry, a piece of wood just lying around is a symbol of a person who's dead. No, equanimity means that you're selective in where you focus your energies, learning how to accept the things you can't change and work on the things you can. In this way your desire for happiness, both for yourself and other people, doesn't turn into suffering.

We all want happiness. Our problem is that many times we want it faster than it can come. In cases like that, if we don't learn to develop patience and equanimity, we're going to suffer. This is why equanimity is such an important part of those four sublime attitudes. It keeps them grounded in reality. We're not just sitting around thinking nice thoughts and hoping that simply the power of nice thoughts is going to give immediate results. Sometimes the rhythm of karma is such that they do give immediate results. Sometimes it's not that way at all. It's going to take awhile.

Equanimity rests on the confidence that as long as you put in positive energy with positive intentions, positive results will have to come out at some point. So it's important that that's what you're careful about: the intentions you're putting into the whole process right now, making sure that they're skillful, not being pushed around by greed, or anger, delusion, impatience, or fear. Try to take nourishment from your confidence in the principle of karma, in the principle of action: that skillful actions will lead to good results. Maybe you can't get the results you want right now, but you can put in good energy right now. Try to

develop as much skillfulness in your attitude as you can. That's what's important. That's what we're trying to develop as we meditate. Remember, the word for meditation in Pali is development. We're trying to develop skillful attitudes, skillful intentions. Focus your energy there.