

Self-starting

May 29, 2009

Those five reflections we chanted just now are used for a lot of different purposes. The first four reflections give rise to a sense of *samvega*, realizing that this life of ours is filled with aging, illness, death, and separation. And it's not just our life. You look around and you see that everybody's lives are filled with aging, death, illness, and separation. Even up in the deva realms: They may not have aging and illness, but they have death and separation just like us. In fact, the Buddha makes a point of having us reflect that it's not just us. Everybody who is born is going to suffer these things. Now if the reflection stopped just there, it would get pretty depressing. But then there's the fifth one: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions," and the same applies to everybody else, too. That's our way out: through looking at our actions to see what we can do, to see where they come from, to see where they lead.

In fact, this is the topic of appropriate attention: looking at things in terms of cause and effect, action and result, and learning to explore the power we have to improve our minds, to improve our actions, to improve the results of our actions to see how far that can go. One of the emotions that's supposed to be inspired by that reflection is *pasada*, conviction: i.e., conviction that we're not trapped forever in the cycle of aging, illness, and death, that actions really can get us out.

This is why we train the mind. Actions come from the mind and, fortunately, the mind can be trained. It's not stuck in either an innate bad nature or an innate good nature. It's got a changeable nature that can be molded, directed to freedom from good or bad natures.

We don't usually think about being trapped in a good nature, but there was once a Dharma teacher who said he didn't want to live in a world without suffering, because he then couldn't exercise his compassion. Which sounds nice, but the more you think about it, the stranger it sounds: You need somebody suffering so that you can exercise your compassion. If you're really wise and compassionate, you'd want to get free of that necessity as well.

So we do have this freedom of choice, and the question is: Are we making the most of this freedom? After all, the fact of action and the fact that we can change our minds and change our actions are neutral facts. They can go either way. We can cause a lot of suffering through our actions, just as we can cause a lot of happiness. So we have to be careful.

This is where another quality comes in. It's called heedfulness, realizing that because we have this freedom, we have to be very, very careful with that freedom to make sure we don't abuse it.

This is why the Buddha said that skillfulness starts with heedfulness, realizing that our actions are important. So you start paying very careful attention to your actions, to your mind, realizing that this is your most important possession. And it can go either way. Just like money: You can spend money in ways that do a lot of good; you can spend money in ways that do a lot of evil. The money itself is neutral. Our use of it is what can turn it into a force for good or for evil.

So you have to be very careful with this principle of action, very careful with your mind. This is the kind of reflection that keeps us on the path, keeps us going, because the path is not a short path. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that there are four kinds of practice. There's the quick and pleasant; the quick and painful; the long and pleasant; and the long and painful. As for the people for whom it's quick and easy, most of them have already done their practice. That leaves just us. And we can't decide which kind of practice ours is going to be. Of course if we could vote, everybody would say, "I'd like it quick and easy." Some people might say, "Well, I'll settle for long and easy." But we can't vote that way.

So if you find that if your practice is long and hard, long and painful, you've got to keep yourself going. You have to be a self-starter. These reflections on heedfulness, these reflections on freedom, conviction, can help keep you going. Because the actions that we do, the intentions that we act on: They don't number just a few every day. We're constantly intending this, intending that. In fact, that's how we have an experience of the present moment to begin with: It's a combination of past intentions and present intentions. We can't do much about the past intentions, but we can focus on and change the present ones. And we have to realize that they're important. We can't just slough them off. If you find yourself getting lazy or discouraged in the practice, you've got to find ways of picking yourself up, dusting yourself off, and asking yourself, "Do you really love yourself? Do you really wish true happiness for yourself?"

Like that passage we chant every day: "May I be happy." Our immediate reaction of course is, "Yes, of course, I want to be happy." But look at your actions. Do you act like a person who wants to be happy? Or are you just going through the motions? This is the question we have to ask ourselves all the time, because our actions are determined by our intentions. We can't have someone else come in and clean up our act. We've got to do it ourselves. And it doesn't get easier as you get older. You've noticed how people get more and more ingrained in their ways

as they get older. So you can't put it off. And, of course, you don't know how much more time you have.

So always make a point of looking at yourself right now. This teaching on kamma: We tend to think of it as being a teaching about past lives and future lives, and really irrelevant for our practice. But the whole thrust of the teaching is, "What are you doing right now?" Or as the Buddha says in one of his questions for daily reflection, "What have I become as days and nights fly past?" Look at what kind of person you're becoming, given the habits you've been picking up, the habits that you've been training yourself in—regardless of whether you consciously regard yourself as being in training in that particular habit. A habit of laziness, a habit of carelessness: We don't think of ourselves as training ourselves in those directions, but if it's a choice that you keep making over and over and over again, that's the training you're giving yourself. So ask yourself: "What kind of training am I giving myself right now, right now?" What kind of training would you like to give yourself in the best of all possible worlds? Well, do that. That's how you make this the best of all possible worlds. You can't wait for the conditions around you to become ideal on their own. But you can make a difference in what you're deciding to do right now.

And part of you would say, "Well, maybe I can keep it up a little while but I can't trust yourself to keep it for a long period of time." You have to say in response, "That's a decision you'll be making later down the line. But try to make the best decision you can right now." Each time you do that, you strengthen a good habit in the mind. As for all the voices in your head that say, "I can't really do this; I don't know if I'm up for it," you don't have to listen to them. No matter how convincing they may seem, you have the right to say, "No. I want to do what's right right now. I want to do what's skillful right now. And as for how long I'm going to be able to keep it up, that's a decision to be made further down the line. But for right now, I want to do what I know is skillful."

It's like discovering that you have a little tiny muscle that you never knew about before. You start exercising it. And with exercise it gradually becomes strong. Right now it may seem small and weak, but the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. Even though there may be some setbacks, you can just say, "Well, try it again." And finally you get to the point where the strength of your skillful muscles, the muscles in your mind, overwhelms the unskillful ones. Your training goes in a new direction. So ask yourself, "Do I really love myself? If I really loved myself, what would I do?" Then you do that. If you do that frequently enough, it really will make a difference.