

Heedfulness

March 13, 2015

Something the Buddha has us think about every day is that, now that we're born, there's going to be aging, there's going to be illness, and there's going to be death. There's going to be separation from those we love.

If the reflection stopped there, it would just be very depressing. But then it goes on: "We're heirs to our actions, born of our actions. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir."

There's a warning in there, but also an expression of hope. We have the power of choice. There are times, of course, when we would rather not have the power of choice, or at least not be responsible for things we do. Some of our decisions we'd like to have in the no-karma zone. Yet there are other decisions we'd like to have extremely influential in how our lives will progress—which is not really fair. If you're going to be consistent and honest with yourself, you have to take responsibility for what you choose to do and responsibility for the results of those choices, both when they're skillful and when they're not.

Now, the reason there's hope there, of course, is that we can make a difference. We can choose what path we're to take. We can reflect on the mistakes we made in the past and learn from them.

When the Buddha introduced karma to his son Rahula, he didn't start out by saying, "You bad boy. You've done all these bad things in the past and you're going to have to burn in hell for them." That's not what he said. In fact, he didn't mention hell at all the first time around.

What he emphasized were the positive things about karma: that giving really is true; generosity is true; gratitude is a worthwhile emotion. In other words, when people helped you, it was their choice to help you. Often they had to go out of their way and face a lot of difficulties. For that they deserve your gratitude. If everything were predetermined, there'd be no need to be generous, because things would just happen on their own. You wouldn't have to go out of your way to be generous. As for the people who helped you, they had to help you. There'd be no need for gratitude. But the virtues that make life as human beings together really worthwhile—generosity and gratitude—really have a basis in the way the world works. That's true only in a world where people do have choices and are responsible for their choices.

When the Buddha was teaching Rahula, one, he seemed to be getting down on Rahula for apparently having told a lie that day, because that's the first topic he

talked about: the need never to lie, even in jest. But then he went on to say, “Look at your actions. Before you do something, think about what the consequences are going to be. If it’s going to harm anybody—you or anyone else, don’t do it.”

It’s interesting—elsewhere the Buddha talks about what it means to harm other people: It’s to get them to break the precepts, or intentionally get them to give rise to passion, aversion and delusion. That kind of thing, he said, is harmful to them. In other words, you don’t treat them simply as objects of your own actions. You realize that they, too, are agents, and they’re going to be experiencing the results of their actions. So you don’t want to influence them to do things that will be harmful for them down the line.

If you don’t foresee any harm coming from the action you’re intending to do, go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, check the results again. If something unexpectedly harmful comes up, you stop. You have that choice: You can stop. Many times we forget this. We find ourselves doing something bad and say, “Oh, what the hell,” and just continue doing it. But you have to remember, if you find yourself in the middle of doing something unskillful, you have the chance to say, “No! I’m going to stop right here.”

If you don’t see anything unskillful coming up, you keep on with the action until it’s done.

When the action is done, then you can reflect on what the long-term results really were. If you made a mistake—something you thought was okay but it turned out not to be okay—talk it over with someone experienced on the path. Then make up your mind not to repeat that mistake ever again.

When you think about the attitude that, if you had a child, you would like the child to take toward his or her actions, the Buddha’s teaching on karma explains what a really sane, healthy attitude toward action would be. You teach the child to be considerate of others, you teach the child to be responsible for his or her actions. And to have integrity: If you make a mistake you’re open about it. You admit it to yourself and you’re willing to admit it to others so that you can learn.

All this is very healthy. So it’s something of a mystery why the teaching on karma is so disliked in Western culture. Actually, it really makes a lot of sense and it’s extremely healthy for us to reflect on it. When we understand the teaching, we’ll realize that it allows us to have the power of choice and for our choices to have an impact.

This means we’ve got to be heedful. As the Buddha said, heedfulness is the beginning of all skillfulness. We’d like to think that we’re naturally good. But when we think that, we start hiding other things from ourselves about what’s going on in the mind. Things that don’t fit in with our good image of ourselves get

pushed aside. Things that we'd like to have other people see in us, we tend to create out of whole cloth.

So it's better to be open with yourself that there are skillful and unskillful urges in the mind, and you want to know how to sort them out. A large part of discernment is just this: sorting out what's skillful in the mind, what's unskillful, and then doing what you can to give rise to the skillful and to abandon the unskillful. If you deny that anything unskillful is there, how are you going to abandon it? If you're not willing to judge what's skillful and unskillful, you won't know what to do with what.

So look at heedfulness as your friend. This is the part of the mind that says, "Hey, down the line these are going to be the results of that action. Are you sure you want to do that?" You don't want that voice to be oppressive but you do want it to be there, pointing out the truth. And you do want to get the other members of the committee in your mind to listen to what it has to say.

It's like teachers in school. There are some teachers who are really friendly but they don't really teach us all that much. They let us have a good time, and when you come away from the class you're not all that sure that you learned all that much. Then there are others who you tend not to like. You can think back and probably remember a couple who were really harsh on you, very demanding. But, you learned a lot. You've got to have that kind of teacher in your mind.

Ajaan Fuang would often talk about how you need a teacher looking after you all day and all night, setting out the lesson plan for the day and then making sure you follow it. Now, you want that teacher to be kind, but kind in a long-term sort of way: not just hoping that you're happy and entertained but wanting you to learn. These are skills you've got to learn about how to manage things inside your own mind, so that you can take charge of your own life.

That's what the Buddha's really good about: He wants us all to be mature adults. He wants us all to be responsible so that we can look after ourselves with ease, in line with that wish in the expression of goodwill. It applies to us, and when we have goodwill for others it means we think that of them as well: "May this person look after him or herself with ease. May all these beings learn what it takes to find true happiness and have the strength to carry it through."

So in that reflection karma lies our hope. It's kind of a warning, but the warning is there for heedfulness. It is possible to make mistakes and then do things you're going to regret. So you want to prepare yourself in advance so that you're not going to give in to those kinds of impulses.

All too often, we look back on our lives and say, "Oh my gosh, that was a mistake," or, "I wish this had been different or if that had been different." Well,

those things we can't go back and change, but we can change what we're doing now.

When you look carefully at what you're doing, how you're using your time... as they say in Thai, "Time eats up all beings at the same time that it eats itself up." So while you're being chewed on by time, what can you get out of the choices available to you? What can you get out of the strengths you still have?

You may know about that collection of Dhamma talks that Ajaan Maha Boowa gave to the woman who had cancer. After the woman returned home and died, her friend, a doctor who'd been with her, suddenly found that she had all the tapes. Here she was, she was in her eighties herself, her eyesight wasn't all that good, but she decided to transcribe them. There was something positive she could do. So even though her eyesight was failing and she had lots of other physical difficulties, she was able to transcribe all those tapes and leave behind a really important book, actually two volumes, always bearing in mind what Ajaan Maha Boowa had told her: As your body allows you less and less time and energy, focus on the things that you *can* do. Squeeze as much goodness out of your body as you can.

All of us, as long as we're breathing, have the power of choice. So try to learn which choices are the good ones and follow through with that knowledge. That's how you show goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others, goodwill all around: by being as heedful as you can.