

Reflections on Kamma

November 2, 2015

The passages where the Buddha teaches children are some of the most interesting passages in the Canon. And they're good to reflect on even though we're not children. After all, parts of our minds are children. It's also the fact that when the Buddha was teaching his son, for example, he put a lot of thought into what would be the most important things to teach: How could he boil down the essence of the teachings so that his son could understand it, put it into practice, and also have a lesson that would serve him well into his adulthood?

So when all the concepts of the Dhamma start seeming to proliferate out of control, it's good to come back to the basic principles—both for your own practice and also if you have any dealings with children. It's good to think about how you might bring these principles when you teach them.

The Buddha starts out with the principle of truthfulness. You get the impression when you read the passage that his son had told a lie that day. When the Buddha comes to see his son, Rahula, Rahula sets out some water with a dipper for the Buddha to wash his feet. The Buddha washes his feet with the water and leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. Then he asks Rahula, "Do you see this little bit of water in the dipper?" "Yes." "That's how little goodness there is in someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame." You can imagine Rahula cringing a little bit.

The Buddha takes the water and throws it away and says, "See how that water's thrown away?" "Yes." "That's what happens to the goodness of a person who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame. It gets thrown away like that."

Then he turns the dipper upside down, "See how the dipper is turned upside down?" "Yes, yes, yes." "That's what happens to the goodness of a person who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame. It gets turned upside down."

Then he shows Rahula how empty and hollow the

dipper is. And of course that's a symbol for how empty and hollow a person's goodness is if they have no sense of shame over telling a deliberate lie.

The Buddha goes on to say, "If you're willing to tell lies with no sense of shame, then there's no evil you won't do." He gives the image of an elephant. If the elephant goes into battle but protects its trunk, it's a sign that there are certain things it won't do. But if it doesn't protect its trunk, then it can do anything.

So if you protect the principle of not telling a deliberate lie, there are certain unskillful things you will not do.

In this way, the Buddha starts out with the principle of truthfulness. Elsewhere, he says that what he wants in a student is someone who's truthful, who doesn't hide things, who is open about his faults, is open about areas where he needs further training.

The second thing he wants is someone who's observant. And in this particular case it's a matter of being observant of what you're doing, why you're doing it, and what results you get.

This is reflected in his second lesson to Rahula: "You look into your actions as you look into a mirror to see your face. Before you act, you ask yourself, 'This action I'm going to do,' — and this could be in thought, in word, or in deed — 'What results do I expect?' If you expect any harm either to yourself or others, then as the Buddha said, that sort of action should not be done at all. If you don't expect any harm, go ahead and do it.

But while you're doing it, keep an eye out for the results that are coming. Because some of the things you do will not wait until the next lifetime to show their results. Put your finger in the fire and it's not going to be the next lifetime that you get the finger burned. It's going to get burned right now. So if you see any harm that's coming that you didn't expect, you stop doing what you're doing. If not, you can keep on doing it.

When you're done, you're still not done. You have to look at the long-term results, because some actions don't show their results immediately. They take time. But if you see that something you did led to some harm, you resolve not to repeat it. If it was an act in body or speech, you then go talk it over with someone else more advanced on

the path—you want to look for someone who is experienced so they can give you good advice as to what you might have done instead—and see what recommendations you get. Then you resolve not to repeat the mistake. If it was something that you simply thought that led to bad results—in other words, it damaged your mind—you don't have to tell anybody else, but you still try to develop a sense of shame around the act.

Shame, here, is not the debilitating kind of sense of shame that psychiatrists talk about and try to get people past. The shame that the Buddha is talking about is the opposite, not of self-esteem, but of shamelessness. In fact, it's the healthy shame that comes from having a high sense of self esteem, realizing that certain things are beneath you. Then you resolve not to repeat the mistake.

As the Buddha said, anybody who's going to purify their thoughts, words and deeds: This is how they do it. This is how you get past delusion.

We were talking the other day about it's easy to see when you're angry, it's easy to see when you're greedy, but when you're deluded you can't see because you're deluded. The way around that double bind is to learn by observing your actions.

So this is that second quality the Buddha looked for in a good student: someone who was observant.

Now there are a lot of implications to these teachings. First, having to do with the qualities of mind you're trying to develop. The first quality is heedfulness, realizing that your actions do have results and that you want to be very careful because sometimes they can cause harm. There's also the implication that your intentions do make a difference, so you want to act on compassionate intentions: In other words, you don't want to cause any harm. And you need to have sense of integrity: If you make a mistake, you want to be open about it—because if you can't be open to other people about your mistakes, you're often not open to yourself. So those are some of the qualities of mind we're trying to develop as we practice: integrity, truthfulness, heedfulness, compassion.

But the instructions also have some implications about what actions can do in our lives. After all, as the Buddha said, if you believe that everything you experience was

caused by some outside power, or was totally random, or was totally determined by something done in the past, there's no way you can practice. You need to have a sense that what you're doing right now can make a difference. So the basic assumption here is that we do have some freedom of choice. We are responsible for our actions, and our actions really do have results.

Some people say the Buddha never answered metaphysical questions but, because he was teaching a path of action, this is a metaphysical issue he had to address: the fact that actions really do shape our lives. As the Buddha said, he can't prove it to you ahead of time. But if you take that as a working hypothesis, you find that you get more skillful in your actions, your life begins to improve.

And if you take this principle all the way, it leads to awakening. When you achieve awakening, that's when you realize that it really is true: Your actions do make a difference. And it's the intentions behind them that determine what the actions are going to be and the direction their results are going to go, both now and on into the future.

Finally, the implications as to what we have to do to practice: We have to be alert to what we're doing, alert to why we're doing it, and alert to the results we're getting. We have to be ardent, putting our heart into trying to do it well. So that's alertness, ardency, and then when you learn their lessons, you want to remember them so that you can apply them next time: That's mindfulness.

So all these teachings that we associate with the Buddha about the qualities of mind we want to develop, the principle of action, the importance of action, and also the qualities of mind we need specifically to develop as we meditate and develop mindfully: They all come from this instruction.

You see that the Buddha's packing a lot into his words to Rahula, so they're good words to keep in mind. When we read about the Buddha's teachings, and things start getting complex, remember these principles because they apply to your daily life, they apply to your meditation. They also apply to your sense of what you can accomplish in life, and where you should focus your attention to get

there. You want to focus your attention on doing things skillfully, which means that you have to focus your attention on your intentions because they're going to shape your life.

This is why we practice meditation, so that we can get to know our intentions well. We begin to sort out which ones are skillful, which ones are not. We develop concentration so that we can have the strength, one, to see these things: the continuity of attention so that we can see actions, their results, and the connection between the two.

Then, second, we also need concentration as food, because looking at your own faults is not a pleasant thing. You need the pleasure and the sense of fullness and refreshment that come from concentration so that you can look at your actions and not get knocked over when you realize you've done something unskillful or when you uncover some unskillful habits of mind that you had denied were there.

The strength of concentration, the sense of being nourished by your concentration, also give you the strength you need in order to say No to unskillful intentions. A lot of them will come and say, "Well, I can tempt you with this little bit of instant pleasure." In other words, while you're doing the action it's going to be pleasant, and who cares what happens afterwards? If the mind is weak, it'll give in. You want the strength to be able to say No to unskillful things that are pleasant to begin with but cause trouble down the line. You also need the strength to say Yes to actions that are hard to begin with but you know are going to give good results in the long term.

So everything comes out of this principle of action. It's good to reflect on it. This is why we chant it every day: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, all living beings are the owners of their actions and heir to their actions."

This reflection is good for lots of different things. As part of the five recollections: We start out with reflections on aging, illness, death, and separation—and it's all pretty depressing. If we stop there, it's depressing. But if we go on to that fifth contemplation, that shows the way out. We

may not be the owner of our bodies as we age, we may not be in control over whether our relationships are going stay with us, but we do have some control over our actions, and the goodness that we do with our actions doesn't disappear. It becomes our foundation. The quality of mind that goes along with this reflection is called *pasada*, a sense of confidence that you can focus on your actions and they'll provide you with the protection you need, the support you need, as you face the difficulties of life.

Then the reflection goes from there to reflect on how *all* living beings are the owners of their actions. In one context, it's listed as a reflection for equanimity. What this means is that there are times when you want to help somebody and you can't. Either they refuse the help, or no matter how much you try to help them and no matter how much they're willing to get your help, something still gets in the way. That's when you have to realize that there are limitations on how much you can do. So you put aside the things that you can't change so that you can focus on things that you can.

In another context, the reflection on how all living beings are the owners of their actions is meant to induce *samvega*—realizing that wherever you might go in the cosmos, even in the deva realms, *kamma* still reigns. There's no place anywhere where you can come to the end of having to keep on making the effort to act skillfully unless you make it to *nibbana*.

So this reflection on *kamma* is useful in all aspects of the practice. When we're spreading thoughts of goodwill, what are we actually saying? We're saying, "May all beings understand the causes of true happiness and act on them." It's not the fact that our thought of goodwill is like a magic wand that's going to spread happiness and light in whichever direction we point it. What we're doing is getting our intentions straight: that we don't want to cause anybody any harm and we're happy to help other people as they work on their own quest for happiness. Again, it comes down to our actions. If there are no actions to support the quest for happiness, it's not going to happen.

So whenever you have any questions about what the

Buddha taught, what the implications are, always try to connect everything to the principle of kamma: that we choose our actions, and the more attention we bring to the process, the more mindfulness, alertness, and ardency we bring to the process, then the wider our range of choices will be. And we learn how to take advantage of this fact that we do have these choices.

This freedom of choice is one level of freedom. It's not the ultimate freedom but it's where we begin to gain a sense of freedom in our lives. If we pursue this issue, we find that it leads us out to a different kind of freedom: a freedom that's not conditioned at all.

So the basics that the Buddha taught Rahula are not things that you learn when you're a little child and then you forget as you grow older. They're the kind of basics that you keep with you all the time.

It's like when you're playing tennis. The first lesson is keep your eye on the ball. You never forget that. Even when you become a great pro, you still have to keep your eye on the ball. In the same way, when you practice, keep your eye on your actions, because that's where everything will become clear.