

## *The Stakes Are High*

*January 5, 2016*

Of those five reflections that we chant so often, the first four are downers: aging, illness, death, separation. We don't like to think about these things, but they're there. When you're young, you don't think aging is going to happen to you. When you're healthy, you don't think illness can come. And death seems far away. But these things have a way of creeping up on you. Actually, they're already there in your body. The fact that your body doesn't show any signs of aging means simply that its repair faculty is still good. It's like all the colors in leaves. The red and other colors that we see in the fall are actually there in the leaves throughout the year. It's just that they're covered by the green of the chlorophyll. When the chlorophyll drains out, that's when you see the other colors. The same with aging: The process of aging is happening all the time. The muscles in the body, the bones in the body—they're getting worn down, worn down. And they get built up again. What happens as you're getting older, is that the building-up process gets weaker and weaker.

It was this kind of reflection that made the Buddha lose his pride in youth, health, life. The typical young person looks down on old people. The healthy person looks down on sick people. And the fact that he was alive, he looked down on dead people. When you're young, you see old people and you say, "They let themselves get old." Probably, though, they did as much as they could not to. But it's inevitable. These things don't really lie in wait for all of us. They're already happening all the time.

The fifth reflection offers a way out, but it's partly consoling and partly scary. Everything depends on your actions: Your health, your happiness, all the good things in life depend on your actions being good, both now and in the past. There's something to be scared about right there. You don't know what your past actions were. There's a statement you hear sometimes that if you want to see a person's past actions, you look at his or her present condition. If you want to see a person's future condition, you look at his or her present actions. But that's not true. The assumption behind that statement is that karma is a single bank account and what you see now is the running balance. But karma's a lot more complex than that.

Each of us has a huge karmic field, with all kinds of seeds we've been planting in the past. What we see now are just some of the seeds sprouting. As for the ones

that haven't sprouted yet, you don't know what they have in store for you. So it's a little bit scary thinking about karma.

The good part, of course, is that you can work in the present moment to put good karma into the process. And the way you process things coming in from the past will make all the difference between whether you suffer from them or not. This is why we meditate focused on the present moment, so that we can see the mind in action, see what it's doing, and learn to do it more skillfully.

When you stay here with the breath, it's a kind of karma. If you develop the right attitude as you're working with the breath—the patience to sit with things for a while; the ability to know where to focus or not to focus; what you can do so that when a pain comes up in one part of the body, how you can take the good breath energy in another part and see if it helps—you're not totally at the mercy of your past karma. You learn new skills in the present moment. And the more clearly you see what's going on in the present moment, the more precise those skills are going to be.

There are lots of different things happening here. When we focus on the breath and try to get the mind to a sense of being one and concentrated, we want to bring things together. At that point, the dividing lines get blurred. Your awareness seems one with the body. The feeling of pleasure seems to be one with the breath. Let it be that way for a while. As these things come together, they then gradually separate out. Ajaan Lee's image is of different metals in a hunk of rock. You can't take a pick axe and separate the metals out, but you can apply heat to the rock. As the temperature reaches one point, one of the metals will liquefy and come out. Then as you raise the temperature, another one will liquefy and come out, and so on up, until they all separate out naturally.

It's the same with the concentration. Your breath, your body, your awareness all seem to be one when things are going well. As the breath calms down, the sense of the body seems to get less clearly defined. You can see that having a sense of body depends on the movement of the breath, and as the movement of the breath energy grows still, the body turns into a mist, with no clearly defined boundary. You can focus on the space between the drops of the mist. There you are: awareness without a sense of the body. Even though you're right here, you begin to realize the extent to which you create your sense of the body through your perceptions.

The perceptions are the ones that tell you where your hands are right now, so if you need to do something with your hands, you know which muscles to activate. But as you're sitting very still, you don't need that knowledge. You don't need to make those assumptions. You don't need to send those messages back and forth

inside the mind. Those perceptions can grow still. This way, you begin to see the extent to which you are shaping the present moment out of whatever potentials you have here right now, and that offers some hope. Can you learn how to shape things in a better way?

In fact, the power of present karma is so great.... Read the story of Angulimala, who'd murdered so many people. But he was able to gain awakening so that he didn't have to suffer from those past actions. The suffering he had was minimal. People were still upset that he'd basically gotten away with murder. Sometimes, when he was on his alms round, they would throw things at him. One time he came back from his alms round with a big gash on his head. Somebody'd thrown a pot at him. The Buddha saw him and said, "Take courage. This is a lot better than what could have happened if you hadn't attained awakening."

So the power of present karma is very strong. You can take bad potentials from the past and change them into something, if not good in the present moment, at least something you don't have to suffer from. So try to work with these skills that we develop here, getting more and more sensitive to what you're doing.

Now, of course, there are limits to what you can do. And the fact that you have to keep working, working, working in the present moment to handle things well—that's a sign that the work still isn't done.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. In the first watch of the night, he recollected his past lives. You can imagine that one of the questions that went through his mind was, "Is there a particular level of the universe that you get born onto where you don't have to come back? Is there some level you can attain where your work is done?"

In the second watch of the night, he had a vision of the whole universe: beings dying, and then being reborn in line with their karma. The fact that it was their karma that determined where they were going meant that the causes were impermanent. And so the results would have to be impermanent, too, even for the highest levels of the gods up in the Brahma levels. They'd stay for a while and then they would fall back down again. So time and space are defined by our actions. There's nothing in the cosmos that's permanent. The Buddha's word for this was *samsara*: the wandering on. And wandering on, *samsara*, is not a place. It's an activity.

So, he began to realize that you can't hope for permanent happiness, say, after the end of this life, or someplace out there. So he reflected again, "What is this karma that people do? It's their intentions, which are shaped by their views." Then the question was, "Are there any intentions or views that would create a kind of karma that leads to the end of karma?" That's the only thing that would lead to

true happiness, a deathless happiness, where you're finally safe from aging, illness, and death. That was one of his most remarkable insights.

Instead of looking out there for the solution, he turned around again and looked back in here. That's how he found all the factors of the noble eightfold path. As you put them together, they do create the kind of karma that can lead to the end of karma. It's only then that you're really safe. So that reflection on karma is both comforting and a little bit scary.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once made a comment that people who like to plan their next lives—making merit here, being generous there, building this, building that, hoping to secure their palace in heaven—don't really believe in rebirth. They still think you can get to one place and it'll solve all your problems. Well, no. You can get to a good place in the cycle of rebirth, but then you'll have to fall from there. And when you fall, it hurts.

Ajaan Fuang had a number of students who were extremely picky people, and his comment was, "They were devas in a previous lifetime, and the human realm is not good enough for them, so they're dissatisfied." Being a deva can have its good side, but it can also have its bad side. You learn bad habits sometimes, if you're not careful. Again, this is not always the case. Just as the Buddha observed, there are wealthy people who find it very easy to abandon huge amounts of wealth and go out and practice the Dhamma. There are poor people who find it hard to abandon their one little pot and their one little shack. And it's the same with devas. Some of them are very good Dhamma practitioners and some are not.

What matters is having a sense of heedfulness that stays with you, regardless of where you go, along with the realization that as long as you're still subject to aging, illness, and death, your only hope is your karma. But even your karma is an iffy thing. The workings of karma are very complex. You can spend a whole lifetime doing good, but it turns out you've got some bad karma from the past that's going to come in and take charge for a while. Or you've been doing good all your life and suddenly at the last moment, you suddenly regret it. You decide you don't believe in it anymore. That can happen. And it can get in the way of the good actions showing their results, at least for a while.

Sometimes you hear people say that the Buddha taught karma, or monks in the tradition added karma to the Buddha's teachings later, as a way of making people feel comfortable and soothed. But karma is actually a scary kind of thought. It has its potentials, but also has its pitfalls. So we have to work at doing the best we can. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was, one, the effort he put in and, two, the sense of not resting content with the skillful qualities he had developed. He didn't stop until he had found something that was

beyond skillfulness—something truly deathless, outside of space and time. As long as you haven't tasted that dimension, you're still not safe. But we do have this potential here for getting there. That's the good news.

So learn how to use the teaching on karma. On days when you're feeling discouraged, look at the good side: You can make a difference. On the days when you're getting complacent, think about the drawbacks—because karma has both. Learn to master your actions, your thoughts, your words, your deeds, as a skill. As they say, people who master a skill have a strong sense of the dangers that come from not mastering it and the strong sense that the rewards that come when you do master it. So they're willing to put in the effort and the energy and the desire and the persistence and the intentness and the powers of analysis—everything they can bring to bear on this, because the stakes are high.