

Patience & Hope

July 5, 2017

The reflection on kamma appears in two of our regular chants. In one, it's in the context of the four *brahmaviharas* or the sublime attitudes. It's meant to induce equanimity. You think about the fact that people have their kamma, you have your kamma, and sometimes as results of past kamma there are things that can't be changed, at least not for the time being. So here the reflection on kamma teaches equanimity. It teaches patience.

As the Buddha pointed out, the principle that “whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir” implies rebirth as well as kamma. It's our working hypothesis. Without rebirth, the principle of kamma doesn't jive with the facts. There are many cases in the world where people break the precepts but they get rewarded. If you were to say that actions are always rewarded in kind in this lifetime, it's obviously not true.

So the Buddha invites you to think about the long term—and we're talking about really long here. In his own case, in his awakening he thought back many, many lifetimes, thousands and thousands of eons—thousands and thousands of universes, actually, forming and then falling away—back so far that he said that the beginning point is not only unknowable, it's also inconceivable. In the course of that long, long time, you've probably done lots of things, you've been lots of different beings in lots of different situations. As he said, it would be hard to find someone now who hasn't at one point in that long time been your mother or your father, or your sister or your brother, or your son or your daughter.

Some of that past kamma has ripened and fallen to the wayside; other past actions are still giving their results. Sometimes you simply have to live with them: things about yourself you can't change, things about the situation around you that you can't change, things about the situation with other people who you love or hate that you can't change.

When you take the long, long view like this, it makes a lot of your problems in your present lifetime seem pretty small. It helps give you some equanimity, gives you some patience. Because there are a lot of things in life that, if you thought, “This is your one lifetime, this is your one chance,” would strike you as very unfair. It would be hard to live with the idea that, say, someone smeared your name and you couldn't get it un-smeared. Other people who don't seem to have any right to power have taken over a lot of power. But if you take the long view of things, you realize that this is going to pass, and this is not your only chance. It makes it a lot easier to live with the things you can't change, and focus on the ones you can.

You could make a case that the Buddha's reflections on kamma are very un-American, if we define “American” as being in line with the Declaration of Independence. There's no creator, there are no rights, and we're not born equal. Some people are born good-looking, other people are born ugly; some people are born with a healthy body, some people with an unhealthy body. Some people are long-lived, short-lived, powerful, weak, wealthy, poor. So we come into the

world not equal. But as the Buddha said, the important thing is not how you come into the world. It's how you go out.

That's where the other reflection on kamma comes in, in the five reflections. They talk about how we're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, but then: "We are the owners of our actions." In this case, the reflection on kamma is basically a reflection on confidence, or you could say it's a reflection on hope: We can get past the suffering from aging, illness, death, and separation if we train our minds well. Because the actions of the mind as we meditate are a kind of kamma, too. This is where our hope lies. We have the opportunity not to be determined by our past actions. There is an element of freedom in your choice.

This is the area where Buddhism *is* very American. One, it points to freedom. Two, it points to independence. Three, it points to the pursuit of happiness. Happiness *is* something you can pursue, through getting more and more skillful in your actions. And where do your actions come from? From the mind. So skill in your words and deeds has to come from skill in the mind—which is what meditation is all about. We're developing the skills of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency; the skills of concentration and discernment, that will allow us not to be overcome by the results of past actions, and to see our way clear—that regardless of what situation we find ourselves in, we can choose the skillful way out.

As the Buddha says, some of us are born in darkness, some of us are born in light. Darkness means being born in poor circumstances, with small chances for education—lots of difficulties in life. Being born in light means that things are easy, things are comfortable when you come in. But he says that how you come is not what's important. What's important is how you go: whether you go in darkness or go in light. And that's not determined by how you came. Some people can come in darkness and go in light. In other words, they develop the precepts, they train their minds, and they're headed in a good direction. Other people are born in brightness and go in darkness. They don't follow the precepts, they're not generous, they don't train their minds.

So we have the choice. This means that the reflection on kamma, the reflection on rebirth, is not just a cultural artifact of the Buddha's time. In fact, during his time, the whole idea of kamma and rebirth and whether there's any connection between the two was hotly debated. Some people believed in rebirth; other people didn't. Some of those who believed in rebirth didn't believe that kamma had anything to do with it. So the Buddha wasn't just picking up ideas from his environment. Based on his awakening, he took a stance. And, as we know, he didn't take a stance on every issue of the time, so this for him was an important issue. One reason is that because learning how to accept things that you cannot change, when you take the long view, helps to relieve a lot of suffering. And learning to look at your actions as important and having long-term consequences also relieves a lot of suffering as well.

So give these teachings a chance. See how they can help you bear with things that otherwise would be unbearable. And see opportunities where otherwise you might not see them, or where you might get discouraged about trying to follow them through.

Someone asked the other day, “Given the situation in the world right now, what are you supposed to do? Just give up?” And I said, “No. There *is* the possibility things could collapse. But you work on developing good qualities of the mind in the meantime. Even if you don’t attain your particular goals in the world outside this time around, the fact that you’ve worked on the mind means that you’re carrying something good with you as you go.”

So the teachings on kamma and rebirth counsel both patience and equanimity on the one hand, and hope and confidence on the other. Try to take advantage of them. All too often we don’t know how to use these teachings, which is why we feel uncomfortable around them, but if you learn how to use them, you find that they’re really good tools. Just try to use them with skill.