

Faith in Karma

April 7, 2018

The Buddha recommends that reflection on karma: “I am the owner of my actions; all living beings are the owners of their actions; whatever I do, to that I will I fall heir; whatever they do, to that will they fall heir.” And it’s interesting to notice that in the different contexts, that reflection serves different purposes.

It’s based, of course, on the conviction that your actions really do make a difference. It’s a point that the Buddha can’t prove for you. As he says, you’ll know it when awakening comes that, “Yes, that was true.” It was because you had made choices and your choices had power that you were able to gain awakening. But up until that point, you don’t know for sure.

Still, you take it as a working hypothesis. Because you see that if you do, you’re more likely to act in skillful ways. If you don’t, you’re more likely to act in unskillful ways. If your actions don’t matter, why bother being careful about them? So that’s the basic premise—that your actions matter, that you’re making the choices, and that the quality of the result will depend on the quality of the intention that goes into the action. And the quality of the intention can’t be just good; it has to be skillful. That means it’s good plus devoid of delusion.

All too often we act on good intentions but we don’t really know what we’re doing. Or we’re not really clear on some of the underlying intentions that are lurking around our actions. Those kind of actions don’t necessarily give good results.

So we’re trying to work from skillful intentions. That means we take into consideration what we’ve learn from our actions. This is why the Buddha, when teaching Rahula, said not only to look at your intentions but also to look at the results of your actions as they’re happening and then after they’re done. This is based on the principle of causality, that some causes give results right away, others wait for a while. But when you look at those results and they’re bad, you resolve not to repeat those actions again. You’ve learned something. This means that you judge your actions both by your intentions and by the results. And you refine your intentions toward skillfulness by taking past results into consideration.

This is another thing you have to take on faith, which is that there is a pattern to cause and effect. It's not all random. It's pretty easy to look at life and think that it's fairly random—who dies, who doesn't die, who suffers a lot, who suffers only a little. As the Buddha said, you have to have a long, long, long understanding of rebirth and karma to see that, yes, the results of the action really do come out in line with the intention. Because sometimes it takes a very long time—many lifetimes—before the results of an action will ripen and show themselves.

This is another reason why you have to take the teaching on karma on faith, even though we don't like the word *faith* in Buddhist circles. Most of us have left another religion because of its unreasonable faith demands, but here, what are you being asked to believe? Actions do follow a pattern. And you can learn that pattern by looking at your intentions, looking at the results. You're able to learn. That's one of the best assumptions you can make. And then based on that, you can use this contemplation to help you get more skillful in your actions.

As for that contemplation of the five reflections, the Buddha says that all five together are meant to induce heedfulness.

You look at all the things that you could be going for and realizing that life is short—aging, illness, and death are creeping up all the time. As they say in the Thai translation of that chant, these things are normal. Separation from the people and things we love, that's normal. All we have to hold on to is our actions. When you think in those ways, you realize that you've got to be very careful in the ways you act. That reflection induces heedfulness.

But in so doing, the reflection on karma is a little bit different from the others. The others—when you look at them—are pretty depressing. They give rise to a sense of *samvega*. You think of all the things you do in life, and they're all going to end. And you pick up the pieces and you put them back together again, and they go to pieces again. Again and again and again. What's the way out? Your actions. In this sense, the reflection on karma induces a sense of *pasada*—a sense of confidence that there *is* a way out. That you can find it. That it's something within your power.

This is a message that the world around us tends to stomp on. Which is why, when you're away from the monastery, you have to be very careful about your values. Don't let the world stomp on your values—the conviction that a timeless,

deathless happiness *is* possible, and that whatever efforts you put in that direction are well directed.

The world will say otherwise. They'll say, "That kind of happiness is impossible, nobody has ever really attained it." You get psychotherapists writing books about the Buddha, saying what a deluded, depressed person he was. Or maybe not the Buddha. Maybe the monks who transmitted his teachings. This is something that always amazes me. There are people who say that the Buddha was a great teacher but the people who he taught didn't understand what he was saying. If they didn't understand what he saying, he wasn't a great teacher.

As he said, the Dhamma was well taught. His disciples had practiced well, in line with the Dhamma. And so the message they've transmitted to us is a good message. We want to keep that message alive in our hearts. Because, as with people practicing the Dharma anywhere in the world, it's counter-cultural.

Even in societies that are nominally Buddhist, the people who practice are the exception. The values of the society at large tend to go off in other directions— simply that in those societies some of the values of Buddhism in terms of patience, endurance, generosity, and goodwill have seeped more into the society than this Moon we're on here in America, we in our little Moon colony. Still, the idea that you could really be practicing seriously for the sake of nibbana, that's something people even in those societies regard as going against the grain.

So wherever you are as a practitioner, you've got to maintain your values. And confidence in the power of your actions is an important value to maintain.

Now, the contemplation that all beings are the owners of their actions: That serves two functions as well. Again, there is a sense of *saṃvega* that wherever you go, no matter what level of being you might aspire to in this life or the next life, it all ends in aging, illness, and death. The good levels of beings are maintained by good actions. And you know how people are about good actions. Remember the Buddha's teaching that the mind can change so fast that there's nothing to compare it with how fast that is. That gives you a sense of how precarious the whole thing is, and should inspire even more dedication to want to find a way out.

But the reflection on everyone's karma is also a reflection to induce equanimity for the things that you can't change, particularly the things that you've already done in the past or the results of things that you've done in the

past. Not only things that you've done, but also things that other people have done. There are people who you want to help but you can't help them because of their karma. Sometimes you can't help them because of *your* karma. So instead of banging your head against the wall, against things you can't change, you learn to regard them with equanimity, and look around to see, "Well, what *can* I change?"

Because the most important things in life are things that you *can* change—your intentions, the state of your mind. This is why we meditate: so that we can see our intentions clearly and gain some more control over them, to turn them in a good direction. After all, what are you doing as you meditate? You're making up your mind you'll do something—you're going to focus on the breath. And then you want to make sure that no other intention comes in to divert you from where you really want to be, what you really want to do. And so you have to become more and more mindful, more and more alert, more discerning. You have to gain more concentration, so that you can see the mind more clearly. And given the sense of well-being that comes from concentration—the Buddha compares it to food—you're in a better position to say No to unskillful intentions.

So we practice equanimity not just to give up on things, but basically to channel our attention, channel our efforts in a fruitful direction.

So regardless of what the world is doing, of what the world says, we know that these assumptions are good assumptions. And you want to act on them.

Years back, I was writing an article for *Tricycle*, and I was saying that, if we assume that karma is real, we have to act in better ways. The editor was curious about that, and then he realized, "Oh, what you mean is that people actually act on their assumptions."

Because you look at most people's minds, they have all kinds of battling assumptions inside. Their mouths may be saying that they believe in one thing, but their actions are saying that they believe in something else. What the Buddha is trying to do is to get your mouth in line with your actions here—the theory in line with the actual choices you make. Because when you do that, you can develop something of substance.

This is why determination is one of the perfections. You make up your mind that this is what you want to do, and you try to put together everything that's

needed to make that happen. That includes having the right views to direct your actions and to help you reflect on what you're doing.

So when we talk about having faith in the principle of karma, it's not just saying, "Oh, yes, I think that's a good idea." It means that you have faith in the people who are teaching it. And you have so much faith that you actually try to act in line with it. The Buddha makes this point over and over again—your actions show what you really believe in. So when you believe in something, make sure that your actions are good.

That provides you not only with the theory but also with the appropriate emotions—a sense of *saṃvega*, a sense of *pasada*, heedfulness, equanimity—as these things are needed. This way, the teaching on karma is not just something that you give your intellectual assent to. It's something you assent to with your whole heart and you carry it out into your actions. Because this is how you benefit the most from it—as you bring your actions into line with the theory.

When the Buddha gained awakening, he learned an awful lot of things. But he taught only the things that he said are useful for putting an end to suffering. And the teaching on karma is one of those useful teachings. So learn how to make good use of it. And you'll find that the Buddha was right—it really is a necessary part of right view, to give you direction, to give you motivation, so that you can reach the point where you can confirm, "Yes, it is true."

But we're not just trying to confirm that. When you reach that point, you'll also find that you've found the ultimate happiness. And that's what this teaching is all about. Sometimes it seems as if karma is there to assign blame to people who are suffering or to say so-and-so deserves suffering. But that's not the case. That's a misuse of the teaching.

The teaching is there to point out that you have this power here in the present moment to do good or to do evil. So be very careful about how you use it. If you use it well, it can take you all the way to the goal that the Buddha found—a deathless happiness.

It's at that point that you really understand it. You understand not only the meaning of the words but also the purpose of the words—and that the Buddha was right. There is a deathless happiness that you can find through your actions—

that's the most important thing that he's right about. Everything else he teaches points in that direction.