

Owners of Our Actions

April 5, 2020

One of Ajaan Suwat's favorite teachings was that there are many things in Buddhism that are not-self. Form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness: These are all not-self. But then the Buddha has us reflect, "We're the owners of our actions." Kamma is not not-self. What we do is our responsibility. What we do is our refuge.

Given the situation now, it's good to remember what really is ours, what's not ours. Because with so many things that we hold on to, the more we hold on, the more they slip through our fingers—and as they slip through our fingers, they cut them. The Buddha's image is of being washed down a river, and you see grasses along the bank of the river, so you try to hold on to them for safety. But either the grasses get pulled out and uprooted and you get swept away, or they cut through your hands as you try to hold on to them. So many things in life are like that.

So what can we rely on? If our intentions are good, we can rely on our intentions. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to strengthen the mind's ability to create good intentions, to abandon unskillful ones—and then once we've created skillful intentions, to maintain them, so that we can have a better and better idea of what "skillful" means. This is our refuge. This is what we can depend on.

In the time of the Buddha, someone once asked a junior monk, "What are the results of action?" And he said, "Pain, stress." They said, "Well, I've never heard that from any Buddhist monk before." So the monk went back to see Ven. Ananda, and Ananda took him to see the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "That's not how you answer that question."

Another monk happened to be listening in and said, "Maybe he was thinking about the fact that all feelings are stressful. Kamma leads to feelings. Therefore all kamma leads to all stress and pain." And the Buddha said, "That's not how you answer that. When you talk about kamma, you have to talk about the three kinds of feelings." After all, you have the choice of acting. You want to know which kind of feeling you're going to be producing. After all, pleasure is preferable to pain. And who's going to be experiencing the pleasure? Either you in this lifetime or you in a subsequent lifetime.

As for the question of to what extent that other person will be you, the Buddha leaves up in the air. Even the extent to which you are the same person as you go through one lifetime: That's debatable. But there's a sense of "me" that keeps feeding on whatever's there. There's a continuity there. You look at your body now, and you feel it's your body. It's very different from what was

your body before. But this is the body you have available to you, so this is the one you hold onto as yours.

In a future lifetime, the body will be very different. You'll go from this body to another body based on your craving. And the options open to you will be dependent on your actions. But the new body would still be "your" body again, just as this body became "your" body when you moved from your last lifetime to this. The mind is like a hermit crab. The consciousness that goes from moment to moment to moment always has a sense of "me" as long as it's unawakened. And wherever it finds itself, whatever it latches onto, will also be "me," "mine," in the same way that a hermit crab goes from one shell to another. It doesn't have a shell of its own, so it finds an empty shell and moves in. If that shell gets destroyed, it searches around, finds another empty shell, moves into that. In each case, it's its shell. It protects the shell as long as it's able to. When it can't protect it anymore, it goes looking for a new one.

That's how the consciousness we have here, this process of consciousness, moves on, from moment to moment, always latching onto, "This is me," "This is mine." So as long as there's going to be clinging there, you try to give it something good to cling to, through your good actions. This way you provide for yourself now and on in the future.

So even though things are falling apart outside, make sure they don't fall apart inside. Remember that you do have something good you can hold onto. You can make the self its own mainstay. Ajaan Lee talks about this a lot. He says that we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but then again the Buddha says the self is its own mainstay, so how do you put those together? You do it by trying to develop the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha inside you, and then you can depend on yourself.

The Buddha gives a long list of ten factors that make you your own mainstay. I can't remember all ten of the factors, but one of the more interesting ones is the extent to which you are helpful to others: That is also your mainstay. You develop good qualities inside, and you share them outside. You develop the skills that are helpful to the life of the group. After all, even though we each are our own mainstays, we do have to depend on one another. For all that we're protecting ourselves and isolating ourselves, the virus is bound to come. If the virus doesn't come, other diseases will come. I was talking today to a number of people who—they themselves or their relatives—have other diseases that could prove fatal, but they can't get them treated now because the virus has taken over the hospitals. Illness and death find all kinds of ways to creep up on us.

So whichever way these things happen, we're going to have depend on one another. And one way to make sure that other people will be happy to help you is that you help them. You keep them in mind. Here's why I keep saying: At the

end of the day when you've done what you have to do, don't just think about what you want to do now. Ask yourself: "Do I have a little energy to do at least one more thing for someone else's well-being?" Make that a habit. That kind of habit then becomes something you can depend on.

And even though we're facing a lot of loss with the potential for illness, death, and separation, we have to remember that certain things are in our control. The body is not in our control. It is to some extent, but in a lot of areas you can't tell it what to be or do. You can't say, "May you be the kind of body that remains asymptomatic when the virus comes. May you be the kind of body that has resistance." You can't tell the body that. You can try to create the conditions as best you can, but that's something beyond your control.

But there are some things you *can* control. You *can* exert some control over what you do and you say and you think. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to gain some control. Because where do our actions come from? They come from our intentions. Where are you going to see your intentions in action so that you can straighten them out? While you're meditating. Just the simple act of noticing when the mind has wandered off and you bring it back; the simple act of noticing, "How can I breathe in a way that gives my mind a sense of comfort so that it wants to stay here": All these simple acts help put you more in control of the mind, the area where you are responsible and the area where you can be in charge. There's nobody in charge outside, but you can be in charge inside your mind. That's where you can find your refuge.

So do your best to make this refuge strong. Because otherwise, you'll have nothing to hold onto.