

## *Reflecting on Karma*

*November 16, 2021*

There's that reflection on karma that we chant every night. Sometimes we do it twice when we add the five reflections. The reflection that "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions," is a statement of confidence. The other reflections are that "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, haven't gone beyond these things. I'll be separated from all that is dear and appealing to me." You think about that and it can get you down. At the very least, it gives rise to a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dismay. What's the way out? It's through our actions. So we reflect on karma to give a sense of confidence that there is a way out of all this suffering.

There's a passage where the Buddha said that suffering gives rise to conviction. If you reflect on the fact that you're suffering and you don't want to stay there, you've got to get out. And there's the Buddha offering you his hand. "This is the way out." Of course, he can't pull you out; he's offering you a path that will require that you do your own work. That's why you have to have confidence in the principle of action—that it can have an impact on your suffering. You're not just a victim. You can come out victorious. After all, that's what the images of the path often say: unexcelled victory. Victory over what? Over our ignorance, over our craving, over all our foolish tendencies. Our ways of looking for happiness that don't really work out but we keep doing them again and again and again.

The Buddha says the reflection on action also gives rise to a sense of heedfulness, realizing that whatever you do for good or for evil, your actions really do make a difference.

There was one time when a young monk was asked, "What is the result of action?" and he replied, "All action results in pain." *Dukkha* is the word, which means pain or stress. The person asking the question replied, "I've talked to a lot of other monks, and they've never said anything like that. You'd better go back and check with the Buddha." So first the young monk went to Ven. Ananda, and Ananda took him in to see the Buddha. The Buddha said, "When you're asked about action, you don't say all actions result in pain." There was a monk nearby who interjected, "Maybe he was thinking about the fact that action results in feeling, and all feelings are stressful, right?" And the Buddha said, "When you're talking about actions, you talk about the three kinds of feelings: pleasant, painful, neither-pleasant-nor painful."

The point is that when you're talking about action, you're talking about the fact that you have a choice. It really does make a difference. If you just said that all feelings coming from actions are going to be stressful, why bother trying to be skillful? It's because some actions lead to more pain than others, more stress, more harm than others that you want to be very careful about what you do.

So that's another attitude that this reflection is suppose to give rise to: one of heedfulness.

Then from there it goes on to the reflection of all beings. When we have the chant about the brahmaviharas, the chant on equanimity says that all beings are the owners of their actions. In the context of the brahmaviharas, that's what that reflection is for: developing equanimity. You start out with goodwill and you realize that as long as you have ill will for anybody, you can't be trusted. So you've really got to work on maximizing your goodwill to the point where it's measureless. You want all beings to be happy.

But think about that for a while. What does it mean? What are you wishing for? On the one hand, you're basically making a statement for your own intentions. You want to make sure that whatever you do and say and think is not going to have a bad effect on other people's true happiness. But how are they going to gain true happiness? Through their actions. So you're basically wishing, "May all beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them."

Then compassion and empathetic joy, two of the other brahmaviharas, derive from that. Compassion is basically what goodwill feels when it sees people who are suffering or are creating the causes for suffering. You'd like to see them stop. Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when it sees people who actually are happy already or who are creating the causes for happiness.

It's actually a good test for your goodwill, because sometimes you see people are enjoying good fortune and you may resent it—either because you feel that you're lessened by their good fortune or because you see that they have that good fortune and they're misusing it. But you have to remind yourself: Here you are saying, "May all beings be happy," yet here's somebody who's happy. It makes you reflect: What kind of happiness are we talking about? The happiness that can be abused is not safe. What would be a safe happiness? The happiness of awakening. The happiness where there's no greed, aversion, or delusion to make you do foolish things with your good fortune.

So when you see people who are abusing their good fortune, take it as a lesson. Maybe someday you'll be there too, having good fortune. And for your own sake you want to make sure you don't abuse it.

This kind of reflection raises your sights as to what kind of happiness really would be worth going for. You also have to remember that if you resent other people's happiness, how sincere is your goodwill? You have to be able to look at other people's happiness and feel no resentment at all. That's when your goodwill is genuinely honest.

But there are going to be cases where people are not going to act on the causes for happiness. That's what equanimity is for and that's where the reflection on karma comes in again. As I said, it's to develop a sense of equanimity. People are going to be living according to their actions. What are you going to do? If someone is determined to do something wrong, it's very hard to stop them. You can get in their way, you can try to thwart them, but their intention is already bad. This is why teaching the Dhamma is one of the best gifts you can give somebody else. But you have to be careful. Who's going to listen to your Dhamma? A lot of people don't want to hear it. The best way, of course, is through creating a good example in your own actions. But your attitude toward other people regardless is that you have goodwill for them. You want them to be happy. But if they're determined to act in ways that are not going to give rise to happiness, you have to develop equanimity, reminding yourself that their karma is their karma. Your karma is yours. Turn around and look at areas where you can make a difference instead of getting upset over areas where you can't, where other people are abusing their good fortune or other people are just acting in stupid ways.

So the reflection on karma has lots of implications, depending on the context. It's part of the five reflections, where its purpose is to develop a sense of heedfulness and confidence at the same time. We tend to think about heedfulness as being primarily concerned with being heedful of dangers. But the Buddha also tells you to be heedful with reference to little good things you can do. He says, "Don't be heedless of little acts of merit. Just as a water jar gets filled, drop by drop by drop, in the same way, little acts of merit can fill you with goodness." So it's not strange that this reflection on action gives rise both to heedfulness and to confidence at the same time.

Then, in the context of the brahmaviharas, it's something else. It's a reflection on equanimity, reminding you that your power to influence the world can be pretty drastically limited. The best place you can work is in your own mind. Make sure that your actions are based on a knowledge of what's conducive to true happiness. That way, as you reflect on karma, you realize that it has many, many implications. These are just a few. But use this reflection to get yourself on the path, confident that you can and should stay on the path, and focus your priorities as you practice.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, “We’re here not to get anybody else. We’re here to get ourselves.” If other people are inspired by the way we practice and want to come and practice, too, then fine. If not, we don’t want to spend all our time trying to get other people, because if we do, we’re going to lose ourselves. The main focus has to be inside because that’s where you really can do the work and that’s where these actions all come from. Your acts for good or for evil, being an owner of an action, comes from what? From your intentions. And if you have no control over your intentions, who’s got the keys to your car? Who’s driving? Mindlessness? Forgetfulness? Apathy? You don’t want any of those things driving your car.

So work on being very carefully aware of what you’re intending right now. This is why we work on concentration. We set up a good intention and we try to maintain it. Sometimes it’s discouraging, seeing the things that come and eat it away. But if you keep on setting up that intention, again and again and again, it’s going to get more and more firm. It’s like building a fence: The closer together the pickets, the more things you’ll be able to defend your property from. So as soon as you sense the mind is wandering off just a little bit, be right there, right there, right there. That’s what it means to be heedful and confident, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—in other words, being equanimous about the world as you focus on where you really can make a difference.

Throughout the Buddha’s teachings on contentment, he advises you to be content with your outside surroundings if they’re good enough for practicing. But you don’t rest content with unskillful states in your own mind. Try to put them out in the same way that a person would put out a fire on his head. That’s going to require skill. Sometimes they won’t go out quite as quickly as you’d like. But if you realize there are things that you should be content with and other things you should not be content with, you learn how to see the difference. That, too, is a reflection that comes under karma. It’s all about making a difference. That’s why the Buddha said that if people couldn’t abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones, he wouldn’t have taught. It’s because we can do this and because it’s good for us, that’s why he taught. And it’s why we practice.