

You Hit Him First

October 21, 2013

There's a story where Somdet Toh was approached by a young monk complaining about another monk who had hit him. And Somdet Toh told him, "Well, you hit him before that."

The young monk replied, "No I didn't. He just came up and hit me out of nowhere."

And Somdet Toh kept saying, "No, you hit him first."

So the young monk went to complain to the abbot of another monastery. The other monastery's abbot came over and asked Somdet Toh what he was talking about. Somdet Toh said, "Well, obviously, he hit the other monk sometime in a previous lifetime."

In other words, if you try to trace things back to where a problem started, you go crazy. Because it just goes back and back and back, and there's no sense of who was the original instigator. Which means that when you're thinking about issues in the past, you just have to let them go. Just say, "Whatever it was, it was a karmic back and forth. Do you want to still continue it?"

There's another story—it's in the Commentary—of two women: One woman was chasing another woman, trying to kill her child. So the woman with the child came running into the Buddha's monastery, knelt down in front of the Buddha, and asked for his protection. The other woman came and he asked them, "Do you realize how many times you've killed each other's children?" And he gave this long, long story, just back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Realizing that both sides were at fault, they decided to let go of the issue right there.

It's good to think in these ways, so that when you're sitting here trying to get your mind into the present moment, the past doesn't come in and clutter it up. You're not going to come to an end of suffering by going out and straightening out other people or straightening out the past. You straighten out your mind right here, right now. What is your mind doing with this story that's coming up, this little world that you've created? If you see it simply as another example of what the world is like and can let it go, then you can get back to the breath.

Then get ready to see the next time the mind creates another little world, all these little worlds you keep creating for yourself. If you go into them, you suffer. But if you learn how to stand outside of them and watch how they're made, then you have an opportunity to get beyond them.

So whenever an issue like that comes up in the mind, just remind yourself,

“Well, the karma probably goes back way, way back.” There’s no way you’re going to trace back to see who had the upper hand or who did the worse kind of karma. It doesn’t really matter.

What matters is what you’re doing right here, right now. That helps to cut through a lot of ideas that we carry around that really burden us.

And the whole purpose of this, of course, is to make us free. It’s not to straighten out the world or settle accounts. We’re trying to get out to a place where we don’t need accounts anymore, we don’t need a world that needs straightening out—because there’s something better we’ve found through the practice.