

In the Light of Karma

October 3, 2014

People tend to assume that when the Buddha was talking about karma, he was just repeating a general idea in Indian culture, something that everybody already believed. He didn't have to explain much.

That's actually not the case. He used the word karma, which was part of their language, but he meant it in a very special sense. As he said, it's your intentions. He went on to say that your intentions are what shape your life—and your lives. These things have been shaping your lives all along. And they shape the lives of all beings.

When the people came to listen to the Buddha teach, he often found that he had to explain this particular aspect of karma again and again. He got a lot of questions about karma that he had to rephrase, which meant that they were questions that deserved an analytical answer. The fact that he had to rephrase them meant that people didn't even know how to ask questions about karma in the right way, at least in the way that was going to be useful for putting an end to suffering.

And what is the useful way to look at karma? First he has you look at your own life in terms of karma: The things you're experiencing now are a combination of potentials coming from past intentions and of your own present intentions. This same principle applies to everybody, everywhere.

There's a very common reflection the Buddha has you do, which is to think about where you're looking for happiness in terms of karma. Those five reflections that we often chant start with the fact that you're subject to aging, illness, and death, from separation from all that you love. Pretty grim. But it's not meant to be depressing. It's more meant to be sobering.

Then there's the reflection on karma. That's really all you've got. Ajaan Suwat liked to make the point that there's so much the Buddha says is not-self, not-self, not-self. But then when you get to karma: "I'm the owner of my actions." Okay, that's something that's yours. Your intentions are things over which you have power. That's quite a statement right there. Your intentions shape your life and you have power over your intentions. Therefore, you can have the power to shape your life.

But all too often we abdicate that power to somebody else, to greed, aversion, delusion, the voices in the mind that want to just go over old stories: "This person did this to me, that person did this to me, that wasn't right, that wasn't right." We

can carry these things for years. Sometimes we're not even conscious that we're carrying them around. The mind gets still for a while, you have a chance to come out here, and they come up.

I remember my first year back in Thailand. All of a sudden, issues from grade school, high school, college, family issues, all kinds of things started coming up. Things I'd forgotten for years. But when the mind is still, they can come bubbling up again. When you find yourself hounded by these things, remember the Buddha's reflection: Think of it in terms of karma. On the one hand, you wouldn't have experienced these things without some karma of your own. And secondly, other people are creating their karma, and usually doing it out of ignorance.

When you think about this, after a while you get a sense of dispassion for the whole process. You can change the narratives, so that instead of being hounded by these things, the narrative is that you're able to reflect on them in line with the principle of karma and you've found that you can go beyond them.

Then the Buddha has you reflect on all beings everywhere. This takes a lot of the sting out of your own personal sufferings. Everybody going through life is suffering: They've got aging, illness, death, separation. And they've got their karma, too.

You can think about devas having a good time up there in heaven. Well, they're like trust-fund kids. As long as the stock market's doing well, the trust fund is fine, okay, they're fine. But when everything collapses—in other words, when their good karma runs out—who knows where they're going to fall. So even on the planes of the Universe where things are pretty comfortable, there's nothing really solid.

And, as I said, when you think about your narratives in the context of all the narratives of all the beings in the Universe—all the people who've been wronged; all the people who've done good things and still suffered because they had some past karma that hadn't quite worked itself out yet—it gives a sobering sense of dismay. But it also takes a lot of the burden off of your own sufferings.

The Buddha recommends that when you're suffering grief over the loss of a loved one, reflect on the fact that this happens to everybody. You would think that reflecting on all the griefs of all these millions and millions of beings would be heavier, but actually it's not. It's lighter. You realize this is just the way things are. The Universe isn't conspiring against you. This is just the way things happen. This is the way karma acts. This is how karma works itself out, based on your intentions.

The purpose of all this is to get you to focus in on your intentions right now.

What is the quality of your intention right now? You can't do anything about your past intentions, but you can change your present intentions.

Part of that involves learning how to re-tell the stories from the past. So instead of being a victim and staying there, you were a victim but now you've risen above that. You can look at things from a lot broader sense of what's going on here in the life of living beings, and decide that you're not going to let yourself be victimized again. In particular, you're not going to keep victimizing yourself with the stories of the past.

When you have that attitude, then, as you focus on the breath, you focus on the breath with a light mind, with a sense of having come to a place that does offer safety. Concentration may be something fabricated but it takes you to a good place.

You can start engaging in your verbal fabrications—all the thoughts and conversations of the mind—in a skillful way. Bring them to a focal point right here with the breath. Learn how to figure out what's going on here in the body, what positive things you can do with this energy you've got here, so that there's a sense of health and wholeness in the body, a sense of balance, well-being.

This isn't the ultimate safe place, but it's the road to the ultimate safe place. And it's a good place to be walking. Think of all the other places you could be wandering right now—physically, mentally—and it feels really good to be right here, working on the factor of the mind that shapes everything and putting that in good shape. Once that's in good shape—in other words, when your intentions are in good shape—then, over time, everything else will fall in line.