All Living Beings & Their Thoughts

May 29, 2013

There are many reasons for why we chant the phrases for the Brahma-viharas before we meditate each evening. One of them is that they help cut through the narratives of the day—issues you may have had with this person or that person, not just today. Sometimes the issues go way back. Issues about your own misbehavior, the times when you’ve acted unskillfully in the past. It’s good to stop and think about all beings. It helps put your narrative into perspective. You can think of the night of the Buddha’s awakening. The three knowledges follow an interesting pattern. The first one is knowledge of the Buddha’s own previous lifetimes, going way, way back. You can imagine all the narratives, the unfinished business, from all those different lifetimes. As John Furrier once said, it’s good that most of us can’t remember our previous lifetimes. We’d have lots of scores we’d want to settle. Fortunately, that wasn’t the Buddha’s purpose. What’s interesting is that in the second watch of the night, his second knowledge had to do with all beings—how they died and were reborn in line with their karma. That put his narrative into perspective. It was also what happened to help him see the pattern of karma. This is why people do bad things in one lifetime, and they won’t necessarily suffer right away. Or even in the next lifetime, but they will die in the line. It’s the same with good actions. Sometimes it takes a long, long time for your good actions, many lifetimes, before they finally show the results. It was when he was able to see the huge, big picture, that’s when he began to see the patterns of how important human action is. Where do actions come from? They come from your views. And what are actions? They’re your intentions. Where do views and intentions happen? They happen in the present moment, here in the mind. You don’t want to go sorting out through all your past views and intentions, but you are responsible right here. That’s what led to his third knowledge, when he started looking into the sources of all these things. Not in the past, not out there in space someplace, but right here in the mind. That’s when he was ready to settle down and look into the mind. So that reflection in the middle, one in all beings and their actions, is something important to bring to mind every time before you meditate. Make that the context of your meditation. So when specific narratives come up from your past, you want to immediately put them into that larger perspective. Now the reflection in all beings and their actions functions in many different ways. That’s part of the Brahma-viharas. It’s the one for equanimity. You realize that everybody’s behaved in unskillful ways. That’s when you see either that you’ve been treated by someone else’s unskillful behavior, or you’ve been mistreated by their unskillful behavior, or you have been unskillful in your behavior with others. It takes some of the sting away to realize, because you’re not the only one. This is not to condone the behavior, but just to put it into perspective. And it’s amazing how thinking of all the actions of all beings throughout time helps take a lot of the sting of particular narratives away. So that’s one of the reflections, the reflection that gives rise to equanimity. The other one about all beings and their actions is used here. It’s used to give rise to a sense of samvega. You realize that here we are, scrambling around, trying to find happiness. And as long as our happiness depends on our actions, it’s not going to last. Because actions don’t last. If the cause isn’t permanent, how can it give rise to permanent results? The image they have in the canon is of a tree that casts a shadow. Now when the tree gets cut down, the shadow has to disappear. You think about all beings acting on one another, and we all know how beings act on one another. The primary motives happen to be greed, aversion, and delusion. They come up with a lot of unskillful things. And it just keeps happening over and over again. You get somewhere good, but then you get lazy and complacent. We’ve seen this many times. People suddenly find themselves in a position of power, and instead of using it for the good of the world, they suddenly have old resentments or old issues that they want to use their power for. And all that goodness gets wasted. That’s not just in other beings. You can probably look in your own lifetime and see times when you’ve gained a position of authority or a position of influence. And probably didn’t use it well. Or you had opportunities to speak in skillful ways and you didn’t. Here you have a human mouth. It’s taken a long time to get this human mouth, and what do you do with it? Of course, you’re not the only one. How many lifetimes in the past? How many lifetimes in the future? When you reflect on this, it gives rise to a sense of sanghvega, because you see the whole universe is this way, no matter where you go in the universe. People are still subject to the results of their actions. That reflection we often have on the “I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions,” on the original Pali sutta doesn’t stop there. As the Buddha said, when you reflect on the fact that you’re the owner of your actions, you get your act together. You realize, “I’ve got to be really careful.” It’s for giving rise to heedfulness. You will begin to act in skillful ways. But then the reflection goes on, “It’s not only me. All beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions.” That, the Buddha says, is enough to give rise to sanghvega, and from sanghvega gives rise to the path. Otherwise, you don’t want to stop right at the sanghvega, because the word for sanghvega literally means terror. Realizing that if you don’t get out, it’s just more of the same stuff over and over and over again. And if that thought isn’t terrifying, well, think about it until it becomes terrifying. But you don’t want to stop there, because that gets very discouraging. That’s the other reflection on your actions. Your actions really do make a difference. And it is possible, through your actions, to find a way out. That’s what the path is all about. It’s a use of all the divinity. It’s a use of all the different aggregates that we normally cling to and cause suffering. We turn around and turn them into a path, because there’s nothing else that could be a path. The unfabricated can’t be used for anything. It’s not caused, and it doesn’t act as a cause. So to get there, you have to use fabrications. Use your body. Use your feelings. Use your perceptions. Use your mental fabrications. Use your consciousness to bring the path together. That’s one of the reasons why we work at concentration, because when the mind is in concentration, you’ve got all five aggregates here in a way that you can really see them clearly. And then you use your perceptions in two directions. You reflect on how all the things that would pull you out of concentration are inconstant, stressful, not-self. It’s interesting that in the Buddha’s time, he taught breath meditation to Rahula. He didn’t teach breath first and then inconstancy. He taught inconstancy first as a way to develop that sense of sanghvega that puts you on the path and then helps you deal with distractions as they come up. But then there are perceptions that go in the other direction. There are perceptions that remind you that there is something unfabricated and it really is the most exquisite, refined, amazing happiness there is. Without those reflections, everything gets very dry, very dark. But you keep reminding yourself that there is this ability that we have, that we can develop, to find a true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t change. And for that, you take the mind when it really is solidly in concentration, and then you start applying the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to that state of mind, that state of concentration. This is how the mind uses fabrications to get beyond fabrications, uses action to get to the end of action, as the Buddha says. So it’s important to reflect on action. The teachings on karma are one of the teachings that tends to get pushed off to the side in a lot of modern Buddhism. But if you look fairly at what the Buddha had to say, then you realize that it really is important to see the power of action, both for good and for evil, and how universal it is. It helps you develop equanimity when you need it, towards other people’s mistakes, towards your own mistakes. It helps you develop sanghvega and gives you the sense of confidence that there is a way out. So as we chant these passages in the evening, don’t just parrot them. Think about them. There are times when you need a stronger dose of equanimity to deal with uncomfortable things coming up in the meditation. There are times when you need a sense of sanghvega when you’re getting lazy. There are times when you need basada when you’re getting discouraged. The basic facts are all the same. All living beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. Just learn how to use those facts as you need them, when you need them. That way, those reflections become part of the path and can take you to a place where there are no actions anymore. There’s no need for them. That’s where it’s really good.

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