Karma

August 1, 2024

In our chants we have two reflections on karma in the context of the five reflections about aging, illness, death, and separation. The reflection on karma serves two purposes. One is to remind you that all those things that age and go ill and die are not ours. Karma is ours. We have the ability to choose what we’re going to do, but we have to be careful. So the reflection that you have to be careful has to do with heedfulness, which the Buddha said is the source of all skillful qualities, realizing that you just can’t let your moods take over, let your thoughts take over, whatever the way you’re going to do. You have to be careful, both for your own sake and for the sake of those around you. But there’s also a sense of passada, that there is a way out. After all, that’s how the Buddha found his awakening. It was through his own actions. And as he said, it was due to qualities that were not exclusive to him. Heedfulness, ardency, resolution. These are qualities we can all develop. So the reflection on karma gives us hope, that we’re the owners of our actions, heir to our actions, born of our actions, related through our actions. We can do something good with our actions and thought, word and deed. Like we’re doing as we meditate right now, this is a kind of karma. Years back I was asked to give a talk on karma to a group in another meditation center. I talked about the Buddhist teachings on karma, that they’re the kind of explanation of action and its powers and cause and effect, that underlie the belief that we can develop skills. You can develop a skill with your meditation. Everyone gave me puzzled looks. I found out later they’d all been taught that meditation wasn’t a doing. It was everything but a doing. You just allow things to happen. You just, we’re supposed to just be in the present moment. It’s odd how the Buddhist teachings get so distorted as they come into a new culture. The Buddha said the full path is a kind of karma. It’s the karma that puts an end to karma. But it includes mindfulness, it includes concentration, all the factors are a kind of karma. So you’re engaged in karma right now. Do you want to do it well? Here’s where you remember that the things that come up in your mind, unbidden, are coming from your old karma. They don’t necessarily have any meaning. Not too often people think that. A mood comes on, a thought comes on, out of nowhere. It’s almost as if there was a divine inspiration or some natural message from deep down in your psyche. Your psyche is filled with all kinds of stuff. There was a Westerner who came to see Jahn Mahābhūr one time, and as he was listening to Jahn Mahābhūr’s talk, he argued, he said, “I can’t put any restrictions on my mind, I just follow my heart.” And Jahn Mahābhūr was responsible. You want to follow that cesspool? Because that’s a lot of other stuff we have down there. Greed, aversion, and delusion, in all of their permutations. So just because something arises in the mind, unbidden, doesn’t mean that it has any special meaning. It’s just the working out of past karma, good and bad. So you have to use your power as a judgment. So the results of old karma that come popping up in your body and mind, sometimes provide openings, and sometimes they place limitations. The important thing is your current karma, what your decisions are right now, as to what to do with those results. You want to make sure that you don’t take on the limitations, but you do want to take advantage of the openings. And that’s the reason why we meditate, just to get a sense of, when something comes up in the mind, what its potentials are, what emotion it’s coming from, what mind state it’s coming from, what mind state it’s going to create. Remember the Buddha’s way of dealing with his thoughts. It didn’t have to do with what he liked, or what he didn’t like, or what he felt was inspired, or not inspired. The question is, what kind of mind state informs these thoughts, and what kind of actions do they inform? If you see anything unskillful on either end, say nope, that’s not a thought I want to go with. So we have to learn some distance from our thoughts that come popping up. Our problem is that we tend to regard them as really interesting. Like Jean Piaget’s daughter. She went through a period in her development where after she had a bowel movement, she wouldn’t let her parents flush the toilet until she had made up a story about the little pieces down there in the toilet. Because they were hers. So just because the thought comes up in your mind, that’s a good image to think. Are you making up stories about stuff in the toilet? If so, flush it down. Don’t let it place limitations on you. So the openings that come, there are times when the mind does calm down. It seems to calm down without you understanding why. Well, take advantage of that. Stick with the calm as much as you can. Learn to recognize when the mind is at peace, how do you breathe? What physical sensations related to the breath go along with that state of peace? And see if you can learn how to recreate those at will. So those are some of the thoughts that have to do with karma in the context of the five reflections. Then there’s karma in the context of the four sublime attitudes. All living beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. And that’s related to equanimity. In other words, realizing that the people we deal with in the course of our lives, some of them will respond to our kindnesses, some of them will respond to our goodwill. There are a lot of people out there, though, who will not. And so if you find that you can’t have a good influence on them, you just chalk it up to the fact that their karma is their karma. And if you go biting your hand against the wall trying to change the person, you’re weakening your own energy. You’re misusing your own energy. It couldn’t be better used otherwise. So karma is a complex topic. We talk about free will. If your will were totally free, then it would be meaningless. You’d do an action, but then the next moment would not be influenced by your past action. It would be like writing in water. If your will had no freedom at all, then, as the Buddha said, it wouldn’t have bothered to teach. So we have this halfway combination of things from the past having influence, and then each moment gives us the opportunity to decide how we’re going to deal with the results of past actions as they come up. How we’re going to shape them, how we’re going to relate to them, what we’re going to do with them. So karma is complex. Sometimes you do a lot of good things for a long time and nothing seems to happen. Well, that’s because your past bad actions are really strong. You’ve got to remind yourself that the good that’s put in every present moment, it doesn’t go to waste. The ability to keep on doing the right thing regardless of the moods coming up in the mind, thoughts coming up in the mind, that’s an important skill. At the same time, you have to make sure that you don’t get complacent. There are times when everything seems to be going well. I’ll try to notice what going well is like. Don’t just wallow in the peace and wallow in the pleasure. Try to notice how you breathe in a state like that. Where do you focus when you’re in a state like that? Learn how to recreate it. This way we find that karma is designed to help us develop a skill. We can learn from the past and there’s enough of a pattern that the lessons we learn today can be useful tomorrow. There’s enough freedom that means that sometimes the lessons that work today will not work tomorrow. But that doesn’t mean you throw them away. You just follow them away. Realize there’s a lot more complexity here than you might have imagined in the beginning. But you don’t let that get you discouraged. You see it as an opportunity. Because that’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about, opening opportunities. Helping you to see things in ways you wouldn’t have imagined otherwise. Ways that really are helpful for releasing you. After all, the path is a path. It’s a kind of karma that leads to the end of karma. Takes you to something that’s not created. Not willed. But is available because you’ve followed the path of creating and willing. And gaining a mastery over the principles of cause and effect. The events in the mind that are helpful. The events in the mind that are not helpful. But are of good use.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240801_Karma.mp3>