

Heirs to Our Actions

February 1, 2006

Those five reflections that we chant: Actually the chant is not the full reflection. The Buddha says for you to reflect first on yourself: You're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all the people and things you love, and you're the heir to your actions.

The purpose of this, he says, is to make you heedful, basically to straighten out your act. If there's any way that you've been unskillful in what you do or say or think, this is an inducement to get you to drop that unskillful behavior.

Because our only real possessions are our actions. Those things that we love, the relationships with people we love—we don't really own them. Even time is something you don't really own. It slips through your fingers. You don't know how much you've got.

This is why the Buddha encourages you to be skillful in everything you do, not just as you're meditating but also in all the activities of your life. With every opportunity to do good, he said: Take the opportunity.

Even simple little things, like keeping the place clean. Ajaan Mun was an extremely clean and orderly person. Ajaan Lee was. So was Ajaan Fuang. Our tradition here is of people who were very diligent.

Part of this is written into the Vinaya, your duties as a monk. You keep your place clean, thoroughly clean. And you keep your whole life in as much order as you can. Part of it's written into the Vinaya and part of it's just because you see the results. If you're diligent in your outside activities, you're going to be diligent in inside things as well. If something is dirty, something is disorderly, it reflects on your mind.

So you want to develop the habit of starting from outside and working in, and then the habit working from inside and working out, to look at whatever opportunities you have to do good and make the most of them. Because as that reflection points out, you don't know how much time you've got.

You're subject to aging, illness, and death. The germs for your diseases are already there in your body. The potential for disease is already there. You don't know which disease is going to get you, or if an accident's going to get you first. But the fact that you've got this body means that these things are lying in wait.

So you want to look at all your behavior. To be a practitioner, to be a meditator, doesn't mean just sit closing your eyes and meditating. It means

developing a goodness in everything you do. Take the opportunity to do whatever good you can.

Ajaan Fuang, as he got old, had some debilitating diseases. At the same time, we had construction work around the monastery. And even though he didn't have the strength to do the construction work, he'd still do little things around the construction site. He'd walk around and pick up any scattered nails, take the wood and put it in a place where it'd be protected from the rain. He'd always find something to do.

And the stories he told about Ajaan Mun and about Ajaan Lee were the same sort of thing. One of the ajaans at Wat Asokaram, who's now one of the senior monks there, was a junior monk when Ajaan Lee was still alive. The sala at Wat Asokaram was high enough that you could squat down and crawl under it. And one day he heard somebody sweeping under the sala. He looked down and there was Ajaan Lee doing the work himself.

So this is the tradition we're in, that every opportunity to do something skillful, something useful, should be taken. That's the point of the first part of the reflection.

In the part that's *not* included in our five reflections, the Buddha tells you to think beyond just yourself. It's not just you: *All* beings of all kinds are subject to aging, illness, and death, subject to separation, and they're heirs to their karma. Everybody, everywhere: This is the pattern of the whole universe. No matter where you're reborn, you're going to be subject to this.

And the purpose of this part of the reflection, the Buddha says, goes beyond just straightening out your act. It means gaining a sense of samvega, a sense of dismay about the whole process. This is where it all goes, it just keeps going around and around and around. It doesn't really go anywhere. The only way out is to follow the noble eightfold path. And that's the purpose of this second part of the reflection: to find a way out, to get you on the path—what the Buddha calls the karma to put an end to karma.

So each time you chant those reflections, remember they don't just stop with you. They apply to everybody. This thought gives you the incentive to practice the path to get out. Otherwise, life gets confining. Try as you may, no matter how good it gets—you could become king, you could become one of those universal emperors who reigns over whole continents—but even for them it ends. And then where do they go? Back into the cycle.

And when you have power, there are drawbacks. We think about all the things that we'd like to have: fame, wealth. The only one that doesn't seem to have a drawback is health. But fame, wealth, beauty, and power have their dangers and

drawbacks. They make you complacent. If you're good-looking, you get used to having your way with people simply on the basis of your good looks. At the same time, other people want you for that reason—whatever their purpose in wanting you might be. When you're wealthy, you have to be very wary and careful: Who else wants to get their hands on your wealth?

And if you're not wise, you find that with all that wealth you can do all kinds of things, some of which are useful, some of which are actually detrimental to yourself. Your wealth then turns out to be your executioner. You become famous, well, other people want to tag along with your fame, claim a connection to you, stalk you, make money off of your fame. And if you get famous for doing something good, sometimes people are hoping that you'll slip up so you can become famous for doing something bad. You see it all around you.

So the goods of the world are not really good. The only true happiness, the only true safety, lies in getting out of the system, getting out of the cycle. That's what we're here for: to realize that no matter how good it gets in the world, it's not really good enough. The heart wants something better.

This is what the noble eightfold path provides. It provides a way out to something better, to something that really will satisfy the heart. Totally free of limitations: That's what nibbana's all about. That's the meaning of the symbol of nibbana, the flame that's gone out. It's not going out of existence. The image there is of being totally unlimited, no longer caught up in anything. Total freedom. That's the one thing that can provide real satisfaction.

So keep both sides of this reflection in mind, starting with your day-to-day activities when your attitudes become unskillful, when you tend to get lazy, when you tend to get grumpy, when you tend to get taken up with lust or fear, deluded about yourself or the people around you. You've got to straighten out your act, because otherwise you start acting on those unskillful mental states and they take you to unpleasant places.

That reflection on karma can, on the one hand, be grounds for hope, but it's also a warning to be heedful. The things you do really do change the direction of your life. And if you waste your time just hanging around not taking advantage of the opportunities to do skillful things, the opportunities start going away, going away.

So reflect on that. And then reflect on the universality of this: Everybody is subject to this. No matter where you go, no matter how you're reborn, no matter how wealthy or beautiful or whatever you get, it all ends. And then what are you left with? You're left with the results of what you've done. And if you're wise and have used your powers, used your abilities to find a way out of the cycle, then

you're in good shape. You're safe. Otherwise, aside from that, there's no real safety anywhere at all.