

Head & Heart Together, part two

Thai forest monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu teaches us how to use wisdom to cultivate compassion

A third lesson from the principle of karma is that developing the brahma-viharas can also help mitigate the results of your past bad actions. The Buddha explains this point with an analogy: If you put a lump of salt into a glass of water, you can't drink the water in the glass. But if you put that lump of salt into a river, you could then drink the water in the river, because the river contains so much more water than salt. When you develop the four brahma-viharas, your mind is like the river. The skillful karma of developing these attitudes in the present is so expansive that whatever results of past bad actions may arise, you hardly notice them.

A proper understanding of karma also helps to correct the false idea that if people are suffering they deserve to suffer, so you might as well just leave them alone. When you catch yourself thinking in those terms, you have to **keep four principles in mind**.

First, remember that when you look at people, you can't see all the karmic seeds from their past actions. They may be experiencing the results of past bad actions, but you don't know when those seeds will stop sprouting. Also, you have no idea what other seeds, whatever wonderful latent potentials, will sprout in their place.

There's a saying in some Buddhist circles that if you want to see a person's past actions, you look at his present condition; if you want to see his future condition, you look at his present actions. This principle, however, is based on a basic misperception: that we each have a single karmic account, and what we see in the present is the current running balance in each person's account.

Actually, no one's karmic history is a single account. It's composed of the many different seeds planted in many places through the many different actions we've done in the past, each seed maturing at its own rate. Some of these seeds have already sprouted and disappeared; some are sprouting now; some will sprout in the future. This means that a person's present condition reflects only a small portion of his or her past actions. As for the other seeds, you can't see them at all.

This reflection helps you when developing compassion, for it reminds you that *you never know when the possibility to help somebody can have an effect. The seeds of the other person's past bad actions may be flowering right now, but they could die at any time.* You may happen to be the person who's there to help when that person is ready to receive help. The same pattern applies to empathetic joy. Suppose that your neighbor is wealthier than you are. You may resist feeling empathetic joy for him because you think, "He's already well-off, while I'm still struggling. Why should I wish him to be even happier than he is?" If you find yourself thinking in those terms, remind yourself that you don't know what your karmic seeds are; you don't know what his karmic seeds are. *Maybe his good karmic seeds are about to die. Do you want them to die any faster? Does his happiness diminish yours?* What kind of attitude is that? It's useful to think in these ways.

The second principle to keep in mind is that, in the Buddha's teaching, there's no question of a person's "deserving" happiness or "deserving" pain. The Buddha simply says that there are actions leading to pleasure and actions leading to pain. Karma is not a respecter of persons; it's simply an issue of actions and results. Good people may have some bad actions squirreled away in their past. People who seem horrible may have done some wonderful things. You never know. So there's no question of a person's deserving or not deserving pleasure or pain. There's simply the principle that actions have results and

that your present experience of pleasure or pain is the combined result of past and present actions.

You may have some very unskillful actions in your past, but if you learn to think skillfully when those actions bear fruit in the present, you don't have to suffer.

A third principle [of karma] applies to the question of whether the person who is suffering “deserves” your compassion. You sometimes hear that everyone deserves your compassion because they all have Buddha-nature. But this ignores the primary reason for developing compassion as a brahma-vihara in the first place: you need to make your compassion universal so that you can trust your intentions. If you regard your compassion as so precious that only Buddhas deserve it, you won't be able to trust yourself when encountering people whose actions are consistently evil.

At the same time, you have to remember that no human being has a totally pure karmic past, so you can't make a person's purity the basis for your compassion. Some people resist the idea that, say, children born into a war zone suffering from brutality and starvation are there for a karmic reason. It seems heartless, they say, to attribute these sufferings to karma from past lives. The only heartlessness here, though, is the insistence that people are worthy of compassion only if they are innocent of any wrongdoing. Remember that you don't have to like or admire someone to feel compassion for that person. All you have to do is wish for that person to be happy. The more you can develop this attitude toward people you *know* have misbehaved, the more you'll be able to trust your intentions in any situation.

The Buddha illustrates this point with a graphic analogy: even if bandits attack you and saw off your limbs with a two-handled saw, you have to feel goodwill starting with them

and then spreading to include the entire world. If you keep this analogy in mind, it helps to protect you from acting in unskillful ways, no matter how badly provoked.

This is Part Two of a three part presentation.