

November 2013

Greetings!

We would like to wish all a very joyful holiday season and a very happy new year. I would like to mention that from my own experience, I know this can be a bit of a difficult time for meditation and training. For myself, I find it is a time at which it is very easy to put my spiritual training on the backburner. I have to be very mindful of this. Also, for those who get depressed or angry, and start looking down, it is important to be extra mindful, for these attitudes and ways of being cause us to suffer. Actually, this time of year is a very good time to do extra meditation, to sit quietly with the Eternal and Its Love.

In this email we would like to look at a couple of aspects of karma. About a year ago we talked in depth about karma, trying to give folks a feel of how the law of karma and karmic inheritance works. We won't go over this again here, but it may be helpful to look at the July, August and October 2012 emails, before reading this email.

The first thing I would like to talk about is an interview I saw on public television. It was with David Berkowitz, "Son of Sam", who is serving a life sentence for a spree of murders he committed in 1976 in New York City. I was very aware of the situation at the time, since I lived in New York. I noticed during the interview that he had completely changed. He was very contrite and very humble. It looked to me that he had had some kind of religious/spiritual experience. He was actually now a minister in the prison doing religious work. He said that he just didn't know why he committed the murders, or why he hated women so much. He also said that he was very, very sorry for what he did.

This is a very good example of why as Buddhists we are against capital punishment. If he had been executed the karma that he inherited, which was so strong it led him to do what he did, would have been passed on to someone else. Also, the karma he created in his lifetime by the crimes he committed would have been passed on to some future being. Not being executed has enabled him to work on cleansing all the karma he has. It has allowed him to begin to help it find the Love of the Eternal, which is actually what it longs for.

It seemed to me that his karma had begun to convert. This conversion will be very painful and difficult for him. He will feel all the pain inherent in the actions of the past, and by doing so give that pain the chance to meet, and be washed by, the Love it so needs. I truly wish him the best.

As far as our own practice is concerned, it is very important to keep our hearts open to all, including folks like "The Son of Sam". This can be very hard for some of us. We may know that part of our training is to keep our hearts open to all, but then we hear of the horrific actions of someone like "The Son of Sam" and they seem to us beyond the pale.

We allow our hearts to harden toward this person and we may justify this with thoughts of “righteous indignation”. However, this hardened attitude which we have towards another is often a reflection of an identical attitude which we have towards ourselves. In fact, we always want to be able to forgive ourselves and others, to see the Eternal and Its Love in every aspect of ourselves and others. When we don’t do this, we move out of the flow of the Eternal and we ourselves suffer. Shakyamuni Buddha had some very good Teaching related to this: “If you indulge in a raging or resentful heart then you make yourself an obstacle in your own path and lose the benefits of your own merit and virtue; forbear for virtue’s sake and keep to the Precepts for, if you act in this way, you reach what seems impossible.”

The other area I want to spend a little time on is karmic inheritance in relation to children. We were going to talk about this a year ago, but we thought of holding it back because we wanted to give the parents in our group time to add something. It turns out that with five young children their plates are full! Again in this email I will offer them a chance to add whatever they wish.

It is said that karma starts to show itself when children are about two years’ old. We all know the phrase “the terrible twos”. It is very, very helpful, when this karma starts to show itself that the parents know about the Law of Karma. In the following short hypothetical story I want to show what does not work. What I don’t do in the story, just as I don’t do when a parent seeks my advice, is tell anyone exactly what to do. What I can say is that it is very important to keep a kind and open heart, and that compassion is very important in dealing with the arising of karma in a child. I can also advise parents to be very still, to stay in meditation, to keep asking for help, and to keep their ears wide open to the child and to the Eternal.

Here is the story:

There was a young child named Jo who seemed more than normally shy. Jo would spend a great deal of time hiding behind the curtains. Jo's parents tried to help Jo with this. First they tried to entice Jo out with some things they knew that Jo really liked - a fresh pizza, a trip to Jo's favorite spot, or a new movie that they thought Jo would like. Jo would sometimes come out and join in for a short time, but then go back very fast behind the curtains.

The parents tried another approach. They started saying things like "what's wrong with you", "get the heck out here", and then one time Jo's father actually went to physically pull Jo out. This made quite a scene, but didn't work. Jo would still spend a lot of time hiding behind the curtains.

So then the parents started to say to themselves that in fact there was nothing wrong,

that they should simply forget about it and put the whole thing out of their minds. However, Jo continued to spend a lot of time hiding behind the curtains.

In this example, Jo's shyness is due to karma Jo has inherited, it is the consequence of past actions. As Jo is a child the karma is first appearing in a "pure" form - fear. The parents see the shyness/fear and try to remedy the situation in ways that they are familiar with. First, they use greed. They try to tempt Jo out hoping that his greed for a pizza or a movie will be enough to make the problem go away. It doesn't work, the fear remains in control as much as before. Second, they use anger. The father's anger probably caused Jo to get angry and even more fearful. Again it doesn't work, the fear remains in control. Finally they try pretending the shyness doesn't exist or isn't really a problem, or will go away if they try not to think about it. This is delusion. Again, the fear remains in control.

The example demonstrates what we humans commonly try to do in response to karma that we or another has inherited. The karma is experienced as feeling and we try to get rid of the discomfort by moving into greed, anger or delusion. The problem is - none of these approaches work! In fact they further complicate matters, covering up the original discomfort with more. In our example, Jo is clearly fearful. Jo's parents no doubt have good intentions but end up encouraging Jo to also be greedy, angry and confused. Far from helping the shyness, these are all added to the original fear complicating it and covering it up, and leaving it in control as much, if not more than before.

So, now I would like present to some thoughts from Geoff, a parent in our group, on how Buddhist training has been helpful to him.

Geoff:

“Thanks Rev Master Basil. The first thing that strikes me is that, as any parent knows, parenting is demanding! As such I have found it helpful in blowing away many of the nice ideas I may have about myself or Buddhist training. So many times I find myself pushed into the position of simply not knowing what to do or how to deal with a situation. I may have tried a bit of greed and certainly some anger, they will probably have inflamed the situation, and then I’m back to not knowing. This is where the training and the teaching have been so helpful, because in this situation I know that there *is* somewhere to turn. This is not to say that I always put this into practice – it surprises me how even after years of training it is so easy to get swept along by waves of feeling and to forget, or simply be unwilling, to turn to the Eternal for guidance. However, on the occasions that I do do my best to actually train it has been enormously helpful.

One example springs to mind. My wife and I had been struggling for many months with the problem of how to change the sleeping arrangement for our first son. We felt stuck, but knew it had to change as it was simply unsustainable. We read books, googled various things, spoke to more experienced parents, and even had an appointment with a nurse who specialized in these matters. From these sources there were lots of ideas, and many seemed very sound. However, nothing quite seemed to fit our situation, so we couldn't simply borrow someone else's plan. In the end, having meditated with when to make a move, we decided that we would go ahead with our own plan of action. That plan involved me, as the dad, being the key person, and somehow getting our son through a night without his mom. This may not sound like a very big deal to some, but for us it had become a big issue. I had no clear idea how to go about it, or what I would do when the inevitable upset and crying started. I also don't have any clear memory of what I did do. What I do remember is that the night went remarkably well, our son and I did get reasonable sleeps, and the night was completely pivotal in changing the sleeping arrangement for the better, permanently. I also remember how I went about it, and that was simply to ask in meditation for the Eternal's help every time I got stuck - "I don't know what to do, please help", or "please help, what's the best thing to do next?" And guidance did come, as at each juncture I sensed what to do next. I look back on the night as actually quite a wonderful thing, and I know that this is how I would like to continue parenting, day in day out."

Thank you Geoff for relaying some very relevant personal experiences of training as a parent, that will I'm sure be helpful to all. In Geoff's example we see how one can always turn to the Eternal for help and guidance. Our responses do not have to be based upon greed, anger or delusion; instead we can take refuge in the Eternal, by doing our best to seek and follow Its guidance. This applies to any situation that we find ourselves in, and helps greatly in the conversion of our karma and that of others, so that all can find peace, and the deep Unconditional Love that is always there.

Take Care

Rev Basil