

## Kamma & Karuna

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-07-13.

After my talk last week we got into a discussion about the importance of kamma and its role in compassionate behavior. We went over, in terms of time, and I felt a sense of incompleteness after we stopped. I felt we had only reached an understanding of the issue that was being expressed without a resolution, at least not the one I wanted! So I'd like to come back to that today.

The issue of kamma arose last week while I was talking about how rare it is for people to come to this practice, especially in a truly committed way. I mentioned that there is a tremendous complexity to the kamma or causes, conditions and circumstances that must come together for one to arrive at this practice and to be able to practice in a committed way. And the gratitude I feel when there is this possibility of practice, both in terms of my own life and practice and in having other committed practitioners to associate with.

The concern or understanding that was raised in response to this, as I came to understand it, was the idea that at a certain point in one's spiritual development, one no longer needs to think in terms of kamma, in the sense of making conscious choices between skillful and unskillful, right and wrong actions. That, instead, there is just a spontaneous response that arises from the compassionate heart as it encounters the suffering of others.

Before we got to this idea, though, we had touched on the ideas that:

- Kamma, or the law of cause and effect, is a fundamental part of the Buddha's teaching. And for many people it is the beginning point for spiritual progress. They engage in wholesome or skillful actions because they don't want to be subject to the results of unskillful ones.

- We also touched on the idea, with a story from Zen, that no matter how awakened one is one is still subject to the law of cause and effect.

So my understanding is that all of these views are true. As people begin to practice it is quite important to make conscious decisions to engage in skillful behaviors, such as generosity, mindfulness, good will and compassion. And that after a certain amount of practice a level of skillful behavior is automatic. One could say that the set-point for

compassionate or skillful responses has been recalibrated. Though others might prefer to describe it as having gotten enough ignorance and defilements out of the way that the naturally compassionate heart can shine through.

The theory or ideal is that one can become so thoroughly awakened that there are no longer any bounds to the compassionate response of the heart. But for those of us who are not yet arahants, fully awakened ones, I've found that remembering the law of cause and effect is a useful tool.

We develop some level of skillful understanding and the compassionate and mindful responses occur naturally, spontaneously. But it is like being in the center of a huge room, which we might call "life," and having a very bright light above us. We can walk or move in the circle shed by that light for a long time, and respond with a compassionate heart without thinking a lot about wholesome and unwholesome.

But eventually we reach the edge of this area of lightness, this "space" that we're in. Things begin to get gray and eventually pitch black. It's the edge of our realization, the edge of our understanding and of our ability to respond skillfully in a spontaneous way. We've reached the point where we are identified with things, where we feel embarrassed or hurt or lustful or angry or simply confused.

And at this point we have to once again pay attention to the law of cause and effect. We have to rely on it to help us find our way through the darkness. We have to see through our identification with the thought of embarrassment and the heat that arises in the body, recognizing that they are just phenomena arising and passing in the field of awareness. We have to see through the greed, the anger, the confusion that we're taking as me or mine. We have to take into account the suffering, inner and outer, that arises when we are caught in these unskillful states.

And when we can truly open to our lives at that moment and let go of the identification, the grasping and aversion, the clinging, then it is as if a new light has switched on. We can see with more clarity and again have some space in which to let our lives just flow and trust in our heart's spontaneously compassionate response.

It's easiest to think of this all as a straightforward process moving from one area of light to another, with the amount of light growing and the darkness shrinking as one's understanding grows. And while there is some truth to that, it also seems as though it is more wandering or stumbling through the gray and the darkness, until a new area of illumination is found.

Some of the areas of spontaneous mindfulness and compassion feel like being under a huge floodlight and others feel like being under little tiny beams that only shine a small circle of light. But even so, the more one continues to practice, the number of these lighted areas does grow and one lives more and more from wisdom and compassion.