

Excerpts from
Head & Heart Together
Bringing Wisdom to the Brahma-viharas
by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
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The teaching on karma starts with the principle that people experience happiness and sorrow based on a combination of their past and present intentions. If we act with unskillful intentions either for ourselves or for others, we're going to suffer. If we act with skillful intentions, we'll experience happiness. So if we want to be happy, we have to train our intentions to always be skillful.

Some people say that unlimited goodwill comes naturally to us, that our Buddha-nature is intrinsically compassionate. But the Buddha never said anything about Buddha-nature. What he did say is that the mind is even more variegated than the animal world. We're capable of anything. So what are we going to do with this capability?

We could do — and have done — almost anything, but the one thing the Buddha does assume across the board is that deep down inside we want to take this capability and devote it to happiness. So the first lesson of karma is that if you really want to be happy, you can't trust that deep down you know the right thing to do, because that would simply foster complacency. Unskillful intentions would take over and you wouldn't even know it. Instead, you have to be heedful to recognize unskillful intentions for what they are, and to act only on skillful ones. The way to ensure that you'll stay heedful is to take your desire for happiness and spread it around.

The second lesson of karma is that just as you're the primary architect of your own happiness and suffering, other people are the primary architects of theirs. If you really want them to be happy, you don't just treat them nicely. You also want them to learn how to create the causes for happiness. If you can, you want to show them how to do that. This is why the gift of dharma — lessons in how to give rise to true happiness — is the greatest gift.

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.

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 applies to the question of whether the person who's suffering "deserves" your compassion. You sometimes hear that everyone deserves your compassion because they all have Buddha-nature. But, 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.

The fourth principle to remember concerns the karma you're creating right now in reaction to other people's pleasure and pain. If you're resentful of somebody else's happiness, someday when you get happy there's going to be somebody resentful of yours. Do you want that? Or if you're hard-hearted toward somebody who's suffering right now, someday you may face the same sort of suffering. Do you want people to be hard-hearted toward you? Always remember that your reactions are a form of karma, so be mindful to create the kind of karma that gives the results you'd like to see.

If you get your head and your heart to respect each other, they can take each other far. Your heart needs the help of your head to generate and act on more skillful emotions. Your head needs your heart to remind you that what's really important in life is putting an end to suffering. They can master the causes of happiness to the point where they transcend themselves, touching an uncaused dimension that the head can't encompass, and a happiness so true that the heart has no further need for desire.