

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter September - October, 2003

Inhaling the Self Mike Lara

This article started out as an attempt to explore my insensitive, follow-up comment at a class talk given by a lay minister. And while my perception was, apparently, not shared by others, there still was a karmic wake that was strongly felt by me. In reviewing this incident, another swatch of old karma came from left field to strengthen the sense that I needed to be more vigilant in my efforts to be mindful in what I am saying in response to other people's comments.

Rev. Kinrei had gone on a trip to visit his parents and had asked a lay minister to give the Sunday class in his stead. During the previous week, the lay minister and his wife, after much agonizing, had euthanized a beloved dog of theirs that had been paralyzed for close to a year. He gave a moving talk on meditation and the "alighting mind" as well as the profoundly difficult decisions that we all must make at times without knowing what is the right action to take. And, yes, there will be consequences whatever we do or don't do. He had, in effect, shared with us, his doubts and grief resulting from a difficult decision he and his wife had made and how he was dealing with it and converting it into training.

After his talk, he asked for questions or comments. After some silence I started making some remarks about a somewhat confused wedding celebration that had been held at the Priory the previous day and how, as one of the participants, I had used the occasion to be still and what a good opportunity it had been to train in being mindful, etc. I had, in effect, totally ignored what

the lay minister had been discussing for the past 45 minutes. There were no further comments and the class broke up.

I didn't feel too good after the class and decided to leave right away. After I got home, I realized that something was not right. I had a tight, uncomfortable feeling in the front of my chest. I still had it when I called the lay minister a couple of hours later to let him know he had given a great class. He made a brief comment in a tone of voice that was quite unlike him, there was a little chit chat and then we said goodbye. I realized at that point that something was amiss but I couldn't tell what specifically was causing the problem.

Later that evening, still feeling badly and somewhat depressed, I chatted with a senior monk at another temple and the topic of how I was feeling came up; no immediate answer came from the talk. Later that evening I asked the Buddha for some insight into the cause of this agitation and also got up early the next morning to sit with it. Throughout the day the heavy feeling persisted. However, as I slowly went over the situation I eventually came to realize what had caused the dis-ease: one could say it was a case of what happens when one's mindfulness is allowed to be overruled by a narrow and self limiting perspective.

When we start to smoke cigarettes, it feels lousy; you get dizzy, probably nauseous and who knows what else. But if we persist in continuing, those feelings are dismissed and then later overridden by the addiction to the nicotine and whatever pleasurable effects it produces. It's the same with breaking the precepts Ñ it pains the heart to go against them at first but, if we persist, that pain is covered up by whatever brief satisfaction the self derives: feeling adequate, in control or being admired, that is, short lived "benefits" that are weighed against the numbing feeling that overlays the broken heart underneath. The self then tells us: "sure it doesn't feel good to turn away from your heart but you'll

come to see that it's no big deal, and everybody does it".

That Sunday, I took a big drag on the self and inhaled deeply. Here we had just heard a Sangha member open himself to us. What I did, in effect, was to walk over his offering and in the process stepped on my own heart. I had completely ignored a moving tribute to the difficulties that living a life of caring and sacrifice can produce and how it is transformed into practice. Instead, I focused on what Mike Lara thought was an appropriate comment that had, in fact, no relevance to the Dharma talk that had just preceded. Thank goodness this time the result was too painful for my skandhas to ignore; given that it had also possibly hurt a dear friend compounded the sadness.

A few days later I got up and wrote a draft of this article and showed it to Rev. Kinrei. He thought it would be a good idea to send it to the lay minister involved to see if he agreed with the details of the incident. I did so and soon received an answer: he hadn't noticed anything in particular after his class and in fact didn't think twice about what I had said after his talk. When I had phoned him the day of the talk, he said he had just gotten up from a nap and was still half asleep when we chatted. In other words, it was an "incident" that had occurred but I was the only one preoccupied with it. However, Rev. Kinrei commented that one can still make a mistake even though others may not recognize it as such. It has proven true time and again: in the past I have made cutting remarks that might have been seemingly ignored or dismissed by others but that later really made me feel badly. In fact, I've come to see how thoughtless remarks can be used to avoid looking at aspects of myself that I want to avoid -- feelings of inadequacy, pride, fear and even anger.

A similar incident that surfaced not too long ago is another case in point. While glancing over a local newspaper, I ran across the

photo and name of a successful local official I had worked with close to 20 years ago. I decided to call him at work to catch up on what he had been up to. We amiably chatted for a few minutes when, as an aside, he reminded me of something I said to him many years ago that I had completely forgotten. As he remembered it, we had been chatting in the restroom at work when he told me that he really wanted to make a mark on the world. And my response was "so did Hitler". He passed my comment off with a laugh as he recounted it, but I was both shocked to hear what I had said that to him and saddened to think how long he had been carrying that remark around. This was an excellent example of karma coming back to hit me upside the head. Some time later, I wrote him a letter letting him know how sorry I was for my thoughtless response and apologized for having made it. I also said I was grateful to him for reminding me of it because it gave me an opportunity to try to make amends.

Two unpleasant incidents within a fairly short time span was a healthy reminder that the verbal wreckage I have left behind over the years would probably leave a good size shadow on the ground; but I'm also working at being willing to look at the consequences of these past actions whenever they make themselves known, embrace them, apologize when I can, and then let them go as best I can. Nevertheless, the old emotions and remorse will undoubtedly continue to arise, and hopefully be dealt with, as I am confronted with the results of these and other unskillful actions.

Endless training is necessary in order to transform beginningless greed, hate and delusion into their original form of compassionate caring. To come to see this, even in a small way, has been one of the blessings for me of coming to Buddhist training. Without the direction the Dharma provides and the willingness of our teachers to constantly remind us of our true inheritance, we would be mired in endless distractions. I am grateful beyond measure for

what I receive from the Sangha and its members and for that I bow to all of you.

Wedding

On Saturday, October 4, Kris Will and Lien Thach were married at the Priory. The ceremony was attended by around 25 guests. The bride and groom grew up in the City of Albany. They both attended Albany High School and met each other there; they presently live in the Los Angeles area. Mike Lara was the celebrant for the wedding as Rev. Kinrei was in New York that weekend. Mike was assisted by Mischa Wendel and Helmut Schatz. The wedding ceremony was held at the Priory and later that evening Kris and Lien exchanged wedding rings and vows at a large Chinese restaurant in Emeryville with approximately 150 guests attending. The wedding was one of three ceremonies that day in which the families participated: a traditional tea ceremony early in the day bringing both families together, a religious ceremony to sanctify the relationship and lastly, a social ceremony for their families and friends to celebrate their union. We wish Kris and Lien a long and happy marriage.