

1 THE VIEW OF KARMA

As I was growing up I had questions that needed answers just like everybody does, but there was one in particular that never left my mind. Whenever I ran into a problem I wondered if there was any way out of my **karma**. Love, greed, anger, obsession, I had them like other people do. I tried to be as moral as I could. Sometimes I would try very hard to **eliminate all of my desires**, but I never succeeded. I believed in the **four noble truths**, and I even tried to meditate at times, but I just could not walk in the **eightfold path**. Why? Because I still had to go to work, make a living, and depend on others. It was impossible for me to drop everything and stay in the temple. My health was sporadic. Sometimes my life was a complete failure, and I felt exhausted with living. I believed that good living was a result of good karma, and it was discouraging to think that I had failed in past lives to accumulate better karma. I did not feel like I was doing so well at making any **merit** in this life.

What really brought me to despair were my debts. My income was never quite enough, and I ended up having to rely on the loan sharks. You have no idea how discouraging it is to work hard on making money, but then have to hand it over every day to the collector. Eventually what I owed on a daily basis was more than what I earned in a day. My life was hell with the collectors coming around and threatening me at all hours.

I started to think I was just born with **bad luck**. Nothing worked and now I was in debt with no way out. To top it all off, I lost my job. I thought about killing myself, but my morality always told me I would go to **hell** if I did. Hell? What's the difference from here?

One day when I was at the bottom with no one to turn to, I sat by my window feeling very depressed. It happened that my elderly neighbor walked by. I thought he was kind of a strange man. I'd seen him many times; my guess was that he was around 70. His name was Wirachai. He lived with his wife of many years, and his children were all grown up and

married. He was strange in the eyes of the folks in the neighborhood on several counts. He never joined any of our neighborhood drinking parties. Whenever any big event goes on like an ordination into the monkhood or our New Year time, everybody goes all out on the drinking. Although he hung around with us, his non-participation in the drinking stirred up quite a bit of ridicule. And that leads to the second reason why he was strange. He was always happy, friendly, and helpful, and no amount of teasing or ridicule could change his attitude. He had a reputation in the community for being kind; whenever someone was in trouble his family always lent a hand. The third thing was that although he lived quite humbly and was certainly not rich, he was happy—obviously at peace, and generous.

I myself was not too sure about him because I did not know what really was behind his smile. Deep down I figured there must be some angle that he was working in all of this, trying to gain personal benefit somehow. However, on this day as I watched him outside the window I thought to myself, he is a kind man. I bet if I went over and got to know him a bit I could borrow some money from him. Then a saying that I had heard from my youth came through my mind, “Listen to the elders.” They have been through a lot in this world. They’ve fought and struggled and succeeded.

So I slipped out of my door as he walked past, and I said, “Hello uncle, how are you doing?” He turned and replied, “Good. How about you? What’s your name? This old man doesn’t remember so well anymore!”

“I’m Ton.”

“What’s going on? You seem kind of tense. Anything I can do for you?”

“Umm, I’m having trouble with money.” I just ended up blurting it out which was not at all what I had planned.

“We all have problems. Don’t give up son, stand firm.”

“Thanks. But uncle, I don’t think my problems are something that I can fight. It’s my karma. I think that I must have done some horrible things in my previous lives to be in such a mess.”

“What is happening that makes you think this is true?”

“They just keep getting bigger and bigger every day, so big I can barely go on.”

I was feeling stupid because there I was telling a stranger about my problems. But Wirachai did not seem to be phased by this at all. He said, “Umm, Ton, why don’t we talk about this at my place?” He took me to an old but clean dining table inside his house, welcoming me with a smile and a big glass of water. He talked to me as if he knew what was going on inside of me. “You’re tired of living aren’t you? I’ll bet you have even thought about ending your life at times.” I nodded my agreement.

As we sat there something weird happened. His gentle questions and kind demeanor soaked into my soul. I could feel his care, and all of a sudden I wanted to tell him everything. I started telling him my whole sad story together with all the solutions my mind could think of. I told him I wanted peace, I wanted to be free, I wanted a stable life but I did not know where to start. Everything seemed dark and I seemed powerless.

Uncle listened patiently. He said, “Ton, we can’t solve all problems in one day. I’ve had such problems myself.”

“Really, I thought I’m the only one.”

“Believe me, everyone goes through these things. Listen, I am glad you stopped by today. I’m always willing to help. Take this little money. Consider it a little money to help you get around and look for a new job.”

I sat there feeling overwhelmed by his generosity, and I just could not get up to go. There was a question burning in my heart. I said to him, “Uncle, what about the law of karma? Do you believe in it? I think I might have worse karma than other people because my life has been so miserable.”

“So you’re thinking of the saying, **‘do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil.’**”

“Exactly, that is our karma, we get paid back for the things we have done. So how can we free ourselves from this cycle?”

“Ton, in one sense you can say the law of karma is like a natural rule. Whatever we do, we take its consequence. If you put your hand in the fire, it will get burned. I believe ‘you harvest what you sow.’ I have a book that is very special to me that tells us that we cannot free ourselves from our karma, from the accumulation of all of our deeds. It’s like this, you and I are sitting in these chairs, and it is impossible for us to lift up a chair while we are sitting in it. But that same book also tells us some

wonderful news—that there is someone who can free us from our karma and give us fullness of life. This person can break us from the **cycle of being born, getting old, having pain, and dying** to have life in his presence.”

“Uncle, I have never heard that before. Who could release us from our karma? It’s what we’ve done; we ourselves must be responsible for it.”

“You’re right. It’s impossible for a human being. But there’s the truth that you and many others still don’t know. There is one man who has already done such a thing. He has already taken all of our **sin** and bad karma upon himself so that we can be free.”

“This is all new to me. Is this some kind of special teaching about how to reach **nirvana** or a new **sect**?”

“No. It is the news of the living, creator **God** who sent His Son Jesus to bear our sins. God loves us all and He is willing to help when we’re down and will always be at our side in any situation.”

“So Uncle, you’re just talking about the Christian religion. That is for white people, not us. You have not joined those white people have you?” I felt disappointed; I was really hoping that Uncle knew something that could help me.

“Slow down for a second here Ton, keep a cool heart. You are both right and wrong my son. I am not talking about religion here. I know there is a religion called Christianity and that many white people and others believe in it. But what I am talking about is a relationship with the living God through Jesus who died and rose again. Look at me, do I look or act like a foreigner? I live in the same country you do, eat the same foods as you, and speak the same language as you. I love our customs and culture. The good news is that Jesus is for all people, and we can know Him and follow Him within our own culture. So this is not about a foreign religion, but about someone who can bring our people freedom from their karma and the hope of life in heaven.”

Uncle had caught me here. All my life I had heard people talk badly about those who follow the white man’s religion. Uncle was right. He was one of us, yet there is something different. But my mind was filled with all kinds of questions and objections.

“Ok, Uncle, I have heard people talk about God before, but He appears to be **ignorant and evil**. If He exists, why would He let us suffer? Why doesn’t He just make us born rich and happy? Or does it make Him

happy to see us suffer? Is He the one who sends grief to humanity? Creating a world that is full of problems shows that He must be evil.”

“Where do bad things come from? Aren’t they from our own heart? Our sacred book says that God made things good, but it was humans who became ignorant and evil and fell into darkness because they would not obey him.”

“Well you have given me many things to think about Uncle. Before I go though I have one more question. We are all taught here from the time we are little that ‘**We can only rely on ourselves.**’ We are taught that we have to follow the eightfold path in order to break out of the cycle of rebirth. Only we can do that.”

“Well my son, look at it this way. Human beings can’t live independently. We were created to depend on each other. When we are born, we need milk from our mothers, money from our father’s career, and love from relatives. We don’t ask for those things, but still other people give them to us. You see? We need others. In the same way, we were created to rely on God. God knows us and loves us. He sees all our sins and karma and He wants to help us. He made you with the freedom to choose. He will never force you to turn towards Him. But if we ask for His help, He will always be there. He gives us new life, not in the future but now, and can help us in all or most difficult situations.”

“Uncle, thank you so much. This was very interesting, even though I don’t understand it all, it makes me feel good. If God can really do what you said that gives me a lot of hope.

“You’re right, this does bring you hope. Remember, God loves you, and values you, and His ear is open to your cry 24 hours a day. Anytime you want to get together and talk more about this, feel free to drop by.”

Thank you Uncle and thank you for helping me with some money.”

I went home and spent the day beating the pavement looking for work. I now knew why Uncle had seemed a bit strange, and at the same time I was very attracted to this humble man.

To Help You Learn

Please answer the following questions in the space provided below or in your notebook.

1. Do you think it is possible to break free from the law of karma?

2. Ton felt like he had no time to practice religion and extinguish desire. What about you?

3. What was the good news that Uncle Wirachai shared with Ton?

4. Uncle Wirachai said there is a difference between religion and a relationship. What do you think?

