



16 *Suffering Clear Away the Ill Effects of Past Actions*

Moreover, Subhuti, if good men and good women, upon receiving and studying this Sutra, are being despised or lightly esteemed, it is because in their former existence they had committed grave errors and faults and should have been cast into the lower realms. But because they are now being despised and lightly esteemed, the errors and faults they had committed in their previous existence will henceforth be completely wiped out from their lives and furthermore the way leading to the attainment of the Highest State of Enlightenment will be opened to them. “Subhuti, I recollect that in the past countless ages, in the presence of Dipankara Buddha, I met 84,000 myriads of Buddhas. I served, worshipped and received instructions from each and every one of them without making one single mistake. Now in future ages, there will be persons who will receive and study this Sutra, their merits will far exceed those which I acquired by serving the myriad Buddhas. In truth, the nature and extent of the merit they will acquire cannot be stated in terms of numbers or figures.

“Subhuti, in future ages there will be good men and good women who will receive and study this Sutra and will acquire incomputable amount of merit. Now there may be persons, who, upon hearing what I have just said, become delirious, doubtful and unbelieving. Subhuti, you should know that the meaning of this Sutra is beyond comprehension and the reward for the believer is also beyond comprehension.

The suffering of which Buddha speaks at the start of this chapter – being despised and being held

in low esteem – is the karma which results from past action. Theoretically we should accept suffering stoically, or if that is not possible, at least be comforted by understanding that as we sow, so do we reap; we can exercise control over our actions and their result. If we understand that we are largely responsible for what happens to us, then there is no point in self-pity. When we encounter obstacles and disappointments, they should strengthen us, not lead us to despair.

In modern times there was a monk who had great academic success, degrees in oriental studies and various languages. Because of his intellectual achievement, there were members of the Sangha who resented him.

Knowing that he was not liked, the monk became very depressed. Eventually he decided that he would invite a large number of the Sangha to his temple and discuss with them any problems they might have with him and so resolve their differences.

The monk made elaborate preparations for the occasion. He provided food and drink and decorations for his guests. Sadly, no-one came.

For the already depressed man this was the last straw. In despair, he took his own life.

This tragedy might not have happened if the monk had held to the view that all things unfold according to Karma, which is simply cause and effect. Really there was no need for shame or self-pity. All of these proceed from the running mind which constantly feeds the ego, that which causes and experiences pain.

If we understand that the running mind is not the true mind, we can see that it need not be the cause of our suffering. So long as we cling to the running mind, we continue to flounder in ignorance. From this ignorance come the three afflictions.

First of these is karma. When actions are repeated often enough, they become habit and are laid

down as karma, the result of habitual action. These habits always multiply – only true nature stands alone.

Second, this karma has its own outcomes, which is the rebirth of body and mind. The third affliction is the constant stress and anxiety that comes from living this way, a vicious circle of cause, effect and suffering.

These three afflictions are dispelled first by Prajnaparamita – the true merit – which teaches us that the four characteristics are illusion, expiates karma and ensures no rebirth in the lower realms. Secondly, knowing the true self, which leads to the third stage, that of emancipation.

And what is this emancipation? It is the moment of awareness, the moment we live with our true nature.

Our true nature has no faults and experiences no pain. It is called no-mind because it has no attachment and creates no karma.

When Buddha uses the number 84,000 to describe the myriads of Buddhas, he simply means a vast amount. Numbers are numberless, time is timeless. We cling to time and space and to outside Buddhas, not realising that “incomparable merit” comes from the Buddha within who is discovered not in the past or the future, but only in the “now” moment.

In darkness, a rope may appear to be a snake. Switching on a torch reveals the truth. Study of the Sutra is like a light which dispels darkness and ignorance.

This chapter focuses on the “now” moment, the clear, unborn mind.