

## A Letter to a Prisoner from Rev. Leon

Dear - - - ,

I am glad to hear from you, the other monks and I are doing well, our health is good for the moment and the temple is thriving.

I will address your question about regret and letting go of the past, but I am thinking in a roundabout way today, so please bear with me.

In Buddhism there is a traditional practice called “offering merit”. It is recognized that by doing good works we create spiritual and material merit which will bear fruit at some time in the future and it is a common view that we can share this merit with others who may be in need. So when we do a ceremony, part of the ceremony will be words spoken to the effect that we dedicate the merit of the ceremony to all beings, including ourselves. It is thought that the best way to generate merit is through spiritual practice, although any type of work or activity that benefits beings is meritorious.

We can offer merit for a particular person and when we do, it works like this: I might decide to dedicate the merit of a day’s meditation to someone, say, my brother, and so, at the beginning of the day, I will make a little prayer to the Buddha saying “I dedicate the merit of today’s meditation for the benefit of my brother” and then go about my day. When I make the offering to the Buddha, I don’t have to worry about whether I have any merit to offer, or whether there is enough merit to do any good, or how the merit will be used. We can just make the offering, and trust that the help that can be given will be given. Then I work on my meditation to the best of my ability. Or, I might decide that it would be good to work on generosity or lovingkindness, or another spiritual quality. I take that effort to work on one of those qualities as my means of generating merit, and in the same way, offer the merit of my effort to the Buddha for the benefit of the person I have in mind, and trust that this will help them and me.

I am unable to see what the best outcome of people’s difficulties (including my own) are, so I try not to have in mind any specific expectation of what a specific outcome for a problem will be. If, for instance, a person has cancer and asks for merit to be offered, or I think to offer merit for them without them asking, I usually try not to hope for, or expect, that they will get well, as a result of my offering. Instead, my hope is that the merit will help them bear the difficulty of illness, and perhaps learn from it, or benefit them in whatever way is truly good. Sometimes, of course, as a human being, I do hope they will get well, but I try to remember that that may not happen, or be the thing that is needed.

I wanted to explain this so I could say that I will continue to offer merit for you and hope that it will help you in your difficulty—it can’t be easy, and one way or another I hope you won’t mind a little merit. To this end, we also thought we might put your name on our “Transfer of Merit Board.” It will just be a small note with your name and the date, for our congregation

members to see and offer merit for you. Please let me know if this is something you would not like.

Now, for your question about regret. There are some things you can do to help with this, and I would be glad to offer some suggestions. I am glad that you included the quote: "Oh my mind! Once you caused me to be born as a king, and then you caused me to be born as an outcast and to beg for my food. Sometimes you cause me to be born in heavenly mansions of the gods and to dwell in luxury and in ecstasy; then you plunge me into the flames of hell." This really points to where we can look to work on our regrets for our past mistakes. For regret we can apply the three R's: Repent, Repair and Reflect.

The first one, repentance—and I hope this word doesn't conjure up memories of past religious meaning, because in Buddhism we are talking about something without any judgmental tone—is really just seeing that what we did created suffering, and that we will do what we can to train ourselves to avoid repeating the mistake in the future. In the text of our precepts, there is a verse at the beginning of the list of the Precepts which goes:

“All wrong actions, behavior and karma, perpetrated by me from time immemorial, have been, and are, caused by greed, anger and delusion which have no beginning, born of my body, mouth and will; I now make full and open confession thereof.”

This verse is called the Sange (pronounced songgay) verse and we use it at the beginning of our precepts ceremonies to help us articulate our wish to recognize our wrong actions and our wish to do better. You can take this verse and recite it (to yourself or out loud) in front of a Buddha image as a way of saying to the Buddha, in a more formal way, 'I made a mistake and I wish that I hadn't'. When I do this myself, I always then recite the Three Refuges: I take Refuge in the Buddha, I Take Refuge in the Dharma, I Take Refuge in the Sangha. Reciting the Three Refuges both asks the Buddha for help in working on your life, and it gives you something with which to replace the former behavior that you regret—this is important and leads to the second R, Repairing.

When I have made a mistake or caused harm, there is often something I can do to help make up for what I have done. Sometimes this is as simple as apologizing or in some way communicating to the person or persons I have harmed that I wish that I hadn't done what I did. Sometimes repairing may require something more from us. For instance, I once dinged someone's parked car and so I left a note on the car letting the person know what I had done, what my name and address was and then, when they contacted me, I paid to have it fixed. You can look at the things that you have done and see, with wise eyes, if there is something that you might do to help repair the thing.

I say with wise eyes, because it may be that it would not be good to contact the other people involved or you may be unable to. In that case, repairing might come in the form of offering merit for someone in the way I described above. As an example, you could decide to do something that produces spiritual merit, recite a scripture or do a set number of bows or prostrations to the Buddha, on a daily basis, and dedicate the merit to the person or people

involved. Bowing to the Buddha is thought to be a particularly good thing to do in such cases—you are not bowing to the other people, but to the Buddha and that creates merit. Below, I have included the text for a short scripture which I have memorized and will recite when I want to offer merit to people. It is a scripture called the Litany of The Great Compassionate One and it asks for the help of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara, or Kuan Yin, who represents the compassion of the Buddha Nature within all things.

The next thing you can do is Reflect. By reflect, I mean consider, in a meditative way, the nature of the working out of Karma. Karma is the law of cause and effect on a spiritual or moral level. We receive the consequences of our actions whether they are good, bad or neutral. One of the ways that we can recognize that an action is harmful or tends toward increasing suffering is that we feel regret, sadness or remorse for that action. These feelings are part of the karmic consequence of our past action and become easier to bear when we see and accept that this is so. Karmic consequence, though recognized as being, at times, very, very difficult to bear, is nevertheless seen by Buddhists as being compassionate—this is how we learn which actions are harmful and which actions produce true happiness. It is like the effect of feeling pain when you put your hand in flame—feeling that pain is how we learn that flames and live bodies do not mix well.

What this means in practice is that, when a feeling of regret arises in your mind, you can try to be still with that regret. You can allow the feeling to arise and be there in your mind for as long as it wants to be. Then let it pass when it wants to pass. You can offer compassion for yourself in the present, and compassion for the former self who made the mistake which left behind the regret. Meanwhile, while the feeling is arising you can go about your regular activities with mindfulness and care, not being too caught up in the feeling: bring your mind back to your present activity, whether it is sitting meditation or another activity, and when you have a minute, you can ask yourself, ‘Is there anything more I can do or learn about this situation?’ By being still and allowing the feeling to come and go, without stirring it up more, we come to understand more deeply the nature of our actions and we allow the karmic consequence to run its course most quickly—it gradually diminishes over time. In other words, I have again described the process of meditation. Just continuing to work steadily on meditation is really the best antidote for these unpleasant states of mind and through it we come to find a deeper refuge than our mind’s ups and downs.

I hope that what I have written makes sense. Please do ask further questions if it is not clear. As I said earlier, we are offering merit for you. May you be well and happy.

In the Dharma, Rev. Leon