Kamma & The End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:23

The talk tonight is called Karma and the End of Karma.

The Dalai Lama was once asked, where should the emphasis be in bringing the Dharma to the West? Should it be more on the teaching of emptiness, which is the pinnacle of Buddhist philosophy, or should it be on the teaching of karma? And he said it's more important for Westerners to hear the teachings on karma than to hear about emptiness.

I want to suggest in the talk tonight that this topic of karma is actually even more central to the Buddha's teachings than we normally think that it is. In pointing to that, I want to remind us of the sequence of insights on the night that the Buddha was enlightened. This is described in Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 4. He goes through the progression of things that happened to him that night.

Do you remember that he decided to sit under the Bodhi tree? He made a resolve not to get up until he had attained full realization. He said, even if I die here, I'm not going to get up. That's determination. You know, the next time the tea bell rings and you pop up, that's a good thing to keep in mind.

He said that in the first watch of the night he had his first insight. The watches of the night are three in number. They start at 6 p.m. and they're each four hours long. So between 6 and 10 p.m., when most of the country was watching the Brady Bunch, the Buddha had his first insight, which was the recollection of his past lives. And he said, I recollected one past life, five past lives, ten past lives, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand past lives. Here I was born of such and such a name and such and such a clan. This was my sustenance and there I passed away. Just reviewing all those many, many lives.

Then in the second watch of the night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., he was still awake, and he had his second insight. This is a good motivation to stay up later in your practice. The second insight was about opening his eye with psychic power to the whole cosmos. He saw various beings being born and dying. And he said he saw that reappearance according to their past actions in this way: that those who had been well-conducted in body, speech, and mind were born in a pleasant destination and enjoyed happy conditions. And those who had been ill-conducted in body, speech, and mind were born in a painful destination and had difficult conditions.

Finally, in the third watch of the night, the time from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m., is when he became the Buddha with his insight, penetrating insight into the Four Noble Truths, the realization of nirvana and the destruction of the taints. At the end of that time, his mind was liberated and he was truly the Buddha, the Awakened One.

I think it's quite significant that in the second watch of the night, the insight was basically about karma. We're going to come back to that at the end of the talk, and I hope you'll see how that fits in.

It's very challenging for us to grapple with these teachings on karma because unlike most of the Buddha's teachings, we can't verify them in detail. I don't have a divine eye whereby I can see beings dying and reappearing according to their past actions. That takes a very special mind. I can't see for myself the truth of rebirth and how that relates to karma. And I don't know anyone teaching in the West who can, although there have been Asian teachers that I've met who said they were able to see this. So most of us can't verify these teachings experientially.

In the talk tonight, I don't want to tell you so much my understanding, because that's really limited, but I want to try to tell you what the Buddha said on this topic. This is the same person who gave us the four foundations of mindfulness and the direct path to realization. That gives him a little bit of credibility in my eyes, and I trust in yours. So please take the words in just as reflections of the Buddha's words, and I think this is a topic that sinks into our hearts and minds often over a long period of time. Don't struggle too much with whether you believe it all or don't believe it all right away, but just let it settle a bit.

There are four topics that I want to cover tonight in this exploration of karma. The first is what is karma? The second is what can be said about the results of karma. The third is the relationship between karma and not-self or anatta. The fourth is the end of karma. This is the general outline of the talk.

So first, what is karma? Karma is the word in Sanskrit, the Pali term is kamma. It was a very common word in the day of the Buddha and a very simple word. It just meant action. That's all it meant. But every philosophical school in northern India at that time had some twist about what action meant. Some of them said it mattered a lot. Some of them said it didn't matter. Some of them said it affected practice one way.

Some said another. The Buddha's original contribution was that he put an entirely new interpretation on the meaning of action. And he said that action refers primarily to the volition that accompanies it, the urge from which it springs.

This is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action." When I use "action" in the talk tonight, the word that's being said by the Buddha is karma. So really, karma and action are synonymous, but karma has many more connotations or overtones than our word "action." So I will use it often to bring in the overtones, but they are synonymous.

Volition—so what does this word mean? The Pali term is cetanā. It's the word that we've used in the instructions that we translated by "intention." Noticing that before there's any movement of the body, there's an intention or an urge in the mind that causes that movement to take place. Other synonyms could be impulse, urge, motive, or will. The volition is the energy that drives the action. The actions are in three areas: body, speech, and mind. All of these are the fields of action.

Now what was so interesting about the way the Buddha described action is that some volitions are

wholesome, some are unwholesome, and it's this quality—the wholesome or unwholesome aspect of the volition—that determines whether the action is wholesome or unwholesome. This was the Buddha's unique contribution to the understanding of action.

So specifically, when volition is influenced by greed, hatred, and delusion, that is an unwholesome kind of impulse or motivation. And these three qualities are called the roots of the unwholesome. When the volition is influenced by their opposites—non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion—then the volition is wholesome.

When we look at the meaning of these words, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, put more positively: non-greed is the opposite of clinging or grasping. It's the opening of the hand in letting go. So it could be called renunciation, relinquishment, letting go, or generosity. These are all aspects of non-greed. Non-hatred is essentially loving-kindness, friendliness, warmth, acceptance. And non-delusion is essentially clear seeing, or you could say wisdom.

So we could say that generosity or renunciation, loving-kindness and wisdom are the roots of the wholesome. When actions are influenced by greed, aversion, and delusion, then they are unwholesome in nature. When they are influenced by renunciation, loving-kindness, and wisdom, they are wholesome in nature. And some actions are mixed, so they have a mixture of both wholesome and unwholesome volition.

So it's not the act per se, but the volition behind it that gives its moral quality. For instance, I could ask you: if somebody cuts you open with a knife, is that a wholesome or an unwholesome action? You can't know, because if someone is trying to steal your money and they slice your stomach to make you fall to the ground, that's an unwholesome action based on greed and hatred. But if a surgeon is trying to remove your appendix because it's swollen, that's a motivation of compassion and a wholesome reason to cut you open with a knife—although it may not feel so enjoyable.

So it's not the action per se, it's the motivation behind it that determines its moral quality. And what's revolutionary about looking at action in this way is the Buddha said that there is this moral fabric woven into the universe of wholesome and unwholesome actions, because they lead to wholesome or unwholesome results. And we'll talk about that more in the section on result.

It would be difficult if we just had that teaching and no more guidance about what actions would be skillful and what would not. But the Buddha went on to provide quite a lot of detail on the actions that are to be done and the actions that are not to be done. Tomorrow night we're going to talk on the whole area of sīla, or moral action. So I don't want to go into much detail now, but the Buddha outlined ten actions that are unwholesome in nature, driven by greed, aversion, and/or delusion, and ten actions that are wholesome in nature, not driven by those forces.

So just briefly, in this list, three of these unwholesome actions are acts of body: killing, stealing, and sexual

misconduct. Four of them are actions of speech: lying, harsh speech, malicious speech, and idle speech and gossip. Three of them are actions of mind: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view. This is an interesting one. Wrong view is an unwholesome action of mind. So holding an assumption about the way the world works, the way things are, that is incorrect, is itself an unwholesome action. And the Buddha said it could lead to an unhappy destination.

Included in wrong view is not believing that actions have consequences. So let this be a word of warning.

I think it's very interesting when we start tuning in—and this is really where our meditation practice can ground itself—that actions of mind carry volition. And in that, they have karmic consequences. So take a look at the kinds of mental states and thoughts that you notice in your meditation practice.

Can you feel into the volition or urge that underlies different mental states and thoughts? With a thought of desire, what's the urge that's expressing itself? In some way, it's a wanting to possess, wanting to own, wanting to claim. What's the motivation in fear? It's something like escaping—escaping something or someone, trying to run away from—that's the urge expressed in fearful thought or mind state.

What's the urge or volition in metta? I think it's caring, caring for someone. What's the urge in compassion? I'd say it's to alleviate suffering. You can explore the different mind states that visit, those that seem to carry this quality of motivation or impulse, and feel into what that urge is about. Begin to recognize the wholesome kinds of motivations and the unwholesome kinds of motivations that arise in our minds.

The Buddha spelled out ten unwholesome actions, and then he outlined the ten wholesome actions, which were basically refraining from the unwholesome. This includes the first four precepts: refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, and from lying.

As you consider returning to daily life, I think the teachings on karma become even more relevant, because as you go back into daily life, you're moving back into the realm of relationship and back into the realm of action. This is why the talk on sila is so well-timed. This is serious subject matter. We sometimes underestimate the importance of karma, the importance of clarity in conduct, but it carries significant consequences for our lives, for our practice, and for our happiness.

As you re-enter the world, this can become one of the major areas of practice. Simply practicing to observe the precepts is a very powerful way to engage with this teaching. The precepts are excellent guidelines and will carry us a long way. They form the foundation for what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness—that ease, comfort, and relaxation that comes into our life when our actions are aligned with the precepts and with non-harming practices.

The second aspect I want to discuss tonight is the result of action, the result of karma. Sometimes in the West, as this concept has traveled here, the two have gotten confused. The John Lennon song "Instant Karma" really ought to be retitled "Instant Vipaka," because the result of karma is actually the Pali word

vipaka. It's different. Karma is the action itself, and the result is called vipaka.

The basic teaching, as I'm sure you've heard, is that wholesome actions lead to wholesome results, or happiness. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results, or unhappiness. This is from the Dhammapada:

"Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

This concept has entered our culture. In the Bible, you'd find it expressed as "as ye sow, so shall ye reap." It's also in the modern vernacular.

A few years ago, a friend and I were teaching a class at Juvenile Hall in San Mateo, California. We'd been invited in by a meditator who was working there as a nurse. For those unfamiliar with how the justice system works here, Juvenile Hall is where people under eighteen are held while awaiting trial—essentially a jail for minors.

We were invited to give a series of classes on meditation to the maximum security wing of Juvenile Hall. These were kids who were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, in jail awaiting trial for offenses like armed robbery, assault, murder, attempted murder. It was fairly serious stuff.

Now reflect back to when you were sixteen years old and think about how much self-knowledge you had about your emotional life. Then imagine being locked up in an environment that fostered aggression and fear, being put in a cell for almost twenty-four hours a day. What do you think your mind state would be like? These kids were climbing the walls, because they didn't know what their future was going to be. In a few weeks or months, they would come before a judge, and depending on the outcome of the trial, they could be sent away to prison for years, if not their whole life.

When we went in, we wanted to teach them basically how to work with their emotions, particularly anger and fear. So we gave them the same instructions we gave you: follow the breath. I have to say, the first time I went in and told them to follow the breath, I thought, "What am I doing here?" These guys were young, they were from the street—

They were of all different ethnic groups that exist in the Bay Area. And here were these two middle-aged white guys coming in and telling them to watch their breath. I mean, they must have thought we were nuts.

But by about the second or third class, we got on to emotions. And that they could relate to. We gave them instructions specifically on how to work with fear and how to work with anger: Feel it in the body. Feel it in the mind. Don't go to the thoughts of past and future. See if you can just hang with it. See if you can just be with that experience.

They were very motivated to practice. That really impressed me. They didn't have much else to do. We were kind of entertaining on one level. And they had a lot of free time, like you all do. You know, viewed from another angle, this is quite a prison setup here if you didn't want to be here voluntarily.

So they went back to their cells. They had a lot of spare time. And a bunch of them in this group really connected with the instructions on working with fear and anger. It brought, I think, probably the first relief they'd ever had in dealing with their emotional life.

By the sixth class, the end of this series that we were giving, we'd built up some connection. We had a sense that things were working. So I said to my friend—this is James Baraz—before we went in to that last class, "I want to teach them some sīla." And he said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah, I'd like to try it."

So I talked about the Buddha as the scientist of happiness and how he discovered that the real secret of happiness is being kind and non-harming in the world. And if we act in that way, happiness will follow. I said, "This is kind of the idea behind karma. Do you have any sense for that?"

And one of the young guys raised his hand and said, "You mean like what goes around comes around?"

I said, "That's it, that's it."

So they had it right there. And then after we left, some other meditation teacher came in and started teaching them about the loving-kindness practice, directing them to send loving-kindness to their enemy. Well, on the streets, enemy has a very real meaning. It's not just somebody you're a little irritated with. It's somebody who might be trying to kill you.

So they all had come from—a lot of them had come from—gang cultures, and they started practicing loving-kindness to the rival gangs that they were meeting on the street. At first a couple of them said, "I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to have any feeling for those guys."

And one of the gang leaders said, "Oh, but you've got to remember, they've got mothers and sisters also. You should try this."

So it was really quite touching. It was quite a connecting experience in the end.

Something about this concept that what goes around comes around has broad currency. And I think most of us have some sense of how this works. But when we get to the equanimity practice and we state it so directly, then it gets a little harder to take in.

This is from the words of the Buddha. I think you'll recognize a part of this quote:

"Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever actions they perform for good or ill, of those they will be the heirs."

Our actions are the womb from which we are born. This is a very powerful statement. And when we start thinking of it in this way—that our happiness and unhappiness really does depend on our past actions—Westerners can have a hard time relating to this. Because it goes against our ideals. We were founded on the proposition that all humans are created equal. This country was founded on that proposition.

The democratic ideal is very widespread in Western culture. I think we believe that everybody should have an equal share in happiness and unhappiness. The teaching on karma doesn't seem to support that view, and so the teaching on karma can seem cruel and kind of like a punishment—as though you're saying that because somebody did something, they deserve to be suffering.

Actually, that's not what the teaching is saying. This concept of deserving the outcome is something extra. The Buddha never talked about deserving to suffer. And I believe wholeheartedly that if he had the opportunity to pluck the suffering out of the heart of any human, he would do it immediately.

You look at his compassion toward the murderer Angulimala, who tried to kill the Buddha. Instead, the Buddha taught him to meditate, ordained him as a bhikkhu, and shepherded him to full enlightenment. Then he counseled him when afterwards Angulimala, after his enlightenment, went out to beg for food in the villages where he was known as a murderer and was stoned because of his past deeds. But the Buddha said, "Bear it, bear it, Brahman, because this is a small price to pay. Otherwise, you would have suffered a lot more for the murders that you committed."

So the Buddha was very compassionate even to people who had done many unskillful deeds. It's not that anyone, including the Buddha, wants people to suffer, but as he expressed it, this is just a law of the cosmos—just like if you cut an apple from the tree, it will fall to the ground. If we go about harming others, unhappiness will come our way. It's just a law.

Sometimes it's the fruits of action that are the hardest thing to accept in the teachings of karma. But I want to suggest that many of the fruits of action you already know about. I think we experience the fruits of our actions in at least five ways, and I want to mention each of them.

The first is in the moment when we do the action. When we do something unskillful, it doesn't feel good in the very moment that we do it. Being in retreat, you may have noticed this. If you've done something that was slightly disrespectful to anyone here, you'll immediately feel how the heart clenches and contracts and regrets that action. It's painful to hurt.

On the other hand, when you've done something generous for someone here—think about how that feels when you hold the door open for someone, when you take someone else's dishes, when you do a little extra work in your yogi job so that your work partner doesn't have to do so much. It feels great. So in the very moment of doing the act, there is a result, an outcome of it.

There's another result when we think back on our past actions, when we reflect on the things that we've

done. In the metta practice, we're encouraged to reflect on the wholesome acts that we've done as a way of building up self-confidence in ourselves and as a ground for the development of metta for ourselves. So when we remember acts of generosity and acts of kindness, it brings happiness back into our hearts.

On the other hand, as we talked about a little bit this morning, often as we get quiet for the first time, the mind starts to throw up all the unskillful things we've done in our life. We remember times we hurt people, times we were unkind, times we used people, times we killed living things unconsciously without thinking, and those can torment us. We can feel a lot of remorse and guilt as those memories come to mind. So in remembering our past actions, we feel the result of them in wholesome and unwholesome ways.

Our actions in the world come back to us anytime we live in community. If you live in community with people, then the way you treat and relate to those in your community will be mirrored back to you. If you're generous and thoughtful and kind and loving, then you'll get that kind of response from the people in your community. Not everyone—there's praise and blame everywhere, and connection and disconnection. But by and large, if you are well-behaved toward others, you're welcomed and you're respected and you're sought out. On the other hand, if your relationships in your community have been characterized by anger or pride or hurtfulness from you, then people are not so apt to be as welcoming or to seek you out. So the world in different ways gives us feedback when we're living in community.

There's another way that we feel the results of our actions, which is in our states of mind—especially in looking at our habitual states of mind. So I want to ask everybody a question: When your mind moves on the cushion, what does it move to? What direction does it move to? Maybe each of us has our top three or four or five. Maybe for some it moves to restlessness. For some it moves to sleepiness. For some it moves to spaciousness. For some it moves to calm. For some to wanting.

These habitual states of mind have really been cultivated by us over years of living. The Buddha would say lifetimes. We've practiced these different states, both wholesome and unwholesome, and as we come into quietude, these are the tunes that get played in our mind.

This is also from the Majjhima Nikaya: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then his mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If she frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then her mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

That is, by directing our mind along these channels, we incline it to land there more times in the future. So again, the result of these habitual actions is to strengthen that kind of conditioning.

The final of the results is that it's said in the text that karma unfolds in the future with results that seem very mysterious to us. How does our wholesome action bring happiness in the future? That's hard to see.

And yet the Buddha said that it does. He also said that we can't figure out the details. The workings of karma is one of the four things that he called imponderables. And he said that one who tried to speculate about the imponderables would go mad and experience vexation. So, please don't.

The other three that it's not wise to speculate about—in addition to the detailed workings of karma—are the range of mind of a Buddha, the beginning of things, and the power of a concentrated mind. These are things we can't figure out rationally.

So this is a really important thing to remember. How many times in your life have you been around someone who is ill and heard a friend say to them, "Oh, it must be your karma"? This is not helpful. It's really not helpful for the sick person. And it's not helpful because nobody knows that kind of thing. If we have any inclination of belief in it, it's pure speculation. We can't know whether that's karma or not. Only someone with a mind like a Buddha mind could know that.

So in this whole area of wholesome actions lead to happiness, unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness, I take it in very broad terms. I sort of trust in it in very broad terms, but I don't try to get specific. If something specific happens in my life or a friend's life, I don't know whether that's karmic or random.

The Buddha never said everything that happens is the result of past action. He never said that. In fact, he was invited to say that at one point. There's this really interesting sutta in the Samyutta where a wanderer, I think it's a wanderer from another sect, comes to the Buddha and says, "These other teachers over here, these other ascetics and Brahmins, are stating that everything that happens to one, whether it be a pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, is the result of past action. Is that true?"

And the Buddha said two things. He said, "Those teachers overstep what they know for themselves," first of all. In other words, they don't know what they're talking about. He was not one to mince words, you may have noticed. The second thing he said was they overstep what is commonly agreed in the world.

And he went on to list something like seven causes and conditions by which we experience pleasant or unpleasant feelings. He said we can experience these feelings because of medical disorders. And using the medical conditions of the time, he talked about disorders of bile, disorders of phlegm, disorders of wind, or a balance of all three. So in modern medical terminology, we could have many more than four to fill in that list.

So basically medical conditions, climate, diet, carelessness, assault—being attacked by someone can give rise to painful feelings. And he mentioned past karma. So there were a number of other conditions that he said could give rise to these feelings. And he declined to say everything that happens to us is the result of our past action.

I think I take that as a very cautionary instruction. If the Buddha wouldn't say that, far be it from us to say it. So trying to pass judgment on "this happened to that person as a result of their past action"—pure

speculation. We simply don't know. We just don't know.

Now, when somebody says, "I don't believe in karma,"

When somebody says, "I don't believe in karma," I think it's usually this fifth kind of result that people are talking about. Because these four earlier results—the way an action feels in the present moment, the way it feels when we reflect on a past action, what we put out into the world and how it comes back to us in relationship, and then the habits of our own mind—I think these are mostly verifiable. I think we can know these through our direct experience.

It's this fifth kind usually that we don't know through direct experience and that causes us to question the teachings of karma. But I want to suggest that saying we don't believe in karma is too blanket a statement. Maybe where the real doubt lies is that we're skeptical about this fifth kind of result, vipāka karma.

So I suggest that in relating to this fifth teaching, you try not to form a conclusion about it tonight. Maybe tomorrow morning. Sleep on it. Sometimes I think these ideas have to settle into our hearts and abide there and get examined over years of practice before we get a sense of this teaching resonating with us or not.

If this doesn't resonate for you, if you don't really believe it, I suggest holding it with an open mind, but also not taking the stance of "I believe it's not true," because this closes us off from some potential wisdom.

Because what if it is true? How would you live your life if this is true? Well, you'd probably want to be really careful with your conduct. You'd probably want to really try and base your actions around non-harming, generosity, kindness, compassion, and live a life that is really in harmony and mutual respect with those around you. If this teaching is true.

Well, what if this teaching isn't true? That would still be a pretty good life, wouldn't it? Wouldn't that still be a life well lived and worth doing? Just from the point of view of being a trustworthy, non-harming individual on this planet, that would still be a great contribution.

This is really what the Buddha suggested in one of the suttas in the Majjhima, Sutta number 60. Either way, it just makes sense to live as though the teachings on karma were true. It benefits us and it benefits others. If they're true, it will benefit us big time. If it's not true, it will benefit us medium time. It's still worth doing.

The next area I wanted to touch on is karma and anattā. I want to lead into it with the teachings on rebirth because I think these connect.

So the Buddha clearly said that the actions of this life influence our next rebirth. In one of the key suttas on karma in the Majjhima, he spells out what kinds of actions lead to what kind of rebirth. I'm just going to hit the highlights so that you'll have heard it:

One who is pleasant with their speech will be born with pleasant appearance. One who is angry with their speech will be born with an unpleasant appearance. One who is generous in this life will be born with abundance in the next. One who is non-giving in this life will be born with a lack of abundance in the next. One who practices non-killing in this life will be born with long life in the next. One who practices killing living beings in this life will be born short-lived. One who practices non-injuring of living beings will be healthy in the next life. One who injures living beings will not be healthy. One who inquires from wise teachers will be born with wisdom in the next life. One who does not inquire will be born with a lack of understanding.

These are obviously very broad generalizations and it would be hard to make any specific conclusions from them because most of us have a mixture of these motives, a mixture of these kinds of karmic acts. But it's interesting that the actions that support the characteristic are the ones that lead to it. I'll just leave you to reflect on that a little bit.

Here's another comment of the Buddha's in regard to rebirth. When he said that karma is the womb from which we are born, he then made it even more explicit in this quote from the Saṃyutta Nikāya:

"Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents, none of them can you take with you when you die. You must cast them all aside. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. Therefore, do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings in the hereafter."

It was one of the reasons that he said that those people do not need to fear death who have done a lot of good acts.

Now the question that comes up when we contemplate karma and its connection to rebirth is: who is it that's reborn if there is no self? Another way to ask that question is, if there's no self, then who inherits the actions?

I want to talk about this topic of karma and anattā a little bit. In another sutta in the Majjhima, the Buddha actually reads the mind of a bhikkhu in the audience who is thinking the thought, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?"

So this is essentially that same question: What self inherits actions performed by the not-self? The Buddha basically said to that bhikkhu, "You haven't been listening to me."

But it does sound contradictory, doesn't it? If there's no self, then what's this continuity of karma? How does it continue?

To understand this, I think we need to look into the meaning of not-self. The first thing to say is that the concept of not-self doesn't deny our individuality. As we look around this room, there are a hundred

different beings here. That difference, those individuals—there is not a denying or negating of that truth.

For instance, in the front row, there is Laura, there is Venerable Piedamo. They are not the same being. It would be very chaotic if one were to assume they were—especially chaotic if they were to assume they were! Very difficult indeed.

This understanding of our individuality is necessary for keeping the world on track. The Buddha never questioned this sense of individuality, never questioned it.

I think in looking at what makes up an individual, this is where we see the teaching on not-self. I'd like you to think about a river. If you drive forty-five minutes west of here toward Northampton, you have to cross a big river on a bridge—the Connecticut River.

If you go down to the banks of the Connecticut River and stand there, ask yourself: What is a river? The Connecticut River sounds like a big thing, a solid thing. It flows from here down into the ocean by Long Island Sound. If you look on a map, you can see it very clearly drawn. It's quite long and broad—a big geographical feature. So the Connecticut River is really something.

But if you go down and take a look at it and ask, "What is it?"—it's a little hard to figure out. I take it that the river is the body of water. It's not the banks. It's not the bed. It's not the stones in the bed. The river, I understand, is the body of water.

So what is the Connecticut River? If you look at it, is there anything constant in it? No. If what's in front of you is the Connecticut River, one minute it's there and the next minute it's gone, but something else has taken its place. There is no constancy to the Connecticut River when you actually experience it, even though it's a big geographical feature.

The individual is just like that too. There is no constancy in the individual, but everything is flowing through, flowing by the present moment.

In Tibetan Buddhism, they have this really useful concept called the mind stream. It's considered that every sentient being essentially is, in their most basic nature, a mind stream. I like this because the analogy to the river is really clear.

Our mind stream is the flow of our sense impressions, known through consciousness, and our volitional actions of thought and emotion. They're streaming by all the time. As you look closely, standing there at this moment of the now, there is nothing fixed in it. And yet there is the being. There is Laura. There is Venerable Piedamo. Each of them has their own being.

There is a continuity, just as there is a continuity to the Connecticut River, but there is nothing fixed in either of them.

So then the question arises, as we come to know them both: Where does their personality originate? But

before we ask that, let's ask what we mean by personality. Personality is a very distinguishing characteristic of beings, of human beings. What is personality? Is it anything other than our habits—the way we think, the way we feel, the way we speak, and the way we act? Isn't that essentially what personality is?

You talk about somebody having a vivacious personality or a reserved personality, an outgoing personality or a very giving personality, a cool personality, a warm personality. Isn't it really just the way we think, the way we feel, the way we speak, and the way we act?

I hope this rings a bell, because these are essentially actions of mind, actions of speech, and actions of body. So I want to suggest that our personality is nothing more than our karmic patterns. Nothing more than our karmic patterns.

When you get to know somebody and discover they have a really charming personality, it starts to feel like there's something solid there. And that's the illusion. There isn't anything solid behind personality. It's just a streaming flow of these karmic actions which arise in patterns, recur in patterns, because we've practiced them, worn a groove in the mind, and our mind inclines in that direction.

So I'd say that personality is nothing more than our individual karmic patterns—built up over years of habit. Nothing else. Nothing solid there. Just the stream of habit, of karmic pattern.

It's curious. In our meditation, sometimes we touch these places of great openness, and we can feel there's really no personality in that space. Have you felt that? It's so open. It's like, where did I go? I'm not here anymore. It's just space. It's just empty space. Everything in the universe has room to live and breathe, arise and pass away. And where am I with my familiar mood and habits? Gone. Gone. Gone beyond. Not there.

But then something happens—a loud sound or a memory comes—and it's like the whole personality coagulates again. And we're back again. When we come back, one person's mind kind of forms around perhaps wanting. Somebody else's mind might form around aversion. The Dalai Lama's mind coalesces again around compassion, for example. Why? Because he's planted that seed so many times. He's practiced that over and over and over.

What we see in this way of looking is that our personality, which seems to be a self, is nothing more than a stream—a changing stream of karmic impulses. But it gives us our unique flavor, our unique expression in the world, because everybody's stream of karmic patterns is different from everybody else's. We're all unique in that. So that's what makes our individuality. But there's no solidity in it.

Yet we also know it's not that easy to change our personality. As the Buddha said: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin."

Living beings are bound by action, bound by karma. We are bound to our personality by the force of the karma that we've invested in it, the volitional urges that we've put into our actions of body, speech, and mind. That's what makes us, quote, "who we are" in terms of personality.

But the beautiful thing is, nothing is fixed in that personality. Nothing is fixed because our actions can change. This is the real principle behind Dharma practice. If we didn't have the situation both of anatta and of the changeability of karma, we couldn't walk the path of practice. But because of this inherent fluidity in our makeup, we can walk the path of practice and we can transform who we are. We can transform our being.

Another way to say this is that the path itself is a karmic unfolding. The path of Dharma practice only works because of karma.

We've got this river flowing down a certain channel based on our past habits, largely influenced by greed, aversion, and delusion—let's be honest about that. Then we encounter the Buddha's teachings and begin to add a different volition. We introduce the intention of mindfulness, the intention of metta, of sila, of renunciation, of generosity, of determination, of patience, of energy. Each moment in which we add one of these wholesome intentions starts to steer the river in a different direction. We are influencing our whole karmic makeup one moment at a time by introducing the wholesome intentions of Dharma practice.

Over time, you can see the current of this river by looking at someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. You can see the possibility of transformation into a heart of compassion and wisdom—one moment at a time. The Dalai Lama didn't get that way by accident. He got that way through practice. According to him, seventeen lifetimes of practice. We have a few to go to catch up, but there's that possibility. One moment at a time, changing the karmic patterning. And it can eventually liberate us. Why? Because our ignorance is not fixed either. Therefore, ignorance can come to an end, along with greed, aversion, and delusion—that cousin of ignorance. This all relies on the unity of karma and anatta.

We reach a point described in the suttas as the end of karma. The Buddha said that for the arhat, the fully enlightened one, there is no more karma—that is, the arhat is no longer generating new karma. He never explains exactly why, but as I feel into this, my sense is that for the fully liberated one, there's no more personal self-interest to go in any particular direction, wholesome or unwholesome. Because the mind stream is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, actions spontaneously spring forth from wisdom and loving kindness. But there's no individual volition in that happening. It just comes forth more or less spontaneously.

So how did this happen to the arhat? This is where I want to return to the night of the Buddha's awakening. The first watch of the night was the recollection of past lives. Why then would the second watch be what it was? I think the Bodhisattva started wondering: how is it that beings appear and reappear? What is the cause and condition for that happening? He turned his divine eye and saw that beings dying and being reborn are due to their past actions. This is where the understanding of karma

came from.

One can only read between the lines, but it may not be too far off to ask: what led to the Buddha's liberating insight in the third watch of the night? I want to suggest that the Buddha looked at the situation where wholesome actions lead to pleasant birth and unwholesome actions lead to painful birth—but he didn't want either. The Buddha was interested in ending birth altogether. Perhaps his reflection, his investigation was something like: what if I abandoned wholesome actions—the volition of wholesome actions—and what if I abandoned the volition of unwholesome actions? What then would happen in my meditation? I believe that was his path to full awakening, and it's the path that we also follow.

This is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "What karma is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, which leads to the destruction of karma? It is the volition to abandon the dark karma with dark results"—that means the unwholesome—"and to abandon the bright karma with bright results"—that means the wholesome—"and to abandon the dark and bright karma with dark and bright results"—that means the mixed karma. "This is called the karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright results, which leads to the end of karma."

What is karma that is neither dark nor bright that leads to the end of karma? It is this Noble Eightfold Path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma. The Eightfold Path leads to the ending of karma—the volition to abandon both wholesome and unwholesome actions.

Notice how this feels in your practice. When you're really mindful, strongly mindful of an act of grasping, what happens to that act? It stops, doesn't it? Or an act of aversion—when you're really mindful of it, it stops. Mindfulness is our direct pathway to the ending of action, the ending of volition. In this, it brings us as far as technique can bring us to a state of non-doing, a state of stopping, a state of non-fabrication—in Pali, *atammayata*. It leads us into a deep stillness in our being where we are no longer directing our volition in any direction.

And then out of that deep stillness, perhaps the opening to something other can come—the insight into the unconditioned and the Four Noble Truths.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

[The talk concludes with a period of silent meditation]

Through this exploration of mindfulness and the cessation of volition, we discover that our practice naturally leads us toward non-fabrication, toward that profound stillness where all directing of will comes to rest. In this space of non-doing, we find ourselves at the very threshold of wisdom, poised for the deeper insights that reveal the unconditioned nature of reality and illuminate the timeless truth of the Buddha's teaching.

This is the gift of mindfulness—not merely awareness, but the direct pathway to liberation itself, guiding

us step by step from the entanglements of reactive volition into the vast freedom of awakened understanding.

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