Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:53

The talk tonight is on karma and the end of karma.

The Dalai Lama was once asked by someone, if you were teaching Westerners, would it be more important to teach them about emptiness or about karma? He said that as important as emptiness is in the Buddhist teachings, it would be more important to teach Westerners about karma. So I thought we shouldn't have a three month course go by without some discussion of this topic, which is very central to the Buddha's teachings.

The word has entered our Western vocabulary, but it's not very well understood. Most Westerners have a difficult relationship with karma when they first encounter it. In the talk this evening, I'd like to suggest that karma is something you can really cozy up to. In fact, it may become one of your best friends on the path. We don't really need to hold it at arm's length as we understand it properly.

I have to say as a preface that I cannot verify from my direct experience the range of the Buddha's teachings on this topic, and most people I know are in the same position. So tonight, I'm not going to tell you what I know personally about karma, as much as what the Buddha said about it, because he said that he could see these things from his direct experience. I just want to share with you his teachings on karma. I am also not trying to get you to believe, although I think it would be greatly to your benefit. But I just want you to know what the Buddha said and let you find your own relationship to these teachings.

This evening, I'm going to touch on four main points in relation to karma: the meaning of the word, the way results are generated, the relationship between karma and not-self, and the end of karma.

What is Karma?

This is the Sanskrit expression of the word. In Pali, it's known as kamma. I might use either of those. It's another example of a simple Indian word that the Buddha took and gave a special meaning to.

In these Indian languages, karma or kamma simply means action, nothing more. In the time of the Buddha, all the different philosophical schools around northern India had something important to say about action. Either it mattered or it didn't matter. There would be consequences or there wouldn't be consequences. It's predetermined or it's freely chosen. There were all these different views.

The Buddha contributed a unique and original perspective on the term. The way he defined it, he said that it means action with volition, or you could say intention. This is the term cetanā that we introduced as a meditation subject toward the end of the instructions a few weeks ago.

This is a quote from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action. For through volition one performs the action."

We could talk about different synonyms for this word volition: intention, motivation, urge, will, impulse. You get the feeling that it's the kind of energy from the mind that drives the action of thought or speech or body. This is really the key.

In the Buddha's explanation, what makes an action wholesome or unwholesome is the wholesome or unwholesome quality of the volition from which it comes. Actions that are rooted in greed, aversion, and confusion—which are called the roots of the unwholesome—express themselves in unwholesome actions. Actions that are rooted in their opposites—generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom, which are called the roots of the wholesome—express themselves through wholesome actions.

It's not the action per se that is to be judged wholesome or unwholesome. It's the volition from which it comes. For example, if a baby moves in their sleep and knocks over a candle and the candle burns the house down, the baby has no unwholesome volition in that. So there's no karmic consequence, even though you wouldn't really like to have your house burned down. The baby did nothing wrong.

You could take an action like cutting somebody with a knife and ask, is that wholesome or unwholesome? If it's done by a surgeon as an act of compassion, it can be very wholesome. If it's done by a robber out of hatred, then it's very unwholesome. It's not the act per se, but the intention behind it that causes it to be seen as wholesome or unwholesome.

An interesting point in this very definition of action with volition—which is most of the action that we do—is that there's a moral weight to the action that's intrinsic to its volition. This is an important point that we'll come back to later, and a departure from the other schools in India at the time.

Action can take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. In this understanding, thoughts and emotions also can have volitional impulses as their basis.

Fortunately, the Buddha was very clear about what kinds of actions have wholesome qualities and what kinds have unwholesome. This aligns very much with the talk that Annie gave last week on sīla. To put it in a slightly different context, he identified ten actions as unwholesome.

Three actions of body are considered unwholesome: killing, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct. Four actions of speech are considered unwholesome: lying, harsh speech, malicious speech about another person, and idle chatter or gossip. And three actions of mind are considered unwholesome: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view.

This is very interesting. The Buddha said that misunderstanding the nature of reality gives us an unwholesome basis from which to relate to life. So misunderstanding or wrong view is a mental unwholesome action.

The ten wholesome actions are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome. This gives us very clear guidelines for our conduct in daily life, just as Annie described in her talk. And I think especially because in another week we'll be heading back into daily life, this is a very important time to turn our reflections to action in the world and what will conduce to our welfare and what will not conduce to our welfare.

The Buddha described one who takes great care with their actions as enjoying what he called the bliss of blamelessness. That is, when one reviews one's conduct in the world, if it has been aligned with the precepts and with the ten wholesome actions, one enjoys a certain kind of freedom from regret and freedom from remorse that he called the bliss of blamelessness. And I've always been interested to what degree this quality, this impeccability of conduct, can be developed.

I was very interested to read the account of an interview with the Dalai Lama that took place a few years ago. The person conducting the interview was Oprah Winfrey. I really appreciate Oprah for bringing wholesome teachings about well-being and healing and spirituality to a very wide audience. I don't know anybody in the world who hits such a wide audience with such good teachings as she does. So I very much bow in her general direction.

This is an account of the interview that she held with the Dalai Lama. Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

The Dalai Lama continued, "Regarding service to Tibet, service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

All that stands between us and the Dalai Lama is sixteen lifetimes of practice. So we're getting started.

This is the potential in the bliss of blamelessness—not to have any regrets in one's life.

So this is the basic meaning of karma: looking closely at our actions and seeing the intentions that they spring from. Then the other part of the teaching is that the kinds of actions we do lead to certain results in our life. And the basic understanding is that when we act from a wholesome intention, that brings wholesome results back into our life. When we act from an unwholesome intention, that brings unwholesome results back into our life or unhappiness.

This is from the Dhammapada, a famous quotation near the beginning: "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 is the general statement of the teaching on karma: speak with a pure mind and happiness results, or act with an impure mind and unhappiness results. This truth holds whether our aim is simple human happiness—cultivated by qualities like generosity, loving-kindness, and compassion—or the highest happiness, developed through the factors of the Eightfold Path. In either case, these are our karmic directions.

This basic understanding is gaining ground in our wider culture. A few years ago, I was teaching a class at Juvenile Hall in San Mateo, California, to a group of teenagers—young people under eighteen who were in jail awaiting trial on charges like assault, grand theft, and murder. As part of the class, I felt it important to teach them about karma because of its crucial bearing on our welfare. I began presenting the topic as the study of how we can find happiness.

"Do you all have some feel for this teaching on karma?" I asked.

One young man replied, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around?"

"Yes, that's it," I said. He had it. He already grasped that concept. There wasn't much more I needed to say, and there wasn't much resistance to the basic idea.

In the Tibetan system, the phrases for the Brahmaviharas are expressed partially in terms of karma. The four immeasurables in the Tibetan tradition include these lines for metta and compassion: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." That's the metta phrase. The compassion phrase: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." Here the metta and compassion wishes have been joined with the teaching on karma to illuminate how they arise.

What fascinates me about this teaching is that it doesn't matter if you believe in it or not. It doesn't matter if you know the teaching or not. It doesn't matter if your religion believes in it or not, and it doesn't matter if your culture believes in it or not. These teachings describe a universal law that operates whether we wish it to happen or know if it's happening—it happens anyway. Much of the growth in the path comes through developing confidence in this teaching, learning to trust somewhat in this law. Do we trust that impeccable conduct really leads to happiness?

There's a beautiful story that illustrates this trust. It concerns one of the most remarkable monks in our tradition I've had the chance to meet—a Cambodian monk named Maha Gosananda. Maha Gosananda became the patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism after the time of the Khmer Rouge. Perhaps the only reason he survived the Khmer Rouge was that he was practicing outside Cambodia while they were in power. Sixteen of his immediate family members were killed in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, but he was practicing in Thailand at the time and escaped that period of mass killings of the monks.

Around 1980, the Khmer Rouge were starting to be displaced from power, but many refugees remained on the Thai border. Maha Gosananda began living in the refugee camps as a way to help heal the country and create a path for people to return home. While there, he taught, becoming well-loved and well-respected. From a simple hut in the refugee camp, he would teach on Sunday mornings, and hundreds of people—sometimes thousands—would gather outside his hut for the teaching.

One of his main teaching devices was to have people chant in Pali another verse from early in the Dhammapada: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is the ancient and eternal law."

Can you imagine having the courage to teach this to people whose families had been killed, whose fellow citizens had been murdered mercilessly by the government in power? Many supporters of that government were still alive and in positions of local influence in Cambodian villages and towns. Yet Maha Gosananda wanted to unify the country. How could he heal? His message was that we can only heal through love. That's trust in karma—trust in the impeccability of conduct and speech.

A footnote to this story: there were Khmer Rouge affiliates still in the refugee camp who didn't appreciate the reconciliation work Maha Gosananda was trying to carry out. They threatened his life. When word reached some of the Westerners in the camp, they approached Maha Gosananda and said, "It's not safe for you here anymore. We're going to give you money to take a plane to Paris where you can live in exile and your life will be safe."

Maha Gosananda had been teaching this prayer from the Dhammapada—about reconciliation through love—through pamphlets. He had printed many, many pamphlets containing the Pali phrases that the Cambodians would chant along with him during the Sunday morning teachings. Essentially, they were asking him to give all of that up.

So Mahagosananda said, "OK, you give me the money, I'll go to Bangkok and do as you say." So they gave him the money—several hundred dollars to fly to Paris to safety. He went to Bangkok, printed up thousands more of the pamphlets, came back to the refugee camp and handed them out to even more people and continued his teaching: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love." That was his trust in the Dhamma.

So our equanimity practice, which we introduced this week, is built on this understanding that our happiness or unhappiness comes from our past actions, their wholesome or unwholesome qualities. The traditional phrase goes like this: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their past actions more than on my wishes for them."

The Buddha actually stated this even more strongly in the text. This is from the Majjhima Nikaya: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions." Here you understand that the word he was using is karma. "Beings are owners of their karma, heirs of their karma. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or bad, of that they will be the heirs."

I've found that Westerners often have a strong resistance to this idea, so I want to explain a little about the sense of it and why sometimes I think there's a misunderstanding. First, for Americans at least, it conflicts with some notion we have about democracy. Those of you outside of America may not know that the beginning of our Declaration of Independence says—and I'm paraphrasing slightly—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal." So there's something about this notion of fundamental equality that seems to people to conflict with the teaching of karma, as though out of this fundamental equality, everyone should be equally happy. And so from this point of view, the teaching on karma can seem cold, uncaring, or even cruel.

But I think one of the misunderstandings is this: The teaching on karma doesn't mean that we think beings deserve to suffer. That's not part of it. There's no deserving anywhere. And I'm very convinced that if the Buddha could have reached into everybody's heart and plucked out the seed of suffering, he would have done that instantly. I don't think there's any wish on the Buddha's part or on any serious practitioner's part that people deserve to suffer.

Think about the story of Angulimala. He had killed 999 people and strung their fingers in a bracelet around his neck. He was in the forest and tried to kill the Buddha as his thousandth victim. Did the Buddha think that he deserved to suffer? No. He taught Angulimala the Dharma. He helped him to practice and understand. Angulimala soon became enlightened and his suffering was ended. This is the work of compassion.

But the fact is that the teaching of karma is just a law in the Buddha's view. Expecting to do an unwholesome action and not have a result of suffering would be like expecting the law of gravity to be suspended. It would be like expecting an apple to be plucked from a tree and not fall to the ground. There's just no way to arrest the law of gravity. There's no way to arrest the law of karma. But that doesn't mean there's a deserving in it. There's not a punishing attitude in the law of karma.

Sometimes we also may think that this is an excuse for not caring. You know, we look at someone who's suffering and we go through this rationale: "Oh, they're suffering. That must be their karma. Therefore, it's their fault. So it's not my problem." And we could think it could be used as an excuse for not taking action

or not caring. Again, that's not the way it's meant. This is called indifference and it's the near enemy of equanimity.

The Dharma is about unfolding compassion. So when we see somebody suffering, it doesn't matter what the cause is. It doesn't matter whether the cause is an external cause, a physical cause, a mental cause, a karmic cause. Compassion wants to alleviate suffering. Of course, to alleviate effectively, we have to understand the cause, but it does not come with a judgment that says you should be suffering, therefore I'm not going to intervene or help.

If in doing the equanimity meditation you find this tendency coming to mind—oh, that person's suffering is from their own karma, therefore it's not my problem, I don't care—then that equanimity needs to be suffused more with metta and compassion. It's an unripe equanimity, an incomplete equanimity that's slid to its near enemy. So in this way, the Brahmaviharas help to balance one another out. Compassion has to go along with equanimity.

The fruits of action, or the results of action, you might say, can be seen in at least six different ways. So I want to run through some of those.

First way is before we do an action, we get a feeling for its tone. So if we're thinking of doing something lovely, beautiful, coming out of metta or generosity, before we do it, as we're considering doing it, we feel good. So even before we do the act, it brings an uplift to us. Similarly, if we're thinking about doing something unskillful, take a look inside. As we get more sensitive, something feels kind of creepy about it. If you tune into it, there's a quality.

Not long ago—I work on a lot of committees and a board at Spirit Rock, teacher groups and so forth, and we have lots of discussions and debates about how to run the center—we were having a discussion on something and I'd put out some viewpoint or other. And somebody was taking the opposite viewpoint and replied in an email to me that I found not only disagreeing with me, but disrespectful. I don't mind if people disagree with me, but when it's disrespectful, then I kind of get stirred up about it.

And I noticed my first impulse—very first impulse—was sort of happily, I'll forward this email to the other members of the committee. So I won't say anything against the person, but I'll show them, you know, the unskillful attitude from this other person who disagrees with my view. And I saw that, and I was sitting with that for a minute. I didn't hit send, and I saw that was the motivation, and I couldn't send it. So I just didn't send it. I can't even remember if I replied to the original email or not, but I very consciously made the decision not to send that because it just didn't feel right. So before we act, we can feel the influence.

During the act, we feel the result. When you're being generous with somebody, tune into how it feels. When you're expressing love to somebody, tune into how that feels. It feels great to give. So in the very moment of doing a wholesome act, you feel the wholesome effect of it. Similarly, when we're doing something that is going to hurt somebody else, inside there's some degree of pain that's going along with

it. Maybe it's coming out of pain in the first place. And we can feel the pain even as we do it. Something that doesn't feel right, doesn't feel good.

Our friend Sylvia Borstein has this nice line that's helpful to remember: Anyone causing great pain is himself in great pain. And that's helpful to remember as a source of compassion.

In the future, after we've done an action and we remember our past actions, we can feel good about that. And that's why in the metta practice, we very often encourage us all to reflect on our good actions as we enter metta for ourselves. Because when we tune into our own goodness, it makes it easier for the metta for ourselves to arise. Or if we've harmed people in the past, often in retreat those memories will come up clearly and we'll feel that sense of remorse or guilt about those past actions. So that's the third way.

A fourth way is that the way that we act toward others kind of comes back to us in the way they relate to us. If we relate to other people out of friendship and warmth and affection and generosity, then people like to see us coming. And they kind of open their hearts and their minds to us, and they want to receive us. So our actions have created an atmosphere that forms the relationship that we're held in. But if we act to people out of anger, frustration, irritation, impatience, and judgment, then people aren't so keen to see us coming. And we may find as we approach people, they turn away or close off to us. So again, the results of our actions in relationship get mirrored back in others' responses.

The fifth way that our actions influence us in the future is in creating habitual states of mind. When we generate wholesome states of mind again and again and again, that becomes the way the mind inclines. If we generate unwholesome states of mind again and again and again, that becomes the way our mind inclines.

So take a look at this as you sit on your cushion. One question that always interests me when I'm sitting or when I come to physical stillness is, why does my mind move at all? Does it need to? Most of the time there's not a real need, but it does. Why is it moving?

And then where does it go? Where does the mind commonly go when it moves? What does it dwell on? Often we'll see it's drawn to those places where we've invested in the past—where we've invested in people or outcomes or situations or money or pleasures or pains. It will go where we've put our volitional energy.

This is from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then their mind will incline to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind will incline to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

So as we act, we are wearing a groove in the mind that the mind will settle into in the future. This is the fifth kind of outcome from present actions.

The sixth is the one that people question. It seems from what the Buddha said that our actions have results in the future in mysterious ways that we really cannot see or understand. These are the ways that we can't verify from our individual insight or experience—some of the complicated and intricate workings of karma. How is it that a life of virtue brings happiness? I don't know all the details of it. We can see some of the ways in those first five. But how does that work completely? I don't know. But the Buddha said that they do come back in ways that we normally can't foresee or tell, in complicated and mysterious ways.

It's kind of interesting when you tune into this level of the teaching of karma—you understand that what the Buddha was painting is a picture of the universe in which morality is woven into the very fabric of the nature of beings. That wholesome actions bring wholesome results is essentially a moral statement. Immoral conduct brings unhappy results—that's a moral statement. This was something that really amazed me when I started to tune into it and reflect on it. Morality is an essential part of the universe of sentient beings. It's inescapable.

To me, this became the heartful view. I wouldn't want to live in a universe that was amoral. Finding that I live in a universe of which morality is an integral part is, to me, a much more heartful way to approach life. It makes me care more about my conduct and the underlying intention. For me, this understanding warms up the universe. It's not a cold or immoral or heartless view at all. It brings a great sense of heart to the very fabric of this world that we live in.

But the Buddha said in many ways we can't figure out the details of how karma unfolds in these subtle ways. In fact, he described it as one of the four imponderables. The Buddha said there are four things that if you speculate about them, you will go mad and experience vexation. I'm not sure which comes first—the going mad or experiencing vexation—but nonetheless, it's not a good outcome.

One of the four is the workings of karma, meaning the details of how karmic results happen that we can't see. The other three, in case you're curious, are the range of mind of a Buddha—what a Buddha could know or not—the beginning of things, the beginning of the universe, and the power of a concentrated mind. These are the other things that you just can't figure out, so you don't need to think about them.

But think about the way that karma is sometimes held in our culture and probably in others. Have you ever heard this? I have heard this. Someone gets sick, and a friend, questionably, will say to them, "Oh, you're sick? It must be your karma." How do you think that makes the sick person feel? Usually pretty awful.

To me, the really interesting thing is there is no way that friend can know whether that's true or not. That's only a belief—a belief with no real evidence and no foundation in these teachings. Only somebody like a Buddha could see that kind of connection. You and I cannot see that. So for us to speculate on the causes of a friend's illness is really inappropriate. It's way off base.

The Buddha was asked one time if everything that happened to one on the level of pleasant or unpleasant

feeling came from past karma. And he did not say yes. This is an important thing to remember. He was invited to make this statement, and he did not agree with it.

And he named other causes that he said all the world recognizes as being influential factors. He mentioned illness, diet, climate, and assault as other factors that lead to pleasant or unpleasant feelings for people.

So just remember, karma is one kind of cause that works in this world that we live in. It is not the only cause. There are physical causes. There are chemical causes. There are biological causes, including genetics. There are dietary and meteorological causes. There are many other things responsible for pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

So we can go in one direction. We can say if there's a wholesome act now, it will bring wholesome results. If there's an unwholesome act now, it will bring unwholesome results. We can go from the present and say there will be some future consequence. But there is no way that any of us can go from the present and say this was the past cause of that.

This outcome that someone is living—whether it's their illness, their general health, their sense of mental well-being, their living situation—anything, any accident that befalls them, any assault that befalls them, there is no way that we can say that was the result of karma. This is not in the Buddha's teachings whatsoever. So this is something I think often catches Westerners, and I just wanted to be very clear that this is not in the teachings. Not everything that happens is a result of karma.

But when somebody says in the West, "I don't believe in karma," it usually means this sixth kind—this mysterious way that it unfolds in the future. Because we can understand the other five ways that present actions lead to wholesome or unwholesome results. They're quite verifiable.

In terms of this sixth way, this mysterious way that karma can unfold in the future, it took me quite a few years of hanging out with the concept and observing my life and the lives of people I knew to get some confidence in this teaching. So don't expect that you have to believe in it overnight or you should believe in it overnight. I'd say just maintain an open attitude to the possibility it may be true and then see. See over the years how it feels to you, how your intuition relates to it.

But also I'd ask you not to believe in its opposite—that there is no way that a wholesome act results in wholesome circumstances in the future. Clearly, you and I cannot know that either. And so to discount this teaching would also be an act of blindness. So I just ask you to hold the possibility, recognizing that none of us knows from direct experience, and then investigate and see.

This also influences the next topic I want to mention briefly, which is rebirth. For karma to be understood fully, we need to understand it in the light of rebirth, because the actions from this life, according to the Buddha's teachings, will influence our next birth after death.

Again, the concept of rebirth was alien to me when I started to practice Vipassana. When I heard the teachings on karma and rebirth, I was skeptical at first. So I didn't toss them out. I just kept an open and questioning mind and then let them settle and reflect over years. So again, there's no rush to have to decide on this question, but just ask you to keep an open mind.

In some of the suttas, the Buddha says very clearly how some of the actions of this life play out in future lives. He said, for example, that one who is generous in this life will experience either in this life or a future life abundance in material things. One who is stingy in this life will experience in this life or some future life a lack of abundance in material things.

He said that one who abstains from killing living beings in this life or a future life will enjoy long life. One who abstains from injuring living beings in this life or a future life will enjoy good health.

So again, there's the possibility of present actions leading to future results, but trying to interpret it backwards, we can't do. We can't say that someone who has a short life—it's because of some action in the past. We don't know enough to see it that way.

Then another question that comes is: what do we take with us at the time of death? What is important that we carry forward? And this is what the Buddha said:

"Grain—" this is an agricultural society; grain was a form of wealth back then—"grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, dependents, none of them can you take with you. You must cast them all aside when you die. But whatever kamma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that kamma. That kamma 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."

So again, it's not necessary that you believe this, but I think it's important that you know that the Buddha said this. And then you can think about it. Suppose you decide to believe this and want to lead a good life.

Then there's the great possibility, according to the teachings, that you will experience benefits in a future life. But even if you don't believe in a future life, yet you live in this way, you'll experience great benefits in this life. So whether you believe in rebirth or not, it doesn't matter—the benefits are there for you.

Now, another question that arises is: if there's no self, what gets reborn? This also intersects with the teaching on kamma. There's a similar question you can pose about kamma: if there's no self, what is it that inherits the results of kamma? This was posed by a bhikkhu in the Buddha's lifetime. The bhikkhu said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" Basically the same question. The Buddha said, "You haven't been listening to me."

So I want to explain a little bit about how this can be understood. First of all, in terms of the self going from one life to another, it's in just the same way as our patterns go from one moment of practice to

another. You can say that nothing is the same as you look closely from one moment of experience to another. Everything is changing—physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, sounds—and yet there is some continuity in our being. In the same way, there is some continuity from one birth to the next.

The factor that continues, or that makes the link—that's a better way to say it—is consciousness. It's spoken of as the relinking of consciousness from a death to the next birth. But there is no essence that is carried in that. So Ajahn Amaro put it this way: "The process of going from one life to the next is in fact not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next. In either case, nothing substantial is ongoing, but there is a pattern that continues."

How do kamma and not-self fit together? At first they seem contradictory, but in fact they completely need each other to make sense. We talked before about this analogy of the river. A river is flowing along, there's nothing fixed in it, and yet we can give a name to that river that makes sense. The Connecticut River is a useful designation that's different from the Mississippi River.

Similarly, each of us has a mind stream that is constantly changing, but is an individual kind of phenomenon. Each of our mind streams is in constant flux, but has its own way of being. So everything is changing within each mind stream, and yet to know that Joseph's mind stream is different from Carol's mind stream, is different from your mind stream, is a helpful thing. There's an element of truth in that.

Within the mind stream, what constitutes personality? I would suggest that it is the flow of thoughts and emotions formed in certain patterns according to how the mind has been inclined, what we frequently think and ponder upon, and how we've shaped ourselves by our actions of speech and body. So the way we've acted in terms of thoughts, emotions, speech, and bodily actions comes to make up what we call personality.

There's nothing fixed in it, only a changing stream as we move through our different emotions of love, sadness, compassion, fear, joy, and so on. There's no solid essence within, and yet each of us has a kind of ongoing personality. This pattern of our actions, you could say, are karmic actions. That's all that personality is. There's nothing fixed or essential in the middle of it. But our minds are conditioned to run in those certain grooves that we know so well. And as you've seen during this retreat, it's not so easy to change those grooves. Those grooves have a certain disposition. The mind tends to run along those tracks.

Here's another quote from the Buddha about kamma: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." So we are bound to our kamma in the way that it generates our mental habits as well as some other ways.

But the freedom in that is that because nothing is fixed in this flow of our mind stream, everything can be changed. Our habits of thought and feeling and speaking and acting can all change. And Dharma practice is all about changing this.

So we start to understand that the Dharma uses the principles of kamma to transform our lives. Or

another way to say it is that the path itself is a karmic unfolding. As we practice wholesome mind states, that becomes the new grooves of the mind. Our intentional cultivation of qualities like mindfulness and loving-kindness and calm and investigation and energy and equanimity—the cultivation of those factors predisposes the mind to find them again. So in that retraining, we are karmically influencing

the direction of our whole mind stream.

Imagine this mind stream as a great river flowing along, carrying all of our conditioned habits with tremendous momentum. This mighty river is our mind, our personality—all those karmic formations upon which we ride. When we enter Dharma practice, it becomes like a small tributary joining from one side. At first, its power seems weak—a little bit of mindfulness, a little bit of metta. The great river doesn't shift much at all.

But as we continue our Dharma practice, that tiny stream gradually becomes a larger and larger river, and it begins to shift the entire current of the main flow. Our minds start to transform. The whole mind stream begins to take on this new karmic flavor of beautiful mental qualities.

This transformation is only possible because there is nothing fixed within our mind stream. If there were something essential and unchanging, how could we alter it? How could we transform it? If ignorance were permanently fixed, how could it be undone? If greed were immutable, how could it be overcome? But they are not fixed. There is nothing permanent in this great flowing river—that is the truth of anatta. And Dharma practice can enter with its beautiful karmic qualities and transform the entire direction of that stream, from suffering to happiness, and finally to liberation—the highest happiness.

When you contemplate our human situation, we are like beings floating in a vast sea of causes and conditions. There are external conditions—the world with all its uncertainty. There are internal conditions—our karmic predispositions. As human beings, as sentient beings, we simply float on this immense ocean of causes and conditions from the physical world, the chemical world, the biological world, and all our own conditioning. Here we are, this awareness, simply tuning into this vast unfolding on karmic levels, physical levels, biological levels, and so forth.

But how can we steer? What is our rudder amidst all the uncertainty and sometimes seeming chaos of this world? Where can we find a reliable rudder for our lives?

The teaching on karma is the pointer. The only reliable rudder is intention. Our own volitions turned toward generosity, renunciation, kindness to others, and compassion—this is how we steer our lives, and this is how we find safe harbor. This is the path to human happiness.

Let me say this again: if you want to be happy in a human sense, it is about renunciation, generosity, kindness, and compassion.

But as Dharma practitioners—serious Dharma practitioners—most of us have a further goal, which is the

highest happiness: awakening, liberation, enlightenment. The Buddha said that for the Arahant, the fully awakened one, there is the complete end of karma. For some of us, this becomes the most compelling destination—the ending of karma itself. The Arahant may still experience results of past karma, but generates no new karma.

How does this come about? Again, it is volition that shapes us.

This insight comes beautifully from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Advaita Vedanta teacher who died in the early 1990s—a deeply awakened being who worked primarily through dialogue. One questioner came to him, and Maharaj told this person, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." Do you see that same pointing as karma shaping the river?

The questioner replied, "Well, surely karma interfered." And then Maharaj said something profound: "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character."

Your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character. So shape your character toward human happiness—generosity, loving-kindness, compassion.

Shaping your character toward enlightenment, I'll read this statement from the Buddha:

"What karma is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, which leads to the end of karma? The karma that leads to the end of karma is this noble eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

If we focus just on the outwardly wholesome actions—generosity, loving kindness, and compassion—we're still involved in doing. We're still involved in activity with an end in sight of some greater happiness. But as we follow the Eightfold Path, we are pursuing factors that lead to this element of nibbana, the unconditioned, which is the stilling of all formations.

And so we approach the stilling of all formations more and more by this quality of non-doing with presence. The stilling where we abandon any self-centered activity. We don't hope for future happy results of abundance or long life or better conditions. We want to come to the end of suffering.

So resting in this stilling, the refraining from the unwholesome, the development of awareness, the stilling of concentration—this allows the mind to open to that which is beyond conditions, to that which is beyond good and bad in the conventional sense. That is the quality of the unconditioned, which is our nibbana.

It is the Eightfold Path that is the way leading to the end of kamma, the end of volitional action.

So let's just sit for a minute together.

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