Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:04:34

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The Dalai Lama was once asked if he had to choose between teaching Westerners about karma or about emptiness, which was more important. He said, "If I could only teach about one, I would teach them about karma." We've spent considerable time discussing emptiness on this retreat, but we haven't devoted much attention to karma. Perhaps, by the Dalai Lama's guidance, we've missed something essential. Tonight I want to rectify that.

Why is the teaching on karma so important, especially for us as Westerners? First, because it's not a teaching we're very familiar with in this culture, and second, because it really is the science of happiness. Karma teaches us a clear road to happiness—whatever our aspiration may be, whether for ordinary human happiness, divine happiness, or the happiness of liberation.

I want to preface this talk by saying that some of what I'll discuss tonight is beyond my personal experience and that of most people I know. I'll be relating teachings from the Buddha that I haven't been able to personally verify. I'm not trying to convince you that you should believe in them—I want to make that clear from the start. Whether you believe in them or not is up to you. It's not my job to make you believe; it's simply my job to tell you what the Buddha said. Then you can decide for yourself.

Don't feel you have to subscribe to anything in tonight's talk, and don't feel you have to figure it out this very evening. Many of these concepts may be new, so just let them settle, take them in, and try to keep an open mind. But I do want to convince you that karma is your best friend along this path. Karma is really your only friend along this path of awakening.

I'll divide this talk into four parts: karma and the concept itself, what the Buddha said about the results of karma, how it relates to anatta (the teaching of no fixed self), and what's meant by this mysterious pointing to the end of karma.

What is Karma?

Karma is a Sanskrit word. The Pali word is kamma. If you read the Buddhist texts in Pali, the word will be kamma, but they're identical—they mean the same thing. This was another common Indian word that the Buddha took and gave special meaning to. The original Indian word simply means action. That's all it means. Karma means action in Sanskrit; kamma means action in Pali. It's a standard concept in many Indian dialects.

But the Buddha put a new spin on it. At the time of his teachings, there were many philosophical schools in northern India, and every one of them had their own interpretation of what action meant, what karma meant. There was a really wide range of philosophical views. People would say things like: karma matters or it doesn't matter; action has consequences or it doesn't have any consequences; all our action is predetermined; all our action is freely chosen. These turned out to be speculative views because most of the teachers at the time didn't know from direct experience what they were talking about. They made up ideas and philosophies and propounded them.

The Buddha put a different spin on the word, and his originality in this understanding, he said, came from his own insight. In the Buddha's definition, karma meant action with volition, or you could say intention. The Pali word here is cetanā, the same word we've been using in the meditation instructions when we talk about mindfulness of intention.

This is how he defined it in one of the passages: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action."

This was a revolutionary concept. All the emphasis in other philosophies at the time was about the action itself. But the Buddha's particular emphasis was on the question: What is the intention or volition behind the action? Where does it come from as a motivation?

Synonyms for this word of intention or volition could be urge, motive, impulse, will, or motivation. You get the sense that it's the mental energy that drives the outer action.

Although in fact, thoughts themselves and emotions are also actions. We'll talk about that in a moment. And the Buddha said that actions are wholesome or unwholesome depending on what this inner force is that drives them. If the inner force is wholesome, it's considered a wholesome karmic action. If the inner force is unwholesome, it's considered an unwholesome karmic action.

As you probably can guess, the unwholesome actions are influenced by these three kilesas, the roots of the unwholesome, which are our old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion. And wholesome volition is that volition that comes out of their opposites. The opposite of greed being renunciation, or you could say generosity—letting go in its different forms. The opposite of aversion being loving kindness. The opposite of delusion being wisdom. So the wholesome roots are renunciation, loving kindness, and wisdom.

So in the Buddha's teaching, it's not the action in and of itself, but rather the motivation behind it.

Just a couple of simple examples. An infant is sleeping in its bed, rolls over, and in its sleep knocks over a candle. The candle catches fire to the drapes, and the fire burns the house down. The baby is, of course, saved—I want you to understand that. The baby's been rescued. Don't worry. But the house is burned down. This is not a particularly good outcome, but there is no unwholesome intention behind that knocking the candle over, so there's no karmic impact for the infant. There's no karma in that action. It was just an accident.

Or we could take an action like someone cutting another person through the abdomen with a very sharp knife and blood spews out. Is that wholesome or unwholesome? Depends on the intention. If a surgeon is performing an operation to remove an inflamed appendix, that's a wholesome action based on compassion. If a thief has cut the person in order to subdue them to steal their property, that's an unwholesome action. So the root that we judge by is the wholesomeness of the intention.

And also to be aware that some actions have mixed motives. We can see this a lot. We give someone a gift—there's generosity, but maybe we also want some gratitude in return. So often actions have mixed motives, and that means that they have a mixture of wholesome and unwholesome motivations.

I think what's interesting about this formulation of the Buddha's is that he's pointing to the fact that actions coming out of mental impulses in themselves have moral weight. There are morally wholesome and morally unwholesome actions based on the impulses that they come from. And this has a lot of big implications, which we'll get to.

The Buddha considered that action could take place in three spheres: thought, speech, and body. We're normally used to considering actions of speech and actions of body, but the Buddha said actions of mind can also be volitional. That means that thoughts sometimes come out of a motivation. Emotions sometimes express a motivation. For instance, a motive behind desire is to gain something pleasurable. The motive behind aversion is to get rid of something unpleasant.

But just so you don't get too paranoid in terms of your meditation, actions of thought have relatively little weight compared to actions of speech and body. So let's say you're angry at somebody—the thoughts are kind of angry—but if you don't express it in speech and you don't express it in action, meaning you don't blast the person and you don't punch the person, the karmic effect of the thought itself is relatively weak. It's not non-existent, but compared to the other actions, it's relatively small.

Fortunately, the Buddha was very clear about what kinds of actions are skillful and what kinds are not. He made a list, which appears many times in the texts, of what he called the ten unwholesome actions. Of these, there are three related to bodily action, four related to actions of speech, and three related to actions of mind. This is very helpful because we can understand that these are the ones we need to be careful with. We've already worked some with this topic in exploring conduct and the precepts. Some of them link very closely to the precepts, but it gets even more refined through this list. Some relate to the mind, which we haven't talked about so much.

Here are the ten unwholesome actions. The three unskillful actions of body are: killing living beings, taking what isn't freely offered or given, and sexual misconduct—harming others through our sexuality. And you can clearly see these form the first three of the five lay precepts.

Then there are four actions of speech that the Buddha considered unwholesome: speaking what isn't true, using harsh or abusive speech towards someone, speaking maliciously of others to undermine their

reputation, and wasting time in what he called idle speech and gossip. You can sort of get the flavor of this as like gossip—using the events of other people's lives just for entertainment and stimulation and kind of judgment.

And then he identified three actions of mind: covetousness, which is wanting something that belongs to another; ill will, which is wishing someone harm; and the third is quite interesting—wrong view. If we don't understand the world the way it is, which forms right view, the first element in the Eightfold Path, if we don't understand the way the world is, we have wrong view, and that becomes the basis for our relationship with life. If we understand the nature of life incorrectly, that becomes an unwholesome foundation for actions.

So these are the ten unwholesome actions, and the wholesome actions are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome. It's pretty clear. Then in addition, there are many wholesome actions that go beyond this, but the basic list is to refrain from the unwholesome.

These teachings on karma and skillful action are very helpful to reflect on and take care with in our life in the world. As we've already discussed, the precepts form guidelines that protect us and protect others. The Buddha said that one who has taken real care with their conduct in the world enjoys what he called the bliss of blamelessness. He considered this a very high source of happiness in life. When we are so careful with our conduct that we don't have regrets about the way we have treated others, then we feel this freedom from remorse and freedom from guilt that has a very pleasant quality—this is the bliss of blamelessness.

I mentioned in a talk a while ago how the Dalai Lama had this quality. Someone else who I thought also had this was Dipa Ma. Dipa Ma was this wonderful Indian teacher from Calcutta who visited IMS in 1980 on her first trip to America. Carol and I had an opportunity to look after her at that time. We had been on staff at IMS, and so we were asked to look after her for a month when she first arrived. We were all living together in a house in Western Mass, so I had the chance to see her in many different situations—some situations that would have been trying for me. But I never saw the slightest flicker of anger in her or even impatience.

I particularly remember a visit we took her and her family on. She also had a daughter and a grandson with her at the time. We took them shopping in a department store near Amherst, and the grandson was about four years old—a very rowdy four-year-old. He was loose in this American department store; I don't think he'd ever been in one before. It was spacious and quite big and fun, so he was running down the aisles. Shirts would be falling off and hangers clattering to the ground, and there was Dipa Ma running along behind him, both to pick things up and try to catch him. Her white sari was flapping out behind her as she ran down the aisle, and on her face was just this sweet little smile. There was no frustration, irritation, impatience, or anger—just a very sweet attitude toward her grandson.

In the whole month that we were together, I never saw anything approaching impatience or irritation in

her. She was someone who, as far as I could tell, really enjoyed this bliss of blamelessness. She was a very happy and contented person.

So this is the quality of the action itself—really taking care not to harm, not to harm ourselves through unwholesome actions, even with our thoughts.

The reason this is important is that actions have consequences in the Buddha's teachings. So let's talk a little bit about results. I'm sure you're familiar with this basic concept: wholesome actions lead to wholesome results in our lives; unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results. Wholesome actions lead to happiness; unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness for ourselves. This is clearly stated by the Buddha in one of the first passages in the Dhammapada, where he says:

"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."

So this is the basic message of karma and result: wholesome actions lead to happiness; unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness. It's interesting that this notion is becoming fairly well known in modern culture, the basic outline of it.

James and I, some years ago, were teaching a series of classes at a juvenile hall in California. That work was actually the basis for what later became the Mind-Body Awareness Project and the Lineage Project.

We were invited in by a student of James who worked there. For those unfamiliar with the American juvenile justice system, Juvenile Hall is where people stay when they've been arrested and charged with a crime if they're under eighteen. These were teenagers, mostly fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, but we were in the maximum security wing. These were young men who had been arrested and charged with crimes like theft, armed robbery, assault, and murder.

Fortunately we had a very good ally who worked with the young people and supported our being there. Otherwise, I don't know if we would have had the nerve to do it. But it was a very good experience for us.

We had completed the entire class series on mindfulness, following the breath, and how to be with difficult emotions. They were a very appreciative audience because they had a lot of time on their hands. Also, they were young people in a very scary situation where a judge could put them away for a long, long time. So many emotions were up for them - fear, anxiety, uncertainty in their lives. They were very receptive to the teachings.

When we got to the last class, James and I talked to each other and said, "Should we talk about karma? I don't know how that would go down." We were also going to talk about sila if we taught karma, and we decided to go for it.

So we began teaching about karma and this understanding that wholesome actions lead to happiness. We

simply asked, "Does this sound like something you've ever heard before?" One of the young men said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around? Sure, we've heard that." That was pretty cool - it's already out there in the vernacular. What goes around comes around. That's the essence of it.

This sense of things coming around is also expressed in the Tibetan tradition in their phrases for metta and compassion. Tibetans also work with the Brahmaviharas, the same ones that we work with, but they have a slightly different name. They call them the four immeasurables because all the Brahmaviharas are considered to be boundless or immeasurable states.

The Tibetan phrases for metta and compassion weave in this teaching on karma. Let me read you the phrases and you'll see. This is the phrase for metta: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." This is the phrase for compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue."

What's interesting about this formulation - the way the Buddha expressed it, the way the Tibetan phrases express it - is it applies to all beings. In the Buddhist understanding, it's a universal law. It doesn't matter whether you believe in this or not, it applies. It doesn't matter whether you know it's true or not, it applies. It doesn't matter if your religion believes in it or not, it applies. It doesn't matter if your culture believes in it or not, it applies.

In fact, our whole growth on the path is dependent on this law. So it's fortunate that it applies for us. There are these universal laws, and the Buddha's whole teaching was really about discovering them and revealing them. He did not teach speculative views. He taught things that he understood directly to be the way things are.

Another of those universal laws we discussed last week with Mahagosananda handing out pamphlets and chanting with his Cambodian refugees on the Thai border: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law." Another phrase from the Dhammapada, one of the Buddha's teachings.

This understanding that virtue is the cause of happiness and non-virtue is the cause of unhappiness is reflected in the phrase for the equanimity practice in the Brahmaviharas. There are different phrases for loving-kindness, for compassion, for appreciative joy, and for equanimity. The equanimity phrase is directly related to the teaching on karma.

Here is the phrase we use for the equanimity meditation: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions more than on my wishes for them."

This is the classical phrase. Sometimes this isn't so easy, so we soften it for people. But for now, we'll talk about it as the classical approach.

This is a very useful practice if you have friends or family members who you always see making the kinds

of choices you wish they wouldn't. Most people know one or two people like this. You wish you could get into their control center when they're about to make the next major choice in their life and say, "Don't do that. That's not the wise way to go." Then you watch the effects play out in their life some months or years later.

As you repeat this phrase, you understand that people make their own choices, and they're going to keep making their own choices—some of which don't help them. Some of their choices lead to their own unhappiness. This phrase gives us equanimity about acknowledging that everybody has their own journey and their own direction in life based on their choices. It brings about a sense of acceptance.

This phrase for equanimity, the Buddha actually stated even more strongly in his teaching. I'll read this passage: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions." The word here, of course, is karma, but it means action with volition. "Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs."

This is a powerful message. Our actions are the womb from which we are born. Our very being, moment after moment, emerges from our own past actions—a huge sense of personal responsibility in that formulation.

Westerners often feel a strong resistance to this notion. I think because it's not so familiar in our culture and also because we have a very democratic understanding of the way things ought to be. For those of you who aren't from this country, you might not know that the very beginning of the American Declaration of Independence from 1776, when America formally separated from Great Britain, starts off—I'm just paraphrasing a little—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal."

This is a very deep notion in our culture, the notion of the equality of all human beings, and a very noble and inspiring one. But sometimes I think it leaves a little bit of an impression that all beings should be equally happy. And that doesn't work. Things just don't work that way.

So this teaching on karma, which basically says that we have a lot of personal responsibility for our situation, can seem cold, can seem indifferent, uncaring, and like it glosses over a number of ways that suffering comes to us. We'll explain this a little more as we go along.

But one of the ways this is sometimes felt in the West is that it means if you're unhappy, you deserve it—that beings deserve to suffer. That is not in the notion of karma and it's not in the Buddha's teaching. And I don't think it was at all in his intention in delivering this teaching. I strongly believe if he had had the ability to reach into the heart of everyone he met and pluck out the source of suffering, he would have done it in an instant.

A good example of this is his relationship with Angulimala. Angulimala was a former spiritual student who got some bad instruction. On the advice of his spiritual teacher, he murdered 999 people and collected a finger from each person he'd killed in a necklace which he wore around his neck. That's the

literal meaning of his name, Angulimala. And he intended to kill the Buddha as his thousandth and final victim.

The Buddha was walking near Angulimala's hangout place in the deep forest. His friends said, "Don't go there. That murderer is going to get you." But the Buddha said, "I'm not worried," and he went there. He met Angulimala and avoided being killed. Angulimala was so taken with his presence and his centeredness that he asked the Buddha for teaching.

So if the Buddha thought Angulimala deserved to suffer, he would have said, "No, you just live out your karma. You're going to have a really bad road, but you deserve it." But that's not what happened. The Buddha taught him the Dhamma. He ordained Angulimala. Angulimala practiced and became awakened—ending the basic mass of suffering through his awakening.

Now interestingly, when Angulimala went on alms round, he was attacked by local people who knew him as a murderer. He came back to the Buddha and said, "Why are these people attacking me?" The Buddha said, "That's your karma." But he had freed his heart and mind from suffering.

The teaching on karma does not mean anyone deserves to suffer, but it's simply pointing to a natural law. Expecting this law not to operate would be like expecting the law of gravity not to operate. It would be like expecting an apple to ripen and fall from a tree in the orchard down the road and not drop to the ground. You can't arrest the law of gravity, and you can't arrest the law of karma. It simply happens.

Another way that karma is sometimes misheard or misunderstood is that it seems to provide an excuse or rationale for not caring. It's as though we think, "Well, that person is suffering, but that's their karma. So it's their problem. Therefore, that's not my problem." That is not what the teaching of karma is about either. That is called indifference.

Compassion recognizes suffering and wants to help, and it doesn't care what the cause is. The cause could be something from outside, something accidental. It could be something in one's own body, an illness. It could be mental afflictions. It could be something karmic. Compassion doesn't care about the source. It sees suffering, and it wants to alleviate it.

Using a rationale like, "Oh, that's their karma, so that's their problem," to turn off the feeling of compassion is called indifference. And indifference in the Brahmaviharas is recognized as the near enemy of equanimity. In other words, when equanimity isn't ripe and it falls into an unwholesome state that mimics it, it falls into indifference. What this means is that if we're feeling indifferent and rationalizing why we don't need to help somebody, then our equanimity isn't right.

Equanimity supports metta and compassion, but metta and compassion also need to suffuse equanimity. If they don't, equanimity becomes too cold and turns into indifference. In that case, there needs to be a suffusion of compassion that will fill out the equanimity and ripen it so that there's balance but also caring. The heart can then respond to the suffering that we meet.

The results of actions happen in at least six ways, and I want to go through the six ways that they're seen and described.

The first is that before we act, we pick up the energy of the action we're thinking of doing. So if we're thinking about being generous with someone or kind with someone, even as we contemplate that action, it feels good. It uplifts us. It makes us happy to think about helping other people. Similarly, if we think about doing an action that's not kind, that's going to hurt somebody, it feels kind of creepy.

I work on various committees, both at IMS and at Spirit Rock. One time, we had a phone call about what to do regarding a certain situation. It wasn't clear-cut, and so we were all giving our opinions about what we should do. I put forth one opinion, and somebody else on the call put forth a different opinion, which is fine. I don't mind being disagreed with.

But afterwards, the person sent me an email about the topic, restating the disagreement, but in a way that I felt was really dismissive of my view and disrespectful. I felt it was very clear from the email—it was really dismissive and disrespectful. So I didn't feel good about it.

The first thing that occurred to me was, "I think I'll forward this email to the rest of the committee." I thought, "Oh, then they'll see the unskillful nature of my opponent's argument, and that will sway them to come to my side of the argument." But as soon as I saw that my motivation was basically to undermine the person, I couldn't send the email. So I didn't. I didn't forward it. I called the person up and talked about it, but I didn't forward the email because it felt creepy to think about doing that.

The second way that we feel this effect of karma is in doing the action itself. When we're in the process of giving to someone or helping someone, it feels great. A staff person was collecting wood for the winter, and they asked if any other staff would like to help them stack it. It ended up being three and a half cords of wood, which is a lot of work. A bunch of staff people came over and helped them, and in return, their friend offered them some nice food.

And at the end of the day, the staff who had come to help thanked the people who needed their wood stacked. Part of it was for the food, but also because it simply feels good to give. It feels good to help. In a way, they were thanking them for the opportunity to be of service, to be community.

So giving feels good, helping feels good. Hurting somebody feels painful. If you reflect on times when you've caused harm and examine the state of heart and mind in that moment, you'll find it was contracted, unhappy—a state of suffering. Our friend Sylvia Borstein has a beautiful phrase: "Anyone causing great pain is themselves in great pain." This is true. Reflecting on this can sometimes open a doorway for compassion.

The third way we experience karma is when we've completed an action and reflect back on it. We feel the happiness or unhappiness of what we've done. When we give instructions for sending metta to yourself, we often say: reflect on your skillful actions in the past. Reflect on ways you've been generous. Reflect on

ways you've helped people. When you do this, you feel good about yourself. You remember the joy in doing something that helps another, and this creates a wholesome quality that allows the metta to grow more easily.

Similarly, as we enter a long retreat with extended silence, we often remember things we've done in the past that have hurt other people. The forgiveness practice has a whole element directed toward this recollection. Remembering the ways we've harmed others becomes very painful as we grow sensitive and attuned to the precepts, the wish not to harm, and the value of loving-kindness. Those moments in our lives when we haven't been able to live by these values are profoundly painful to feel. We often experience deep guilt or remorse at such times.

The fourth way we can observe karma's influence is that as we treat other people, our actions return to us in relationship. If you tend to be friendly, warm, and generous with people, they welcome you, want to see you, are open with you, and value being with you. If you are irritable, judgmental, or unfriendly, people remember that. When you meet them again, they step back and eventually close off to you, shutting you out. Our actions come back to us in relationship—this too is karmic.

The fifth way we see karma manifest is through what I would describe as habitual states of mind. When we repeatedly engage in certain patterns of thinking and feeling, these are actions arising from intention or volition, and they create patterns that then repeat almost automatically, almost compulsively.

The Buddha taught: "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 inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

Through our habitual ways of thinking and feeling, we wear a groove in the mind that makes it easy to fall back into again and again. This is the fifth way we can observe karma's effects.

Then there's the sixth way: according to the Buddha, actions we perform for good or ill can have mysterious results in the future—results we cannot see or understand, but which he said do happen. He described these quite clearly. This sixth way represents aspects of karma we cannot experientially verify, but the Buddha spoke of them with certainty.

For instance, how is it that acting out of kindness brings happiness? It's rather mysterious, isn't it? And yet, that's the basic teaching of the Dhammapada passage—that it simply does.

What I find so fascinating about this entire teaching, which points to the effects of wholesome and unwholesome actions, is what the Buddha seems to be saying: this concept of good and ill—what we call morality—is woven into the very fabric of the universe. It's not something accidental, not merely an adaptive mechanism of evolution, but exists at the center of the laws governing sentient life. Wherever

there are sentient beings, these actions and their results apply.

Initially, the teaching of karma can seem cold, impersonal, or uncaring. But as I felt into this message more deeply, I realized what it truly means: we live in a moral universe where morality is one of the central features of sentient existence. This began to feel to me like a universe with a heart—a caring universe. When I then reflected on the idea that there was no morality in the universe, that the universe was essentially cold and amoral, that began to feel very uncaring and heartless.

So as I contemplated this teaching on karma more deeply, it warmed up the whole universe for me. It gave existence a sense of a beating heart, right at the center of all sentient life.

Now the Buddha said that actions play out in complicated ways that we cannot figure out.

He said that the results of karma are one of what he called the four imponderables. He said if you try to figure this stuff out, you will go mad and experience vexation. I'm not sure in which order, but either way, the outcome is not so great. There's no point in trying to figure out how this works. It's beyond the scope of reason. The Buddha said he could intuit it through insight, but it's beyond the scope of reason.

The three other imponderables, in case you're interested, are the range of the mind of a Buddha—the kinds of things that a Buddha can see—the beginning of things, which I take to be the origin of the physical universe, and the power of a concentrated mind. All impossible to figure out.

These imponderables leave us necessarily humble. And the teaching on karma does get misused sometimes. You've probably had this experience where someone you know gets sick, and a friend will say, trying to be helpful, I guess, something like, "Oh, that's your karma." And how does that make the person who's sick feel? Not very good. Like, I have to blame myself for this illness now.

But saying "that's your karma" is just a speculative view. We can't see that, and the Buddha never said that. He was asked at one point whether everything that happens to us in the way of pleasant or unpleasant feeling comes from past action. And he said, "You can't say that." He said you can see for yourself that there are other causes for pleasant and painful feelings. Illness of the body is a cause for painful feeling. Climate is a cause for pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Diet can be a cause. Accident can be a cause. And assault or attack can be a cause. These are all causes for pleasant and unpleasant feeling, and karma is another cause.

This is the way we understand it. It's not that everything in the universe happens because of karma. There are lots of other kinds of causes—physical, chemical, biological, genetic, climatological. Karma is one cause among many. But not everything that happens to us is because of karma, the Buddha said quite clearly.

I think the way to hold this teaching is to take it in broad terms and mostly look forward, knowing that wholesome actions will lead to more happiness, unwholesome actions will lead to more unhappiness. It doesn't work so well as a rearview mirror. Like, how did I get here? It must have been that karmic action.

I don't think so. We can't see that. The Buddha said that he could in certain cases, but we can't. So speculating on that doesn't really take us anywhere.

There are these six ways that we can describe the workings of karma, six ways we can see the results. When somebody says, "I don't believe in karma," usually what they mean is they don't believe in this sixth kind, this mysterious kind that the Buddha talked about that we can't see directly. But the other five we can see and understand. So I wouldn't just take it on faith if we're inclined to say we don't believe in karma. We don't believe in one small slice, perhaps, of the teaching on karma.

You may or may not resonate with this teaching at this point. It took me a lot of years of hanging out with it, observing and reflecting on it over a long period of time to get confidence in this teaching. At this point, I have a lot of confidence in it. I've looked at my own life. I've looked at the lives of many of my friends over thirty, thirty-five years. I have a lot of confidence in this message, but it took me a while to get there.

What I'd recommend is if you feel unsure about this, just let your mind open to the possibility. You could close off and say, "That's not true. I don't believe that." But this "that's not true" thing—we don't know either. To say that's not true is just another view and opinion. There's no basis from which you can know that. The proper attitude, as I understand it, is just to stay open. Consider it as a possibility and watch as your life unfolds and as you practice the dharma, and see what you think.

Just hang out with the possibility and consider and reflect on it.

So then the next place that this leads, of course, is the question of rebirth. Because to fully understand the workings of karma, for it to fully play out, it has to be seen across lifetimes. We look at a figure like Hitler, for example. I don't see enough suffering in this lifetime proportionate to his misdeeds. So in order to consider where the karmic result might be taking place proportionate to his actions, I have to look at a future life. And the Buddha described this again and again also.

So as I understand it, rebirth is needed to make full sense of karma. Of course you can understand it in a more limited way in one lifetime, but really to understand the fullness of it, I think it helps to understand it in the prospect of several lives.

So I was also skeptical about rebirth when I came in contact with these teachings. But I didn't close my mind to it. I just said, I don't know the situation here. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not. And again, it's just a concept I hung out with over a lot of years and became more and more appreciative of. So now I don't know what happens when I die. As Ajahn Sumedho said, I haven't died yet. How could I know? But I have a certain confidence in this teaching also. But again, it may not be true for you.

So the Buddha said a few things about the actions in future lives. He said that if one is generous in this life, one will experience now or in a future life an abundance in material things. If one is stingy and not prone to giving, then in this life or future life, one will experience a lack of abundance in material things. If one takes care and doesn't kill living beings, then at some point one will experience a long lifespan, kind of

reflecting that commitment to life. If one is non-injuring of living beings, at some point one will experience health over a lifespan.

About karma and its influence in future lives, the Buddha put it this way. Grain was a form of wealth in the agricultural society 2,500 years ago in India, so it's one of the ways he points to wealth here. "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents, none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside at death. 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 after death."

So again, I can't tell you to believe this or not. But the Buddha said that it would be a good bet to make because if rebirth turns out to be true, you'll be well positioned. If it turns out not to be true, you'll have done good in this life and you'll be loved and respected.

So rebirth also raises the question of who is reborn. And in a way it relates to the question of karma also. This question on karma was addressed to the Buddha in his lifetime. A bhikkhu approached him and said, "What self, then, will actions performed by the not-self affect?"

It's a good question, isn't it? What self will the actions performed by the not-self affect? And the Buddha said, basically, you haven't been listening to me. And that was really all he said. It's a great question, isn't it?

So in order to understand this, both about karma and about rebirth, think about the way your experience unfolds moment after moment in meditation. You're observing very carefully and you see everything is changing. Body sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions. Nothing is solid from one moment to the next. Nothing is fixed.

And yet, there's a kind of ongoing continuity, isn't there? There's some way in which my experience at the end of a meditation is like my experience has been for a while. I don't turn into the Dalai Lama as a result of one sitting meditation. There's a way that there's a continuity going on, we could say, of a pattern. There's a pattern in my experience, even though everything is changing.

So we might say that this pattern is what continues in us moment by moment because one moment of experience touches and conditions the next, touches and conditions the next, touches and conditions the next. Nothing solid or fixed all the way through, but there is a conditioning process that creates an ongoing appearance of patterns. This is basically how rebirth happens also.

Nothing is fixed, but there is some way that the pattern is transmitted to the next birth. Ajahn Amaro had a really nice way of saying this. He said, "The process of going from one life to the next is not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next." You can reflect on that. I think that's a great pointer.

But let's talk a little more about how this unfolds. Think about a river or a stream. If you like, think about that stream that flows from the little pond at the end of the parking lot. It's kind of fun to watch a stream and ask, "Where's the stream? What is a stream?" Because we could call that the IMS stream, and it would have a name. It means something to us. If we say "the IMS stream," you know what I'm talking about. It's different from, say, the Connecticut River, which is much bigger, has a lot more water. It's also dirtier.

But if you look at the IMS stream, is there anything solid there? Is there anything that stays the same from moment to moment? It's all changing, isn't it? Heraclitus said you never step in the same stream twice. It's totally different water, moment after moment after moment. Nothing is the same in that stream from one moment to the next, yet it sort of forms a predictable shape, or we could say pattern. There might even be an eddy that's in the same place all the time, even though it's completely different water.

We can also use this concept of a stream for our inner experience. We can call it a mind stream. We look into it and there are thoughts and emotions and sense impressions going by moment after moment after moment. Nothing's fixed, yet this mind stream that we call mine is different from that mind stream that we call yours. This mind stream has certain recognizable patterns and eddies. Your mind stream has certain recognizable patterns and eddies. Even though there's nothing fixed, there's no self at the center of it all.

And personality is basically just this collection of feelings, thoughts, speech, and actions, right? Isn't that basically what personality is? So personality is kind of the total sum of our karmic patterns, just unfolding from this mind stream as it rolls on.

Our mind stream, when we come into the Dharma, is headed one place, and that is Lake Samsara. Driven by greed, aversion, and ignorance, it's just heading again and again to Lake Samsara. And we know what keeps it going. Greed, aversion, delusion keep it on that track. That's our pattern. That's the destination.

But then the teachings of the Dharma come in. And the teachings of the Dharma in the beginning are just this little tributary that come in from one side and add a different kind of current to it. We start adding the current of mindfulness, a current of metta, of compassion, of renunciation, of tranquility, of generosity. In the beginning, these don't seem to affect the basic flow very much. They're kind of a minor impact. But as time goes on, these things become really strong. All of you who have been here for five weeks now, they've become very strong in your mind stream. You are now not headed toward Lake Samsara. You are headed to the Nirvanic Ocean.

And as this tributary becomes stronger and stronger, it totally changes the direction of our mind streams and leads us in an entirely new way. So the only way this can happen is because there's nothing fixed here to begin with. If our ignorance was fixed, if our craving was fixed, if our aversion was fixed, this tributary couldn't move the direction of this current, but they're not. They're also conditioned and subject to change. So this new stream that comes in starts to take us in an entirely different way, an entirely different direction.

And we start to see that Dharma practice is basically using the power of karma for personal transformation. Because these are all intentional actions that we undertake through our thoughts and feelings. The intention for mindfulness, the intention for metta, the intention for calm, the intention for renunciation. We act these over and over and over again. And it's a karmic unfolding that's able to change the direction of our mind stream. Another way to say this is the path itself is a karmic unfolding.

And without the law of karma, this path couldn't unfold the way that it does.

This great Indian teacher, Nisargadatta Maharaj, put it this way—I love this expression. He was in dialogue, I think with a Westerner, and said, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." This is very much like the equanimity phrase: "Your choices have been the backbone of your happiness and unhappiness."

The questioner replied, "Well, surely karma interfered." And Maharaj said, "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."

This is profound. Your character shapes your life. And ultimately, you alone can shape your character. This is what we're engaged in here—shaping our character moment after moment after moment with these very powerful and wholesome intentions. And as we do that, the whole shape of our life is changed.

Eventually, it ends in this direction, rather cryptically expressed by the Buddha as the end of karma. The Buddha said that one who is fully awakened has come to the end of karma. By that I understand the end of self-centered volition or intention. And what is it that takes us there? He said, "It is this noble eightfold path—right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—that is the way leading to the end of karma."

And so we start to understand how sila, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom start to still our being. We come into a place of so much peace and so much stillness that the urge to act on behalf of ourself goes away. And we trust in that stillness and that abandoning of individual will. We feel then that we're at this place where the Buddha described nibbana as the stilling of all formations, and we start to feel we're in close proximity to that.

And so we let go the individual volition, the self-centered willfulness, and surrender to that stillness. And that has the power to reveal to us something else beyond karma, beyond conditioning, beyond the individual—the power to reveal to us the unconditioned nibbana, the real stilling of all formations.

We trust in that. We trust in that stillness, the ending of karma.

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

Thank you for listening.

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