Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:27

The subject of tonight's talk is karma and the end of karma. It's an interesting concept in modern times because it's a word that has entered our vocabulary—at least in English and probably most European languages—but it's not very well understood in modern societies and non-Buddhist cultures.

A group of Western teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama some years ago. He used to hold meetings in Dharamsala once a year, and in the course of the discussions, they were talking about this topic of karma. The Dalai Lama told the Western teachers that he thought it was more important for them to teach about karma than to teach about emptiness. Now, as someone who's written a book on emptiness, I found this a little hard to take in. But I tend to agree—it's more immediately practical. And so that's what I want to talk about tonight.

I'm going to talk about things that the Buddha taught about karma. At the very start, I'll say that I'm not able to verify all that he taught, but I figured I need to share it with you anyway. Not that you should believe it, but I think it might be useful to consider. So you can make of it what you will, but I think it's important that you hear what the Buddha had to say about this topic, because I think if we understand it correctly, karma can be our best friend.

Karma has many aspects, and I'm going to talk about it in five different areas: karma itself, the results of karma, the relation to not-self, the relation to rebirth, and finally, the end of karma.

What is the Meaning of Karma?

Karma is a simple word that in Sanskrit just means action. The Pali word is kamma. It was just a common word in the Buddha's time that all the philosophical schools debated about. Every teacher had their own take on what karma was and what it involved.

Some teachers said that actions didn't matter—they don't have consequences beyond the immediate moment. Some people said there are results and after-effects of karma. Some people said you could go out and kill somebody and it wouldn't have any impact in your life following. Some people said actions were predetermined or that God determined all the actions that were happening.

There were all these different views around, and the Buddha had his own definition of karma, which was a new definition at the time. He said, "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call karma, for having willed, one acts by body, speech or mind."

This notion of putting the motivation at the center of the meaning of action was the Buddha's

contribution. That was the new information that he offered as part of his teaching. We've talked quite a bit about this factor of volition—intention, urge, will, motive, or motivation. It's talking about the energy or the mind states that actions come from.

Actions are judged to be either wholesome or unwholesome depending on the motivation behind them. Unwholesome motivation comes from forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. Wholesome motivation comes from their opposites—qualities of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. The Buddha actually called these three forces the roots of the unwholesome and the roots of the wholesome. They are where all action springs, either in a positive way or in a negative way.

So it's not the act per se, but the motivation behind it. For instance, if I said to you, "Someone was just observed cutting someone's stomach open with a sharp knife. Is that a good act or a bad act?" It depends. If it was a robber who was holding someone up to steal their money, that's a very unwholesome act. But if it was a surgeon preparing to heal somebody's appendix, it would be a very wholesome act. The act itself is not the determiner—it's the motivation.

Or if a baby is sleeping on a bed at home, rolls over, knocks over a candle, and the candle sets the house on fire, there's no blame. There was no intention in that action, so no blame or unwholesome karma for that particular act.

It is interesting that according to the Buddha, actions have a moral force based on what the intention was.

You'll notice in this definition that actions take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. Of course we think of physical action as action. We think of verbal action as action. We're not often used to thinking of mental action as action. But in the Buddha's teaching, even thoughts and emotions have a force that comes out of their volition, out of their intention.

Fortunately for us, the Buddha was really clear about what the unwholesome actions are. He made a list.

He passed them on. It's something really helpful to reflect on and to learn about.

So he broke these down into ten unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind.

The unwholesome actions of body—you're going to recognize these—are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct. So these form the first three of our five lay precepts.

The actions of speech begin with false speech, which you recognize as the fourth of our lay precepts. Then there are three other actions of speech that are unskillful: using harsh speech, which basically means angry speech; divisive speech, which means to speak badly of someone to a third person, to turn that person's mind against the other person; and wasting time in idle chatter and gossip. Does this go on on the internet? A little bit.

And then he talked about three actions of mind that are not skillful: covetousness—wanting what belongs

to someone else—ill will or hostility, and wrong view. This is an interesting one. Wrong view says if we misunderstand the way reality is or the way it works, we're going to act based on our misunderstanding and we're going to end up hurting ourselves or others, adding to the suffering in the world. So another way to say wrong view is ignorance. When there's ignorance in the mind, we act in unskillful ways.

The ten wholesome actions are to refrain from these. It's just like a lot of things—the Buddha put a lot of things in the negative way. So the wholesome actions are to refrain from the unwholesome. But then there are also a lot of wholesome actions that are built upon generosity and loving kindness. You could extend this list a lot. But he basically said, look, if you keep from doing the ten unwholesome things, you're on a good track.

So the teachings on karma are especially important when we're out in the world in relationship. And half of this group will soon be back in the world and in relationship. And for the rest of us, this is—in retreat, this is a useful time to contemplate action in the world. But the teachings on karma become really important when we're in contact with others and we're acting in a way that is wider.

So we aspire as practitioners to always act from the wholesome roots, to always act from generosity, kindness, and wisdom. But we also know our minds aren't always in generous, loving, wise places. So we aspire to that, but we can't actually control it yet. That's why the path of meditation, the *bhavana* aspect, the mental purification, is so helpful to our overall development on the path. As our minds and hearts become purified, then our actions naturally spring from the wholesome motives.

And there are lots of beautiful examples of this. There are these people who really exemplify what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness. There's a great joy in being able to look back over one's actions and feel good about one's conduct.

So somebody who really exemplifies that for me is the Dalai Lama. Some years ago, he was sitting down for an interview with Oprah Winfrey. You all probably know that she has a magazine called *O*, which is quite popular. And she's done more than anybody else I can think of in the modern age to bring a kind of wide view of spirituality to a very broad audience. This has been one of her main interests in her speaking and in her literature and her TV network. And it's a beautiful thing to offer.

So she was doing an interview with the Dalai Lama to be put into the magazine *O*. She 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. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued. "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Hmm. 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 great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "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."

That's a beautiful mind. And you know, some of that peacefulness and depth of meditation is related to his pure conduct in the world. Because if we are doing unskillful things in the world, it will continue to stir up our minds and we won't be settled into meditation. So he is somebody who really exemplifies both of these beautiful qualities.

So that leads into the results of action, and the Pali term for this is vipaka. The basic teaching, as you all know, is that wholesome actions lead to wholesome results—that is, results that make us happy. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results—that is, things that make us unhappy.

This was said by the Buddha at the very start of 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."

Some years ago, a friend and I were teaching a meditation class at a juvenile hall in the Bay Area. This was, I think, the first of its kind that I know of in the juvenile halls. It came about because one of the people who worked in the juvenile hall was a meditator and had invited us because she thought it might be useful to the young men who were there.

So we were invited into the maximum security wing. For those of you who don't know the U.S. system, a juvenile hall is where people under eighteen are placed while awaiting trial on serious charges. The kids in the maximum security unit were in there for things like robbery, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder. Fairly serious stuff.

They're all under eighteen, and they're incarcerated, waiting for a trial that could determine years in prison or being released back to their homes. So you can imagine these young men were in a state of tremendous anxiety. There was also not a small amount of aggression within the unit they were situated in.

My friend and I thought: What? We're going to go in as two middle-aged white guys and we're going to teach these young men about the Dharma? Is this going to work?

But we just went in and presented a straightforward approach to meditation by focusing on the breath, then opening up to body sensations and talking about how to work with emotions. For them, I think this was as entertaining an hour as they had in their week, so they didn't resist coming. It was workable because their probation officer sat in the class with us. He was a big, solid guy, and we knew they weren't going to give him any trouble.

Then we got to the part on working with difficult emotions. For me, this is really where the meditation came to life. Cooped up, not knowing what the future of their lives would be, they suddenly had a way to look at their fear, look at their anger, and find ways to work with it. We saw some quite remarkable connections to the practice among these young men. They really found it useful.

We got to the end of the class—graduation day. We'd made up a certificate for them: "Certificate of Graduation from Mindfulness Training." We thought, okay, this is going to be our last time to meet with them. Should we talk about karma? I thought, well, I don't know. That might be a little too speculative or a little too heavy. But this was the last time we'd ever get a chance to talk to them. I think we should do it.

So we did it. What we did was present karma as the science of happiness: If you want to be happy, this is what to do. We gave a little discourse on karma and I said to them, "Does this make sense to you?"

And one person raised his hand and said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around? Sure, of course that makes sense." It was fascinating to see how deeply this basic idea has penetrated our culture, even without a profound understanding—the fundamental principle had taken root.

At the end of the class, we handed out the certificates, and one of the men took his and asked, "Can I take this to the judge?" "Sure," I replied. "I hope it will work."

The Tibetans have a beautiful way of expressing the four Brahmaviharas. They call them the four immeasurables, and they have specific phrases for metta and compassion. The phrase for metta is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness"—which is virtue. The phrase for compassion is: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow"—which is non-virtue. Just like the Dhammapada, this ties happiness and unhappiness to the purity of one's actions.

The Buddha expressed it this way: "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 acts they perform, for good or for ill, of that they will be the heirs."

Their actions are the womb from which they are born. According to the Buddha's teachings, this was a direct insight of his—not a speculative view like those of other philosophers of his time. This was something he saw directly through his extraordinary abilities. And according to his understanding, this

teaching, this law, applies whether you believe it or not. It applies whether you know it or not. It applies whether your religion believes it or not, and it applies whether your culture believes it or not. It's a universal law that governs all beings based on their actions.

I will also say that our growth on the path really depends on this law, and we'll explore that more later.

This reflection—that all beings are the owners of their karma—provides the foundation for the equanimity meditation as it has come down to us in the classical teachings. Jill spoke about equanimity meditation in her overview of the four Brahmaviharas. In the traditional teachings, going back over a thousand years, the phrase for equanimity is: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their actions"—and we might add—"depend on their actions more than on my wishes for them."

There was a touching scene—did some of you see the movie Kundun? It was Scorsese's film about the Dalai Lama's life. He brought such beautiful sensibility to a culture that was not his own in this biography of the Dalai Lama. At one point, he shows the Dalai Lama still living in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, being trained by tutors. Some of the finest minds of Tibet were offered to provide his upbringing and instruction.

Scorsese includes this scene where the tutors are instructing the young Dalai Lama on the Four Noble Truths. They ask him to restate the Second Noble Truth in his own terms. He responds, "The cause of suffering is craving"—that's the formal statement as the Buddha taught it. But his tutors say, "Put it in your own terms. Don't just give us a recitation. Make it personal."

I'm paraphrasing because I don't remember the dialogue exactly, but he then says something like, "Suffering comes from wanting things." His tutors respond, "No, that's not personal enough. Give us a statement in your own terms." He's perhaps eight or nine years old at this point. He closes his eyes, thinks for a moment, and then opens them and says, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

The tutors respond, "Very good. Very good."

Most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. We may wish to project it onto other people in our lives or blame our present circumstances, but most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. This is the core reflection about karma.

All beings are heirs to their karma. Another way you could say it is their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own habits of mind.

Now, I want to say that it doesn't depend entirely on one's past actions or one's past habits of mind. It doesn't really hold up for me anyway that way. I think about the children who have been dying in Syria when hospitals are bombed, a government bombing its own citizens. I find it really difficult to believe that all those children are dying because of their past actions. I just personally don't believe that.

So one of the things the Buddha said is we can't figure out the details of the workings of karma—how certain results came about based on past actions. It's considered one of the four imponderables: four things the Buddha said you can't figure out by thinking. The details of the workings of karma, the range of the mind of a Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the beginnings of things. I think you should share that with all the cosmologists. What he says is you'll go mad and experience vexation if you try to figure this out. I'm not sure which comes first.

I don't know if you've seen this in your life, but I've certainly seen it. Someone gets ill and a friend comes to them and says, "Oh, that must be your karma." That is such a not nice thing to say. And nobody knows. That's just a speculative view. It's not a kind thing to say, and it's not in any way necessarily true.

The Buddha never said that everything that happens to us is based on our past actions. He was invited to say that at one time. Somebody came to him and put forward this view and they said, "Other teachers say that. Would you say this is true?" And he said, "That's wrong to say." And he identified several other causes that lead to circumstances in our life. He mentioned illness, diet, climate, accident, assault—all these things could result in painful situations in our life. So he explicitly said you can't go around saying that everything that happens is the result of past karma.

The way I think about it is that there are lots of laws at work in our universe. There are physical laws, there are chemical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, and there are karmic laws. All these things have a place to play in this universe, and karma is not supreme above all of them. They're all going on.

So we need to take this teaching in broad terms: as we act from wholesome motives, wholesome things will come back into our lives. As we act from unwholesome motives, unwholesome things will come back into our lives. But what we can't do is take our present situation and try to say, "Wow, I'm suffering now. What did I do in the past that made this happen?" Maybe the Buddha could have seen that, but you and I can't. So to try and look in that way is just speculation, and it generally doesn't make us much happier.

This is trying to use karma as a rearview mirror. Here I am, how'd I get here? Oh, let's look in the past. We don't have that ability, so I wouldn't even bother. The main way to use karma is as a future GPS system. You want to go toward happiness? Here's the path. Turn right here. Turn left there. Karma will tell us what to do to aim toward happiness in the future. It doesn't really tell us how we got to where we are now. Many, many things have come into play.

Those of us who have been brought up in modern cultures based on science, maybe based on democratic ideals, often have a strong resistance to this teaching. Maybe it's because it says that we're to some extent responsible for our own happiness. Maybe we have a democratic ideal that we should all be equally happy. And so from the light of our view, this view which says we're to some extent responsible for our happiness might seem cold, might seem cruel, might seem heartless. And sometimes people think there's an implication: "Oh, if somebody's suffering, that means they deserve to suffer because it came out of their past actions."

This notion of deserving to suffer is not at all present in the Buddha's teaching on karma. I'm absolutely convinced that if the Buddha could have gone around to the most hardened criminals of his day and removed all the suffering from their lives, he would have done so without hesitation. While he didn't possess that ability, there is one story that beautifully illustrates his attitude—his encounter with Angulimala.

Under the misguided direction of a teacher, Angulimala had killed 999 individuals on his path to reaching 1,000 victims, collecting a finger from each person as proof of his deed. As he approached his thousandth kill, he decided to make the Buddha his final victim.

The Buddha was walking along a mountain path when friends warned him: "Don't go that way. The killer Angulimala is hiding in those hills, and he will kill you." The Buddha simply replied, "I don't think so," and continued walking.

Angulimala swooped down onto the path and chased the Buddha with a knife, yet somehow could never catch him despite the Buddha's steady, unhurried pace. Finally, in frustration, Angulimala called out, "Stop! Stop!"

The Buddha turned around calmly and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala, but you have not stopped."

At that moment, Angulimala realized this person was coming from an entirely different place. Intrigued, he essentially asked, "What's up with you?" The Buddha gave him the teachings and converted Angulimala on the spot. The serial killer immediately abandoned his plan to kill his thousandth victim, came to practice with the Buddha, and—as many of these stories go—became fully awakened in a relatively short time.

Here was a serial killer of his era, yet the Buddha didn't say, "You should suffer. I'm turning my back on you—good luck." Instead, he taught him complete release from all suffering.

Interestingly, when Angulimala went out for alms rounds in nearby villages after ordaining, people threw stones at him. They knew his history as a killer—perhaps some victims had been family members of these villagers. When Angulimala returned to the Buddha saying, "Bhante, they're stoning me," the Buddha replied, "Bear it, my friend, because if you had not practiced and become awakened, your suffering would have been far worse than this."

This wasn't because the Buddha believed in deserving suffering due to karmic law—Angulimala had already become awakened. It's simply how the law operates. Expecting to do something unskillful or hurtful without consequences would be like expecting gravity not to function—like expecting a ripe apple to fall from its stem and not drop to the ground. Gravity operates. Karma operates. This is the universe we inhabit. We cannot stop these laws.

Hearing the equanimity phrase, some people mistake it for an excuse not to care: "Oh, beings are owners

of their actions. Their mental habits brought this suffering upon them, so I don't need to be concerned. That's your problem, not mine." But this isn't equanimity—it's equanimity's near enemy, which Jill discussed: indifference, or uncaring.

True compassion doesn't concern itself with the source of suffering. Compassion simply wants to alleviate anyone's suffering, regardless of its origins—and suffering arises from many different causes, which we'll explore in a moment.

If equanimity practice or reflection on karma leads to indifference, the antidote is to strengthen metta and compassion. Bring loving-kindness and compassion toward the person you're feeling indifferent about, allowing these caring brahmaviharas to suffuse your equanimity. Ideally, we want all four brahmaviharas to awaken in our hearts together, not in isolation.

The results of action manifest in at least six ways. Carol discussed three of them in her talk on generosity—remember how she described the wholesome feeling that arises when you're about to give? Then the wholesome feeling present in the actual act of giving?

And in reflecting on your giving, you have a wholesome feeling. So in this way, our actions come alive in three different times: before we do the action, while we're doing the action, and after we reflect on the action. This is true of all our acts. These are three ways that we can feel the impact of an action, any action that we do.

The fourth way that they come back is our actions affect the way that people relate to us. If we relate to people from friendliness, from warmth, from care, from interest, then they respond to us in that same way. If we relate to people from not caring, from lack of interest, from hostility or criticism, then people will shrink back from us and not really want to approach. So this is the fourth way our actions come back.

The fifth way is in habitual states of mind. Why does the mind move when you're in meditation? And where does it go? It's just reflecting habit patterns. Our minds move into areas where we've invested energy, into areas where it's gone before. This is from the Buddha: "Because whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of generosity, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of generosity, kindness, and compassion."

Basically through our patterns of thinking we wear a groove in the mind, and that gets played out again and again and again. There's this very nice quote that's often attributed to the Buddha. I haven't found it anywhere in the Buddha's teachings, but he might have said it: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit and habit hardens into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings." So this is just attending to our habits of mind and keeping them in a wholesome track.

One of the facts of life is that some of our habits of mind kind of got put there by forces outside of ourselves, and then we are left to replay them somewhat involuntarily. Instances like childhood abuse, instances of societal racism, instances of early trauma or traumatic loss go in so deeply before children have a chance to know what's happening or how to work with them that they kind of get programmed before we have any awareness of them. And then when we come into meditation, we find, oh, these are the habit patterns of mind that I have to work with now.

Even though we didn't request them, and even though we certainly wouldn't have chosen them, they are what we bring into meditation. These are the things we have to work with. So as adults, we recognize these are the habits of mind I've gotten. Whether that's fair or not, these are the habits of mind that I need to understand and transform.

So that's five ways karma shows up. And the sixth is the tricky one. The Buddha said that the results of our actions will show up in mysterious ways in the future, in ways we can't really understand. They may play out in this life. They may play out in some future life. And there's no way to know exactly how that's going to work. The detailed workings of karma are an imponderable.

But even the basics, the basic teaching that virtue brings happiness—how does that work? That's the basic teaching of karma. Virtue brings happiness. How does that work? That's a mystery. And what it really says is morality is not just an invention of the rational mind. Morality is woven into the very fabric of the universe through this law of karma.

Originally we may have thought that karma was a cold and heartless teaching because it put too much on personal responsibility. But when I look at it, karma infuses our universe with a moral core. The universe is fundamentally a moral place because the law of karma operates for all beings in this universe. To me, this is the caring view. This is the heartful view of the world. I wouldn't really care to live in a universe that didn't have this moral dimension as part of its basis. But the universe we're in has this dimension.

So the next piece to look at is how karma relates to rebirth. And again, I can't verify all the Buddha's teachings on karma and I can't verify the Buddha's teachings on rebirth.

But I have had teachers who felt they could verify some of these teachings. So I believe some of it is empirically verifiable. I'm just not there yet.

What I would say is if you have a very skeptical attitude toward these two teachings, that's fine. We aren't asking that you believe in either karma or rebirth. But I would also say, what about keeping an open mind to the possibility? You don't have to believe, but if you move into denial and say it's not true, how do you know that? So often we find that we don't believe in something simply because we don't want to believe in it. But the scientific approach is to hold it as a hypothesis and examine it over years, see what your experience is, the experience of friends. And when you die, see where you wake up. These are things you can explore for a long time.

The teaching on rebirth says that the actions we follow through with in this life will affect our next birth. The Buddha gives some general outlines of how this would play out. He said something like, those who are generous in a birth will at some point in the future experience abundance in their life. Those who are kind to living beings will at some point in the future experience good health in this life or another life. Those who inquire deeply when they're around wise teachers will experience wisdom in their future life. This is part of the meaning of karma being the womb from which we're born.

There's another teaching on this: "Grain, possessions, money" - you realize this comes from an agricultural society 2,500 years ago - "grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, workers, family, and dependents, none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession. 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."

Your actions are your real possessions. They're the womb from which you will be born. Maybe you don't believe in this, but what if it happens to turn out to be true? Wouldn't you like to act in accordance with it? And if it turns out not to be true, but you had simply lived a good life, that wouldn't be a bad outcome either. There's a whole discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya number 60 where the Buddha outlines this reasoning for believing in karma and rebirth.

Rebirth can also be understood as a moment-to-moment process. It's not the only way the Buddha meant it, but it is there in the suttas also. We are changing from moment to moment. A new sense of self is being born many times during a day, conditioned by the previous senses of self. This is going on all the time.

One of the criticisms of rebirth is: isn't there some lasting thing in a being that would have to be reborn in order for that continuity to take place? And the answer to that is no. Just as there is no lasting thing in you that goes from moment to moment to moment, and yet a consistent personality shows up moment after moment after moment, more or less. You don't go to bed and wake up as Deepa the next day. There's some consistent personality that wakes up the next morning that is you.

In the same way, there's some consistency that goes after death into the next birth that carries some of these karmic patterns, but there's not a fixed thing that continues or endures. One moment conditions the next, conditions the next, conditions the next. That's how it happens in this life. That's how it happens into the next birth. Ajahn Amaro had a 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." It's a nice one to reflect on.

Then we come to the question of karma and not-self. Because these two can seem contradictory. If there's no self, then who is affected by the actions, by the results of karma? In fact, one of the bhikkhus at the time of the Buddha asked the same question. The bhikkhu was in front of the Buddha and said, "What self

then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" That is basically that question. And the Buddha said, "You haven't been listening to me." He didn't explain it, didn't answer it any further. He just said, "You haven't been listening."

But let's explore this a little deeper. Remembering that not-self doesn't deny individuality—each of us is a unique being. It's just that there's nothing fixed at the center. There's no core, no observer.

An analogy often used is that of a stream. You could walk down to Gaston Pond—not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one of these days when it's cleared and safe—and look at the stream flowing out on the north end. That stream has certain characteristics: it's relatively small, runs fairly fast, has pretty clear water that you can see tumbling downhill. It's definitely a stream.

But if you stand on the edge and look down, what is a stream really? It's flowing water. Is there anything fixed in it? No. You never step into the same river twice, as the old philosopher said. It's just a changing flow, but it has a pattern. That stream has certain characteristics.

If you drive west of here for about forty-five minutes, you'll cross the Connecticut River, which is also a stream but of a very different nature. It's broad, slow, muddy—looks completely different from the Gaston Pond stream. Yet they're both streams with individual characteristics, and we can give them names.

In Buddhist understanding, each of us is a stream. Particularly, we're considered to have a mind stream. There's a flowing river of thoughts and feelings and perceptions, views and opinions, likes and dislikes, warmth and coolness, generosity and selfishness that run through us, changing moment by moment. Yet there's a consistent pattern to this, which is what we call someone's personality.

Each of us has a unique way of showing up in the world based on the particular mix of all these qualities flowing through our mind streams. So it's always changing, nothing is fixed, and yet each of us has a unique combination of patterns. This is what we call personality.

Personality comprises the ways people think and speak and act and feel. Does this sound like karma? Thinking, feeling, speaking, acting—this is what constitutes the field of action. So personality is basically our karmic stream, running according to our conditioned habits of mind for a very long time.

Personality may be consistent, but it's not solid. It's not fixed. Although personality isn't fixed, do you find it easy to change? This is part of the understanding of practice, isn't it? Changing our habits of mind is not easy because they have tremendous momentum. The Buddha would say lifetimes of momentum lie behind these habits of mind.

As the Buddha taught: "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 karma like the chariot wheel by the pin. It's this habitual momentum the Buddha points to here. It's not easy to shift momentum we've been cultivating over at least decades, if not longer.

But the point of practice is to transform it—to transform the unskillful tendencies of mind into wholesome habits of mind. And as you all know, it's hard work. It doesn't happen overnight.

The good news is that nothing in our mindstream is fixed.

The teaching of not-self reveals that nothing in our mindstream is fixed, and this truth makes transformation possible. Our ignorance is not fixed. Craving is not fixed. Greed, aversion, and delusion are not fixed. They are all mutable, all capable of being transformed.

The difficulty lies in recognizing that these are strong karmic patterns. Dharma practice uses the principle of karma to transform karma—we are using karma to change karma.

When I came into practice, I carried many unwholesome habits of mind that felt quite compulsive. The greed, anger, reactivity, and confusion played out repeatedly in endless cycles. My mindstream was flowing in a particular direction, which I describe as a lake designed by M.C. Escher—where the outflow wraps around and feeds back into the source. What flows out becomes what flows back in, filling the lake again. We call this Lake Samsara, because it endlessly cycles the same material: fear, confusion, anger, greed.

Then Dharma practice enters like a tributary flowing from a different direction, carrying different content. Suddenly the volitions begin changing. No longer only greed, aversion, and delusion, but mindfulness, loving-kindness, generosity, wisdom, equanimity, compassion, patience—all the beautiful qualities begin flowing in. This transforms the karmic makeup of the stream.

As we change the karmic composition, the stream heads in a new direction. It no longer cycles back into Lake Samsara but flows toward the Nibbanic Ocean. Whether you thought you wanted to go there or not, that is where you are heading. I share this in the spirit of Yogi Berra, who said, "If you don't know where you're going, you could end up somewhere else." But now you know—you are flowing toward the Nibbanic Ocean.

This transformation becomes possible because nothing is fixed within us. Those old karmic patterns directing the stream need not remain, as the new karmic patterns of Dharma begin shifting us in a different direction. Liberation is possible because none of the old patterns are permanent. Ignorance, craving, clinging, grasping, becoming—all can be uprooted.

Karma explains the development of the path. The karmic power of intentions that we place into each moment of Dharma practice begins reshaping us, bringing far greater happiness into our lives. As we examine this factor of intention, we discover how critical it is to practice. I would say it is the only real tool we have for change.

Here we are as human beings, all sharing the same situation—afloat on a changing sea of circumstances that is unpredictable, chaotic, always shifting. Whether we look at mind or world, we see the same:

change, impermanence, fluctuation, conditions not subject to reason, unpredictable and often chaotic.

We have only one way to steer on this ocean, and that is with our intention. Picture yourself on a boat upon this vast, changing ocean of life with countless unpredictable events unfolding. The rudder of that boat is your intention—this is how you navigate to safe harbor. By continuously placing intention behind the wholesome factors of the path, you reach safety. It is the only reliable rudder we possess: the intentions of mindfulness, loving-kindness, generosity, compassion, non-harming.

This brings to mind a dialogue from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Advaita Vedanta teacher in Bombay.

And he mostly worked in dialogue with people. So one student came to him and said he wanted to talk about transformation and destiny. And Maharaj said, "Well, your own will has been the backbone of your destiny."

And the student said, "Well, surely karma interfered."

And Maharaj replied, "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life, but the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

I love this statement: your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. That's what we're doing here. We're shaping our character and we're shaping it in a way that only leads in one direction. It leads to peace and release and nibbana.

So the Buddha said that when one becomes fully awakened, there's no more generation of karma. It doesn't mean that one stops acting, but no new karma is being created. And that's what he called the end of karma. And he said, "What action is neither painful nor bright, with neither painful nor bright results, which leads to the end of action?" And he said, "It is this noble eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

Essentially, it is the letting go of all of our self-centered activities, all of our activities that are just about the small me and our small desires and small aversions. By letting that go and trusting this stream of Dharma to carry us, in a way, I would say, by stopping doing so much, we are carried along by wholesome intentions to that final freedom and final awakening.

So again, as the Buddha put it, it is this noble eightfold path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma, leading to the full awakening and release from suffering.

So let's just sit for a moment together.

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.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.