Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:21

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The talk this evening is on kamma and the end of kamma. This word has come into our English vocabulary and is quite widely used in the wider culture, but it's not very well understood. I thought that a three-month course is a place where a talk on this topic can fit. It's not something we talk about on shorter retreats, so I want to address this topic tonight.

I'm going to take the authority of the Dalai Lama to justify this focus. He used to meet with groups of Western teachers who would travel to Dharamsala, perhaps twenty at a time, to discuss how the family business was going—how Buddhism was evolving in the West, what the problems were, what the issues were. At one of those meetings, he told the Western teachers that he thought it was more important for them to teach about kamma than to teach about emptiness. Now, as somebody who's written a book about emptiness, I thought this was not very good publicity. But nonetheless, I do agree with it because kamma is more immediately practical for us than emptiness is.

So it is an important topic, and it fits if you take a step back and look at the Buddha's main teachings. Consider the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and the Law of Kamma. All of these are basically about cause and effect: suffering and its cause, liberation and its cause, the chain from ignorance and how that leads to suffering, and then the law of kamma, of cause and the effect of kamma. There's an interesting similarity to all the main teachings, and it's basically because if you take the self out of the picture, then everything happens simply because of causes and conditions. So all these central teachings are pointing to that truth.

Tonight I want to tell you about what the Buddha said about kamma. First, because I think it's really interesting. Second, because I think it can be helpful. Third, because it's not often talked about in these retreats, and so it's not widely known exactly what his teachings are. But as I talk about it, I want to preface this with the acknowledgment that there's a lot of this I can't verify by my personal experience. A lot of the teachings on mindfulness and the development of the Eightfold Path and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment we can verify. But a lot of the teachings on kamma came about because the Buddha had a really profound vision that most of us don't have. For him, the insights into kamma were not speculative or theoretical. These were things he actually saw in his direct understanding.

So I want to make sure to pass that on to you, but without any assumption that you should believe it, because it's not something that's experienceable for most of us. Some people aren't comfortable believing things that aren't experienceable. So I would encourage you to hold the teachings on kamma at least with

an open mind, because it's easy to say, "This is not true, this can't be true." But the fact is, we don't know that either. You may not know from firsthand experience that these teachings are true, but I would wager that you don't know from firsthand experience that they're not true. Therefore, I would encourage you to have an open mind. For myself, I've had to hang out with a lot of these teachings over years to get a sense of my own confidence and trust in them. So I'm passing on to you what the Buddha said, but it's of course for you to decide whether it resonates or not.

In this evening's talk, I want to look at this question of kamma from five different angles. One is what the word means. The second is what are the results of kamma. The third is how does it connect with the teaching on not-self, because these could seem to be opposed. The fourth is how does this influence the idea of rebirth. And the fifth is what did the Buddha mean by the end of kamma. I'm going to touch on these five points tonight.

In her talk the other night on intention, Carol actually gave quite a good introduction and overview of kamma, so I don't need to repeat a lot of that at length. I'll just summarize the things she said. She didn't go into this detail, but I want to put this in: In the time of the Buddha, there were a lot of different opinions and philosophies around the notion of kamma. The word kamma is a Sanskrit word that just meant action. The Pali term is kamma with a double M. It just meant action.

Every different school had its own take on action. Some of them said actions don't really matter—that actions don't have results for the person who's doing them. You could murder somebody or you could heal somebody and neither of those would have any clear effect in your own life or in your own mind. Some people said that action was all predetermined, that it really didn't matter because it was all going to happen automatically anyway. Some people said it doesn't matter because God is doing it all, so there's no room for individual will. All these different philosophies were circulating, and the Buddha, with his insight, offered a new definition of kamma.

that is the one that we'll be using and talking about. He said, "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call karma, for having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind."

This factor of volition—sometimes translated as intention—is really the key. It is the motivating force behind the action. We could call it motive, volition, intention, will, impulse, or motivation. It's the activity in the mind that leads to an action—that is its volition.

As Carol said, actions are wholesome or unwholesome according to the volition that drives them. They can be driven by the three roots of the unwholesome—greed, hatred, and delusion—or the three roots of the wholesome: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

The meaning of wholesome or unwholesome is very pragmatic. Actions done from a wholesome motivation end up having a wholesome effect in our life, meaning they lead to happiness. Actions done from an unwholesome motivation end up having an unwholesome effect in our lives, meaning they end

up causing some degree of suffering. It's not the act per se, but the motivation behind it that is the key.

Let's look at a couple of examples. If a baby is lying on a bed at night, rolls over, knocks over a candle in the baby's sleep, and the candle burns the house down, there's no karma. There's no volition in that action, so there's no karmic consequence.

Or the same action can have two different meanings. If I say to you, "I observe somebody slicing someone's stomach open with a sharp knife," is that good or bad? It depends, right? If a person was cutting someone in the abdomen in order to steal their money, that wouldn't be so good. But if a surgeon is making an incision in order to heal their appendix, that would be very good. It depends on the motivation behind the action.

The first thing I note about this that's kind of interesting is that actions have an intrinsic moral force—an intrinsic moral force that's based on the mindset from which they spring.

As Carol said, actions take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. We're comfortable with actions of body and actions of speech. We may not have thought before that mental events are also actions, but in the Buddha's teachings, they are. Thoughts also have volition. Emotions can have volition.

The Buddha was very clear on what the unwholesome actions are that we want to stay away from. Just to run through them briefly: three actions of body, which are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and engaging in sexual misconduct. Four actions of speech, which are false speech, harsh speech, divisive speech, and idle chatter and gossip. And three actions of mind: covetousness—wanting what belongs to someone else—ill will or hostility, and wrong view.

Here's what's interesting: wrong view is actually an unwholesome form of action. You can kind of see this because if we don't understand reality the way it is, we're going to act in the world based on misunderstanding, based on confusion. And that's going to lead to problems for others and for ourselves.

The ten wholesome actions are to refrain from these. If you just don't engage with these unwholesome actions, that's considered wholesome conduct. I would put a postscript on it, which is there are lots of forms of wholesome action that go beyond this. Forms of generosity, of loving-kindness, of compassion, acts that actively reach out to help are also wholesome. We'll get into that later.

Anyone reading this would think, "Well, I always want to act from a wholesome motivation, right? All my actions should come out of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom." But is that possible? Not as long as greed, aversion, and delusion are still active in the mind. Then it becomes very difficult.

To me, this raises an interesting question about free will. If we really had free will, we could ensure that all our actions sprang from wholesome motives. But we don't. Greed, aversion, and delusion are compulsive forces in the mind that sometimes make us act in ways we even know at the time are unskillful. This is our situation.

But understanding them correctly and refining our actions more and more over the course of years of dharma practice means that our actions align more and more with wholesome intentions, wholesome motivation. This is really helpful for us. This is what guides us on the path to greater and greater happiness.

You can see this possibility in somebody like the Dalai Lama, who is so refined in his action because he is so refined in his heart and mind. Some years ago, he was being interviewed for O Magazine by Oprah herself. I really have to give Oprah a lot of credit because more than anyone else I can see in the West, she's been responsible for bringing really helpful forms of spirituality to a very wide audience. She has a lot of openness to different traditions, and she's really popularized a lot of these teachings.

Before there was a mindful magazine, there was Oprah. So Oprah starts this interview with the Dalai Lama, and she says, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" That's an interesting question, isn't it?

The Dalai Lama paused a moment, and he said, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

"My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable," the Dalai Lama continued. "Not very peaceful. Bed bugs 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 pretty amazing. As engaged as he has stayed in worldly activity, and his meditations compared to those who have spent years in the mountains practicing meditation with single focus. That's pretty incredible.

One of the things I see in that answer is how the refinement of his conduct has created such a stable platform for his mind to rest in. To go to meditate and know you have no regrets—that's a good beginning. May we all start from a place like that. That's wonderful.

So that's the basic overview of the meaning of karma: wholesome and unwholesome actions in these three spheres of body, speech, and mind. The next question is, what about results? What can we say about results?

Sometimes when in the West we talk about karma, what we're really pointing to are the results. I think there was a pop song, "Instant Karma," many years ago, and I think it was really pointing to results of action. But karma just means the action.

The basic results: wholesome actions lead to happiness, unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness. And I think Carol also quoted these lines from the Dhammapada: "Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

Some years ago, I was teaching a course on meditation at a juvenile hall in California, in the Bay Area. I got invited in along with James Baraz, who's a good friend. The reason we got invited in is that one of the Spirit Rock meditators worked in this juvenile hall. If you're not from America, you may not know juvenile hall is where people are held who have been arrested for some suspected crime before they go to trial. And juvenile means they're below the age of eighteen.

So we were in a men's wing, and it was one of the more secure wings of this juvenile hall. Young guys who were like fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old were in there because they were being charged with things like theft, grand theft, murder, attempted murder, assault, and so forth. Some of it was fairly serious stuff. They were going to be tried in a matter of weeks or months, and this is where they were held in the meantime.

We thought, are they going to listen to two middle-aged guys who don't really understand what their lives have been about? But we thought, we'll give it a shot. We started off the same way we started here. We started with paying attention to the breath to calm the mind, attention to body sensations to land in the body. Then we opened up to thoughts and then emotions.

This is where the meditation started to gain some traction because you can imagine—you're fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. You're in jail. You're going to go before a judge in a few months and you could be sent away to prison for years if you're convicted. Or you might be released back to your family, back to your home. And they didn't know which way it was going to go for them. So the level of fear in that population was quite high.

Also, as you might imagine, there was a certain amount of aggression within the group, and the level of anger was sometimes quite high. By giving them the tools to feel the fear and the anger in their bodies, it started to give them a way to work with and shine a light on all this turbulent energy they didn't have any understanding about. The practice proved to be genuinely helpful for them on the level of mindfulness of emotions, and some of them became quite engaged with it.

I remember giving them one simple instruction: "Do you fall asleep on an in-breath or an out-breath? Check it out and see." One of the guys kept coming back every week saying, "I still can't find it, but I'm still looking." They were really applying themselves to the practice. It was very sweet to witness.

So we came to the last class—the final time we would be meeting with them. Normally we would explore the precepts, practice in daily life, and introduce the teaching on karma. We wondered: should we go there with this group? This might not land well at all. After some consideration, we thought, it's our last meeting—we'll at least try it.

We briefly outlined the idea of karma and asked, "Does this sound like anything you've heard before? Does this sound reasonable?" One of the young men immediately said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around? Sure, yeah, we've heard about that." So they could connect with the fundamental principle of karma.

One of the senior members of the group surprised us. After we left, he told the others, "You know, you should send metta to the people in the other gang because they have mothers and sisters also." That unexpected sweetness happened after our departure—a beautiful flowering of the practice.

We also created something special for them. We made certificates that we tried to design like diplomas, complete with curly cues and fancy script. Each one read: "This person"—and we'd write in their name by hand—"has successfully completed a course in Mind Power." It was mindfulness training, but we called it "mind power." We dated each certificate and signed our names. I think those certificates meant something to them. One of the participants looked at his and asked, "Can I show this to the judge?" We said, "Sure, we hope it will help."

This idea of karma was finding its way into their understanding. The way we presented it—as the science of happiness, the reliable blueprint for building happiness—seemed to make sense to them. If you want to be happy, you act from these kinds of motivations and you don't act from those other motivations. Honestly, that's how I understand it for myself.

Viewed in this light, the teaching on karma becomes our best friend. It offers a genuinely reliable path to happiness. You may not believe this, but having grown up in the Dharma over about forty-five years and maintained relationships with a consistent group of friends throughout much of that time, having watched my friends' lives unfold and witnessed my own life develop within these teachings, I have deep faith in this truth: acting from wholesome motivations brings genuine happiness.

This is another beautiful dimension of the meditation aspect of our practice. It refines the heart so that wholesome motivations arise more and more naturally. It becomes increasingly easier to act from that place and to restrain the impulses that emerge from unwholesome states. This restraint itself brings happiness, but then it factors into the actions we perform. It influences our karma—our actions of body, speech, and even thought. This creates another layer through which purification develops and generates

momentum.

In Tibetan practice, they also hold the Brahmaviharas as essential cultivations. They call them the four immeasurables because they're intended to extend to all beings everywhere—in that way, they become immeasurable. They use slightly different language. For loving-kindness, the phrase is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." For compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." You can see how the teaching on karma is woven directly into these four immeasurables statements.

I want to explore in more detail this relationship between the cause of happiness and karma. The Buddha stated it like this: "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 those they will be the heirs.

You can see how important this teaching is. We inherit our actions and they show up either toward happiness or toward unhappiness. And again, as I said, this was a direct insight that the Buddha had. This was not a speculative philosophical view. This was something he saw operating. In fact, he saw it the night of his awakening. It's described in one of the discourses in the Majjhima Nikaya, how he surveyed the world and saw the truth of this.

According to the Buddha, this applies whether you know the law or not. It applies whether you believe this law or not. It applies whether your religion believes it or not. It applies whether your culture believes it or not. It's a universal law that applies to every sentient being everywhere.

Interestingly, our development in the path is based on this law. The path is a karmic unfolding, but I'll return to that point later.

As you know, the four Brahma Viharas are loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. There's a phrase for the equanimity practice just as there is for metta, compassion, and joy. The traditional equanimity phrase is: "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 really illustrates how we inherit our actions. Our happiness and unhappiness depend on our past actions.

I don't know if you saw the movie Kundun. It was a film by Martin Scorsese, probably released about twenty years ago. It tells the story of the life of the Dalai Lama from childhood onward. It's a fictional account, not a documentary, but it's a really high-quality film. I highly recommend watching it if you haven't seen it before.

The film tells the story of the Dalai Lama's growth from a child living in Tibet, growing up in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. He had the very best teachers they could find to prepare him to be the spiritual leader of Tibet. There's one scene in the movie that I found really touching. He's about eight or nine years old, and

his tutors are three old monks gathered around him. They're teaching him about the Four Noble Truths.

As part of the teaching, they ask him to tell them what the Second Noble Truth is. He says, "The cause of suffering is craving." The tutors say, "No, no, no. We want you to put it in your own words. Don't just parrot something back to us. Put it in your own words. What's the Second Noble Truth?"

The young boy thinks for a minute and says, "I suffer because I want things." They say, "Not good enough. Make it really personal, in your own words." He sits and reflects some more. Finally he says, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind." They say, "Ah, very good, very good."

Most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. This is the pointing of this phrase in equanimity meditation. Our happiness and unhappiness depends on our own actions.

There's an obvious flaw in this strict formulation, which is—I'll tell you my problem with it. I look at the suffering of the children in Ukraine right now. Children have been killed, their parents have been killed, they've been injured and wounded, their homes destroyed, their towns destroyed. There's a huge amount of suffering going on for the children of Ukraine in certain areas. I don't believe that all of that is because of their past actions.

I mean, it's possible, but I personally can't see a reason to believe it.

So I take this phrase with a little modification, and we'll come to why that is later. But when we say, especially speaking for an adult, your happiness and unhappiness depend on your own habits of mind, that can be seen to be true. We can see that in our own experience. We can see it in our friends' experience. We can see it in people that we know well. Our habits of mind determine our level of happiness and unhappiness.

But one of the things the Buddha said you cannot figure out are the detailed workings of karmic results. This is actually one of the four imponderables. I think I mentioned the four imponderables in an earlier dharma talk. One is the range of mind of a Buddha. The other is the power of a concentrated mind. The third one is the detailed workings of karmic results. You just can't figure out how one action led to another, and another, and another, and ended up in this result. The Buddha said often that he could see in some individual's life how it had turned out, why it had turned out the way it did, but we can't see that. And so it doesn't help to think about it. The Buddha said that one who thinks about this will go mad and experience vexation. He didn't say which came first. Maybe both. The fourth imponderable is the beginning of things. Don't tell that to an astrophysicist. But that's what the Buddha said.

So there are ways that we kind of misuse this teaching. I've heard it misused. A friend gets a diagnosis of some serious illness and some other friend comes up to them and says, "Oh, that must be your karma." That's not a nice thing to say to someone. First, because there's no way that person could possibly know the truth of that. That's a completely speculative view. And it's not helpful to the person who's ill. It would be much more helpful to refer them to good medical treatment.

So the Buddha never said—and this is one of the things I want to underline and make really clear, because this is one of the misinterpretations of the teaching on karma—the Buddha never said that everything that happens to us is the result of past karma. Never said that. In fact, there's one discourse where he was invited to say that. Some wanderers came to him and said, "These other teachers are saying that all pleasant and unpleasant feeling is the result of past action. Can you confirm that?" The Buddha said no. He said they shouldn't be saying that. It's wrong for them to be saying that. And then he identified a number of other causes of unpleasant feeling. They can be caused by illness, can be caused by diet, can be caused by climate, can be caused by accident, can be caused by assault—other sources of unpleasant feeling not connected to past actions.

Don't assume that everything that happens is because of karma. Karma is one of the laws operating in this universe, but there are other laws. There are the laws of physics, the laws of chemistry, the laws of biology, the laws of psychology, the laws of genetics. All these laws are at play, and the law of karma is also at play.

So the way that I think this teaching works best is to take a really broad view of it. How can we best support our happiness going forward? It's to act from wholesome motivations, as much as possible. Sometimes it won't be possible, but as much as possible, that will put us on this track toward greater happiness.

But to use it to say, "Oh, I've gotten a certain amount of unhappiness in my life right now. I must have done something really bad in the past"—that's not a skillful reflection. We don't know that. And so just to assume it kind of loads us up with more guilt that's purely speculative. We don't know why these conditions have come about in our life. And so to assume that it's something we did in the past, we don't know that. It's kind of like you want to use karma as a rearview mirror, right? "Oh, I got here. How did I get here?"

Looking in the rearview mirror doesn't reveal the truth. We don't know that our present circumstances are even karmic results in many cases. This kind of speculation is just ideation without grounding in reality.

Although I will say, there was one occasion when I saw this kind of karmic reflection used skillfully. When Dipa Ma first came to this country in 1980, Carol and I had just recently left staff, and she was housed in a home in western Massachusetts for a month that was rented by Joseph and Sharon and some friends. We had gone off staff and were in our dharma bum phase at that time. Joseph and Sharon asked us if we would help look after Dipa Ma, so we moved into the house with her for a month and helped cook and clean and shop.

During this month, one of the friends who came often to visit—a student of hers—had gone down to New York. While he was there, someone had broken into his car and stolen his tape player. This was back in the days of 8-tracks, so you know how old that was. He came back to the house, and we were all sitting

around at dinner while he told us the story. He'd parked the car on the street, came back, and somebody had broken in and taken his tape player.

This launched us into a whole discussion about big cities and how sad it is that this kind of thing happens when you're just being innocent, parking to go to a restaurant. We felt so sorry for him—the whole sympathetic routine.

Dipa Ma asked to have the conversation translated. She didn't speak English, but her translator gave her the overview of what had happened and what we were saying. She just looked at our friend with a little smile on her face and said, "You too have stolen."

That was it. "You too have stolen."

It completely flattened all the conversation about blame and victimhood. I don't know if she could see that karmically or she just knew that everybody has at some point taken something that wasn't given. But it was a good reminder of the universality of actions. Over so many years and so many lifetimes, we've all done everything. Somewhere back there is a cause for anything that can be showing up, but we don't know what it is.

Sometimes Westerners feel resistance to the teaching on karma, perhaps because we have very strong democratic ideals of equality—everybody should be equally happy. But we're not. This view says that we're to some extent responsible for our happiness. To some extent. When somebody's suffering, this can look heartless, like blaming the person who's suffering. Cold, uncaring, cruel even.

Some people take away the idea that the Buddha is saying some beings deserve to suffer. If you've done things in the past that are bringing this on, well, that's because you deserve it. You've done unskillful things, so that's your just desserts.

But it doesn't mean that. The Buddha never said that or meant that. I'm convinced that if he could have taken away the suffering from every individual on the face of the planet, he would have done it instantly. It's not within his power. It was not then. It's not now.

You can see this in the story of Angulimala, if you ever doubt this. Angulimala was a serial killer who was actually a very spiritually inclined being who had hooked up with the wrong teacher. This teacher had given him an instruction to collect the fingers cut from the bodies of a thousand people he had murdered. At this point in his development, Angulimala—mala means necklace, anguli means finger—had a necklace of 999 fingers, which he wore.

He was hiding out in the hills around the area where the Buddha was staying. The Buddha said, "I think I'm going to walk through those hills tomorrow."

His attendant said, "No, no, no, no, no. Venerable sir, please don't do that. There's a killer out there. He's just going to wait for you to walk on the path and bring out a knife and kill you."

The Buddha said, "I don't think so."

So he went ahead and walked on the path. As he was walking, Angulimala came running down from the hillside, jumped onto the path behind the Buddha and started running after him. But the Buddha kept walking forward at a good pace, and Angulimala could not catch him.

Run as fast as he might, he couldn't catch the Buddha. And finally he shouted out, "Stop, stop!" And at that, the Buddha just turned around and calmly said, "I have stopped, Angulimala, but you have not stopped."

That stopped Angulimala. He said, "This guy is on to something else." And so he came to him and basically asked to be his student. He said, "You've got something. I'd like to learn what it is." He saw the Buddha had no fear of him.

And so the Buddha took him on, allowed him to ordain within the Sangha, gave him instructions to free his heart and mind. And in a matter of a few weeks, Angulimala became fully awakened, because he had had a very deep spiritual inclination from being very young. So he became one of the Arhats in the time of the Buddha.

And when he went on alms round in nearby villages, people would stone him because they knew of his reputation as the person who had killed almost a thousand people. So he came back to the Buddha and said, "Every time I go on alms round, people want to stone me." And the Buddha said, "You have to bear that. That's the fruit of your actions. But if you hadn't joined the Sangha and meditated, your destination would be a lot worse. So bear it. You just have to bear it."

So this was an act of compassion to a very entrenched serial killer. The Buddha was interested in bringing him out of suffering.

So it would be nice, perhaps, if people could engage in all kinds of actions and not suffer the consequences, but this is a law. Expecting to do unwholesome actions and not suffer some suffering as a result would be to expect the law of karma not to operate. That would be like expecting gravity not to operate. That would be like saying, "Yeah, the apple can get ripe and detach from the tree, but it won't fall to the ground." You can't suspend the law of gravity, and you can't suspend the law of karma. Unwholesome acts lead to unwholesome results.

And then people might think this is an excuse for not caring. We see somebody suffering, but we think, "Well, they brought it on themselves, so it's not my problem. Let them suffer." But this is not equanimity. In the tradition, this is the near enemy of equanimity, which is indifference. It's not caring. It's cold.

Compassion looks on suffering and says, "I don't care where it came from. I don't care if it's external. I don't care if it's internal. I don't care if it's mental. I don't care if it's physical. I'd like to help that person come to the end of their suffering." That's compassion. Indifference is not part of the Brahma Viharas. It's a near enemy. It's not a wholesome state.

So compassion wants to respond to suffering anyway.

So we can see these results of actions in a number of different ways. You can see the karmic result. You see it before we act. When Vance talked about thinking about being generous, there's a good feeling that comes. In the act of giving, there's a good feeling. After giving, we reflect on our generosity. There's a good feeling.

We see that our actions come back to us in ways that people relate to us. If we've been warm and caring and friendly to people, then they welcome us and want to have contact. If we've been cold or critical or angry or judgmental, then they'll pull back and not want to be friends with us. This is the fourth way we see the actions coming to result.

And in habitual states of mind. Why does the mind move when you're sitting quietly?

Why does it go anywhere at all? Why isn't it just still and peaceful? And when it does move, why does it go to where it goes?

As 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 the mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of generosity, kindness, or compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of generosity, kindness, and compassion."

With our thoughts, we wear a groove in the mind, and that's where the mind tends to return. There's a lovely quote that captures this process beautifully: "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."

Our thoughts form into intentions, the intentions form into actions, the actions become habits, and the habits shape our character. Then we're grown adults with all this conditioning.

But I want to add an important caveat. Some of these habits were instilled in us when we were really young. We may have suffered from abuse as children. We may have suffered from the racism that permeates society. We may have picked up intergenerational trauma. We may have had a traumatic loss early in life. When these things happen to young people, they go in so deep and form very strong coping habits that the children had no opportunity to reflect upon, to observe, or to try to modify.

We grow up as adults often carrying conditioning that we didn't really assent to, but that simply landed on us when we were too young to understand what was happening. So we often come into meditation bearing grooves in the mind that we didn't really choose. But then as meditators, we have no choice but to take responsibility for those grooves and to work with them. It's not fair, it's not really just, but this is where we find ourselves. And this is where, as adults, we simply have to work.

The sixth way that results show up is that they will occur in the future. It might be in this life, or it might be even a future life in mysterious ways that we can't understand or predict. And we usually can't verify. But this is an integral part of the teaching on karma.

This points to a really interesting connection: acts of goodness lead to happiness. How does that happen? That's the heart of the karmic riddle. How does that happen? It's a mystery. The workings of it are a mystery. But this is the heart of the teaching on karma, part of what the Buddha is pointing to.

This connection between virtue and happiness fascinates me, because it's intrinsic to sentient beings. It's not just an accident of Buddhist practitioners—it's intrinsic to sentient beings. What this says to me is that morality is not just an invention of the rational mind or some spiritual figure or religious leader. Morality is woven into the fabric of the universe. Goodness leads to happiness. This is in the very construction of the universe we're in—a universe that has sentient beings and hearts and minds. That's the kind of universe we're in.

To me, that's a heartful universe. If I lived in a universe where that wasn't true, that would seem like a universe lacking in morality, an amoral universe. To me, that would be the cold universe. But we live in a universe that has this caring built into it as an element of happiness. There's no escaping it.

Another place where this shows up is in relation to anatta, and this seems contradictory at first.

Because if there's no self, why does karma land here? Why do the results come back here if there's no self? There was a bhikkhu in the time of the Buddha who asked a question like this: "What self, then, will actions performed by the not-self affect?" Basically that question. And the Buddha's only reply was, "You haven't been listening to me."

But actually, karma and anatta need each other. You can't really separate them. They need each other. Why is that?

The teaching on anatta doesn't deny individuality. We are all unique beings. We have a unique history and we have separate bodies, and our consciousnesses are not exactly the same thing. So the individuality is true. It's just that within this process, there's nothing fixed. That's what the teaching of anatta or not-self means. Nothing is permanent and ongoing within this changing field of experience.

One way this makes sense is through the analogy of a stream. A stream is a flowing body of water. If you wanted, you could go down to Gaston Pond and look at the outlet, and there's a stream that flows out of it and then runs downhill a little way. You could stand and watch that stream and observe its characteristics. It's fairly small. The water is quite clear. At this time of year, it's pretty cold. And it's disappearing all the time. Every second, there's new water flowing by. And yet, there is something that we can call a stream, and it makes sense. If I talk about the Gaston Pond Stream, you kind of know what is being pointed to. There's nothing fixed in it—all flow, changing water—but it has its own kind of personality.

If you drive forty-five minutes west from here, you'll come to the Connecticut River. That's a very different kind of stream. It's very broad, hundreds of yards wide. It's brown water. It's flowing much more slowly than the water out of Gaston Pond. So that stream has a different personality. It has a different look. And its water is also just passing by, passing by, passing by, nothing fixed. Yet that has a different shape and color and speed than the Gaston Pond stream. They're very different.

This is what beings are like. We all have unique presentation and characteristics. Within this mind stream, there's a flow of experience. We are like a mind stream, and it contains sights and sounds and smells and thoughts and emotions and views, all kinds of feelings flowing on, always changing. In it, there's nothing fixed. But each of our streams is unique. We're our own river.

Looking at this river, I want to ask: what is personality? What comprises a human personality? We look around and know people who are generous and who are not generous. We know people who are very warm and people who are kind of cool. We know people who are a little bit shy and people who are really extroverted and confident. All those things go into making up their personality.

To me, personality is about the way we think and feel and speak and act. Maybe that sums up somebody's personality—mental, emotional events. Thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting—these are the three fields of karmic action, aren't they? So maybe personality is just the karmic bundle that each of us manifests.

And it's somewhat consistent, isn't it? You look at yourself, you look at your friends. Our personalities are kind of consistent from day to day. You know, it's not like you're going to go to bed tonight and wake up as Dipa Ma tomorrow, or I'm going to wake up as the Dalai Lama. I wish it could happen, but it's not going to happen.

So the personality is somewhat consistent, and it's not easy to change, as you know from observing your thoughts and feelings and so on for all these weeks. It's not easy to change personality because these habits of mind, which have worn a groove, have lots of momentum. There's a karmic momentum to all these habits of mind.

Here's a quote from the Buddha, and I'm going to use the word action rather than karma, but it's the same thing: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin that holds it to the axle. This is how fixed our habits of mind and heart are. Living beings are bound by our karma. We have so much accumulated momentum in these habits that has built up certainly over decades of this life, and maybe many lives before, that makes it hard to change.

But it can be changed. Nothing within this flow is fixed. The ignorance isn't fixed. The craving isn't fixed. The clinging isn't fixed. The becoming isn't fixed. All the kilesas are not fixed. They can all be taken out. So the purpose of the path is to transform these habits of mind.

And how do we do it? I want to move from the stream to a lake, and say that we are in a lake that was

designed by M.C. Escher. And being designed by M.C. Escher, the input comes in one way, flows into the lake, the output goes another way, but it circles back in to become the input again. Right? That's the kind of lake Escher would design, isn't it? Going round and round and round with the same streams, habits of mind. This is Lake Samsara. And this is where we are. Our outflows become our inflows and we just repeat the same habits.

Now we come into Dharma practice. And what happens in Dharma practice is some new streams start to come in with new intentions and new volition: mindfulness, loving kindness, patience, generosity, sila, compassion, wisdom. So all these new streams start to come in and they start to affect the outflow. Now the outflow is not heading back the same way; it's heading in a new direction. And where the outflow is going is to the nirvanic ocean. You may not have known, but that's where you're heading. It's going to the nirvanic ocean because this is the purpose of the path. The path brings in new intentions that shape things in a totally new way in the direction of freedom.

So I'm going to close with this quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who's an Indian Advaita Vedanta teacher who lived in the last century. A wonderful teacher who mostly taught in dialogue. He didn't tend to give talks, but he would entertain seekers and have dialogues with them.

In one conversation, Maharaj made this statement: "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." And the person in the room, the questioner said, "But surely karma interfered." And Maharaj said, "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."

That's what we're doing. We're shaping our character.

in the direction of wisdom, love, compassion, and peace. And that character will shape our lives in completely new ways—unexpected, wonderful ways.

So let's just sit for a minute with this truth: ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character.

[Silent pause]

Thank you for listening.

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