# Q&A on Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 21:32

Good morning, everyone. I hope you've been sleeping well, practicing well, and feel rested.

I ended the sitting a few minutes early because I wanted to pick up the topic of karma this morning. There were some things I didn't get to in last night's talk, some things I promised and didn't address. I wanted to touch on them, and I thought we might do some live questions. In fact, the questions in the bowl were exactly about the things I had hoped we would talk about, so we'll consider that sufficient. I'll address some of the questions from the bowl, and then we have a couple of announcements at the end.

The first question asks: "To fully believe in the principle of karma, does it require a belief in rebirth?" It depends—that's up to you. But it's clear from the Buddhist teachings that the Buddha saw the two as very closely connected. Let me tell a story about the night of his awakening.

This account appears in detail in one of the discourses in the Majjhima Nikaya. There are a couple near the front—suttas 4 and 26—that describe his enlightenment in some detail. He sat under the Bodhi tree and resolved not to get up until he had understood what he was looking for. As the night wore on, he had three major insights. In describing all of them, he says, "When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, steady, malleable and wieldy, I directed it in a certain way." Malleable means it can be shaped or formed easily, like soft clay. Wieldy means it has power, like a lightsaber that can be effectively used.

The first thing he directed his concentrated mind to was the recollection of his own past lives. He said that with his psychic vision, he could see one past life, two, five, ten, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand past lives that he had experienced. He reviewed them very quickly. That was the first insight of the night.

I'm going to add some interpolation here—this isn't described in the sutta, but I think it's likely it would have happened. After reviewing his past lives, the next question that would have arisen in my mind would be: why did they unfold in that way?

In the next insight, he directed his concentrated mind to understand why beings die and then get reborn in certain conditions. With his psychic vision, he could see many thousands of stories of people who had died and then were reborn, and how that unfolded the way it did. What he saw was that people who had embraced good conduct in the previous life had a fortunate birth in their next life, while people who had unskillful conduct were led into a painful birth. This, of course, is the basic origin of the law of karma. He doesn't use that term in describing this insight, but it's the basic seed of the teaching on karma. He saw it in his own vision before he was awakened.

Then what I think might have gone through the Bodhisattva's mind was: "Oh my gosh, even if I act really well in this life, I'm still going to be reborn. And that means dukkha." Remember that dukkha is birth, aging, illness, and death. This means that the wheel of samsara just keeps going and going for everyone—even one who acts as well as one possibly can act—the wheel of rebirth continues.

I believe this is what motivated the Buddha to seek something beyond birth and death, to seek the deathless. So in the final watch of the night—the last four hours—he took his concentrated mind and directed it to the destruction of the taints, which means essentially destruction of the kilesas, the destruction of all the unwholesome elements of mind. This happened for him right at dawn, when he realized the unconditioned state he had been looking for: the release from birth and death. This was the attainment of nibbana, of the release from all cravings. In that liberation, there was complete ending of dissatisfaction.

I think someone mentioned that he then spent the next seven weeks still by the Bodhi tree, enjoying the bliss of deliverance. Many more insights came to him during that time, and it was out of those seven weeks that he decided to teach the Four Noble Truths—his first and central teaching.

You can see in this account of the insights leading up to his awakening that there was the understanding of action conditioned by wholesome states leading to rebirth that is positive, happy, favorable, and agreeable. In the Buddha's teaching, in the Buddha's understanding, these two teachings on karma and rebirth are very closely tied. But it doesn't mean that they have to be joined like that for you.

The teaching on karma may make sense to you, but there's still skepticism about this idea of rebirth. When I came into the Dharma, I was coming out of a scientific background. My training was in physics and math and computer science. And this didn't hold any sway for me. But over years of living with this view, it's become really kind of obvious to me that it just makes sense. Basically, if there is still desire active at the time of death, that is going to carry something forward that will result in another birth.

In the Buddha's teachings, if one acts in a certain way, certain results will happen. One of the things he said is that if one is generous in this life, then in the future or in a future birth, one will be endowed with abundance. That is basically the fruit of generosity. If one cares for living beings in this life in a non-harming way, one will enjoy good health and a long life, either in this life or some future life. If one pursues wisdom in this life, the Buddha basically said by inquiring of wise people, that is interested to learn from wise people, then one will be reborn with a mind that leads to wisdom.

So basically the way that we acquire wholesome qualities in the future is to manifest them in this life. And then they grow in a future birth. So that's the basic teaching. And to me it just makes a lot of sense.

This is one of the Buddha's quotations about rebirth. Remember, he came out of an agricultural society, so these are agricultural terms: "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, workers, families, 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, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. So do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death."

So this is the potential promise and reward that karma offers us: Live happily now and that will set the stage for future happiness as well.

Now, when I was meditating in the early years and I was running up against a lot of emotional issues—you know, I had fear and insecurity and confusion, a lot of stuff going on—I thought, wow, I must have really engaged in a lot of unwholesome conduct for all this stuff to be showing up in my mind. What on earth have I done? Of course, when I reviewed my life in the 60s, that provided some answers.

But what I think about, if you have thoughts like that, is just to think how fortunate a birth you are having. How many people of the seven billion people on the planet have heard the Dharma, understood the Dharma, and found time to practice the path to liberation? All of you have incredibly fortunate circumstances that brought you here and have cemented your relationship to the Dharma. So don't take these passing emotions as being definitive of your past or your goodness or your conduct. You're all very, very blessed.

And then there's the question of if there's no self, what carries forward from one birth to another? Trungpa Rinpoche had a kind of funny answer to this. He said, what gets reborn are our bad habits. But that's coming from a view that our basic nature is pure. So that pure nature will always go with us. Call it pure awareness or original mind, whatever. That will always be with us. Then what gets reborn are some bad habits. But our wholesome qualities go forward too. He liked to be a little bit cynical.

So how does that happen? In the list of the aggregates, the one that the discourses show as continuing to some extent is consciousness—the fifth aggregate of vijñana. And it's not clear exactly how, because the Buddha didn't lay out a lot of these details. He didn't consider them essential to liberation. But there are discourses where he clearly lays out that the ground for a new being to arise is the moment of conception, being joined with a consciousness from a previous birth.

So in the Buddhist scheme of things, this is how we all got here. At the moment of conception, some elements of a consciousness from our previous birth got merged with that embryo. And then they grew up together. How that consciousness carries the karmic imprints isn't clear to me. He didn't describe it.

But somehow, consciousness, even in its impermanent nature—arising and passing, one moment conditioning the next, conditioning the next, conditioning the next—this rising, passing consciousness somehow carried karmic imprints that joined with the embryo at the time of conception and led to the being growing up with this combination of consciousness and physical qualities. So that's as much as is stated in the discourses about what happened with that.

Another question on rebirth: if we have many more lifetimes to practice, why do we have to worry about

getting enlightened now? My answer to you is, how do you know that your next birth will let you practice the Dharma? How do you know that you'll be reborn in a land where the Dharma is available, where there are authentic teachings, where you have the leisure and understanding to practice to liberation? There's no guarantee. No guarantee.

And that's why it's so important to take advantage of this rare and precious opportunity to clarify as much as we can within the mindstream. And that clarification then will carry over, hopefully, into the next birth. But it's good not to postpone when the opportunity is here.

Another important question on karma: Do thoughts have less karmic weight or impact than actions of body or speech? Yes. By orders of magnitude.

The understanding generally is that actions of thought are the least impactful, actions of speech a little more impactful, actions of body most impactful. You can think this through with an eruption of anger. If you become angry at someone but you restrain it, that restraint itself is a wholesome action. So there is the anger, which is karmically unwholesome, but the restraint is karmically wholesome, and the mindfulness of it is even more karmically wholesome. So you've got other qualities there with the anger that make it a not totally unwholesome experience.

But suppose you shouted at somebody out of that anger. Feel this the next time—I hope it doesn't happen for you, but if it does happen, feel how that acting out with the shouting and the raised voice intensifies the impact on you. Taking a step like that more or less locks the anger into our body and mind for a longer period of time. You can feel this experientially if you act it out. And then if you went to the extent of punching someone, that's going to have a lot of repercussions—worldly repercussions—and you're really going to be stuck with that result for a long time.

So thoughts themselves, especially if met with mindfulness, don't have that negative a karmic impact. They're strengthening the groove, but if mindfulness is there with it, they're not making it worse for the future. They're starting to wear it down.

Nagarjuna was a great philosopher of emptiness. To my mind, the wisest author in the Buddhist tradition after the Buddha himself. He was a philosopher somewhere around 100 AD in India. And he said very clearly, basically, karma is undone by meditation. So as we witness these karmic habits with true mindfulness, that wears down their impact like nothing else. And then as we become more and more awakened, some of those habits are actually uprooted. So karma is ended through meditation.

And that's the freedom from the past. This path leads to freedom from the past—past hurts, past habits, past trauma. This way leads out of all of that into a fullness of presence in the moment that's uncontaminated by past suffering. Part of the beauty of this path.

A couple of announcements: Today, Dawn will be seeing people in her practice meetings as regularly scheduled. Most of us will see people tomorrow. Dawn will be meeting with people today, and her

meetings will be in the afternoon. So please check if you're planning to see Dawn shortly. Roxanne will be offering sign-ups today, and her sign-ups will also be in the afternoon. So please check if you'd like to see her tomorrow.

And then I want to talk a little bit about the ending of the first half of the retreat. It is coming. It formally ends on Tuesday. If you weren't aware of that, you get the gold medal star for present moment attention. So we bow to you.

But some of you may have simply noticed that some of the group will be leaving on Tuesday. For those staying for the three months, your schedule remains unchanged. Every aspect of the schedule continues going forward, so pretend nothing's happening.

For those departing, the schedule will shift starting tomorrow. On Sunday afternoon and Monday afternoon, we'll do some integration work with the six-week yogis. This will include a return to speaking in a mindful way and listening in a mindful way. There will be talks and discussions about taking the practice from here back into daily life, along with manager's announcements relating to all the details of closing up your room and other logistics.

There will be a manager's talk tomorrow afternoon after a meeting with the teachers. After the manager's talk, Period One yogis are welcome to pick up your phones. Then there will be some time late in the afternoon for conversation. If you want to check in with anyone at home, you can retrieve your phone tomorrow afternoon after the manager's announcements. Sunday afternoon will also include time with teachers and some time for conversation.

Due to this transition, today is the last affinity sitting time for the LGBTQI community for the six-weekers. The LGBTQI sitting at 2 p.m. will continue for the three-monthers without interruption, but if you're a six-week yogi, this will be your last time with that group. It might be a meaningful occasion to join up with a community that has supported you and that you've supported. We hold it as a silent group, but it might be a time, if you wish, to bow to one another and acknowledge the support and friendship of that community.

The BIPOC group at 6:15 can continue through Monday evening, so that one is not closing now. Similarly, with the BIPOC group, if you want to acknowledge each other with a bow at the end of the sit, feel free to do that. I know it's been a good support for many people.

We have another beautiful New England day ahead. We're in the peak of the fall experience, so I hope you enjoy it mindfully.

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