# Emptiness and Karma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:19

From the beginning of our retreat, we've talked quite a lot in relation to this topic of emptiness about cause and effect. In a very early talk, Gil talked about this general form of dependent arising: when this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. We've often alluded to the Four Noble Truths—the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, the way leading to the end of suffering. Sally talked about the twelve links of dependent origination, the step-by-step causes that lead to suffering. So there's a reason that this has been a significant theme running all the way through.

Why is cause and effect such a significant theme in terms of emptiness? I think it's because when we take the "I" out of our understanding of the universe, then we see that there are just phenomena arising and passing according to causes and conditions. When we have the whole universe mapped onto the "I" view, we think there's an agent in the center of everything, that everything revolves around and is somehow influencing it, causing it, making it unfold, keeping it going. When we see that that "I" isn't at the center of everything, then we really see how everything comes and goes according to its own causes and conditions. And that's what the unfolding of the universe is: empty phenomena rolling on.

So we come this evening to another of these areas of cause and effect, one of the other great laws that the Buddha talked about again and again—the teaching on karma, the cause and effect of karma.

As we head back into daily life, our main field becomes not the field of silent contemplation, although we hope that still continues both on the cushion and off, but much more of our attention has to go into the field of action. So it's really helpful at this point in the retreat as we near an end to take a closer look at this field of outer action—actions of speech and body, and how they depend on actions of mind.

Let me tie this into the Eightfold Path. You know that the first spoke of the Eightfold Path is Right View. That's the beginning of the section on wisdom. The Eightfold Path consists of three sections: one on wisdom, one on ethical conduct, one on meditation. It begins with Right View. If we don't understand something, we won't take the rest of the steps. So it begins with right view, and the middle section is on conduct or action. What's the appropriate action to further the path? The Buddha spells these out as right speech, right action, right livelihood.

What's the link between right view or understanding and right action? There's one other piece of the Eightfold Path that goes in between those two: Right Intention. So we have right view, right intention, and then the area of right action. Intention provides the link between our understanding and our action. As we understand the world, so we act in it. And one of the key elements of right view or right understanding is the teaching on karma. So the Buddha is basically saying if you want to act appropriately in the world and

use your actions to further your path, further your awakening, then right intention is the key component from understanding that makes that link.

I think it's for this reason that the Dalai Lama made this statement. Somebody asked him, "I'm going to be speaking to Westerners about Buddhism. Would it be better to talk to them about emptiness or about karma?" He said it'd be better to talk to them about karma. So we may have been wasting your time this week—we could have gone here a lot sooner. Because this is so important in the field of action and as it affects our whole path, it's important to understand this properly.

I sort of think of karma as the science of happiness. If we want to be happy, what action should we take? This is really the point of the teaching. This is the cause and effect relationship—what leads to happiness and what leads to unhappiness.

One of the things I have to say in talking about karma is that a lot of it I can't verify from personal experience. So I'm going to tell you some of the things the Buddha said about it, which he said that he could verify from his own insight. But it takes an extraordinary mind to be able to verify the workings of karma through direct experience. I'm not that person. My aim is to let you know what his teachings were, and then you can figure out how you want to relate to it.

I don't think it's my job to convince you, only to let you know what he said, although I think it would be to everyone's benefit if we were convinced. That's my intention—just to let you know what he said.

So I'm going to talk about basically four aspects in tonight's talk. One is what karma is, how the results of karma appear or happen, how karma directly relates to emptiness, and what's involved in the ending of karma. These are the four topics for the talk.

The word karma you probably know is Sanskrit. The Pali word is kamma. I might use either one tonight. And the word again is one of those simple words that the Buddha took—it just means action in Sanskrit or Pali. It's just an ordinary word that means action.

In the time of the Buddha, all these different philosophical schools had lots of different views and opinions about action. Action matters or it doesn't matter. There are consequences to action or there aren't any consequences to action. Action is determined already or there's free will in action. All these different philosophers and spiritual teachers would debate about all these points, but nobody really seemed to know.

The Buddha came along and made a unique contribution to the understanding of what action pivots on. And this becomes the meaning of the teaching on karma in his teachings. That is, he pointed to the crux of it as being this quality—the mental quality of volition. Or sometimes we say intention, but be aware it's a different word than the intention in the Eightfold Path. That's right intention in the path, which is samma-sankappa. Volition here is the Pali word cetana.

But I might use volition, I might use intention. As I'm using them in the rest of the talk, I'm referring to this factor that's involved in karma. This is quote 66 on the last page of the handout:

"Volition, O monks, is what I call action. For through volition, one performs the action."

Synonyms for volition: intention, urge, impulse, motivation. So you get the sense that what the Buddha is pointing to is the mental force or emotional force that drives the action to take place—this impulsive energy that the action comes out of, some energy of mind or heart that makes action happen.

The word karma refers to what we do in the present moment. We've heard this phrase "instant karma"—it's entered the pop culture. But that's really pointing to the result, and that's a different word. That word is vipaka. So we talk about karma and then vipaka, its result, which comes later. Karma is just the action in the present moment.

The Buddha considered—this was his teaching—that actions are skillful or unskillful depending on the quality of the volition. If the volition's a wholesome one, the action is skillful. If the volition's an unwholesome one, the action is not skillful. He said that the roots of the unwholesome are our three old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion.

So actions that are influenced by or under the spell of the kilesas—greed, aversion, and delusion—are considered to be unwholesome or unskillful actions. Given what we've been talking about this week, when greed, aversion, and delusion are operating, that's what we've been describing as craving or being caught up in the self. This operation of these kilesas makes the feeling of self, brings about craving and therefore clinging, and they blind us to seeing clearly. When we're under the spell of greed, aversion, delusion, we don't see so clearly.

When these are absent, or at least weaker, and we have non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—we could put those in positive terms—that means the forces in the mind are non-greed, more like generosity or letting go. Non-aversion or non-hatred is more like loving-kindness. Non-delusion is wisdom.

So the wholesome roots of action—when the mind is being shaped by generosity, by loving-kindness, by wisdom—then we trust that the action that comes is a wholesome action coming out of those volitions, those roots.

The Buddha described the action that he's talking about as happening in three spheres. Body and speech, clearly—that's what we normally take as action. But he also talked about mental activity as being action of mind. So the three spheres of mind, speech, and body are all in the area of karma. Even thoughts and emotions have karmic weight and can be either wholesome or unwholesome.

Now, just so that we wouldn't have to always be examining our volition to see what things to do or not to do, the Buddha also talked about a list that he called the Ten Unwholesome Actions. This is really helpful because it makes a very clear guideline of what he suggested not to do, to refrain from. The Ten

Unwholesome Actions are divided into spheres of body, speech, and mind.

And he answered, "'Once when I was young, I shot a bird with an air gun. After I shot the bird, it occurred to me that this beautiful little creature was probably enjoying its life, and I had brought its life to an end for no purpose. For many years afterward, whenever I saw a beautiful bird, I remembered that negative deed. Even now, at age sixty-eight, that feeling still comes to me.'"

So here's the Dalai Lama, and he's still feeling remorse for this one action of killing a bird when he was a child. And Oprah asked, "'How do you handle that feeling?'" And he said, "'I purify the negative action by feeling regret, and I try to engage in more wholesome activities.'"

What strikes me about this exchange is the extraordinary level of sensitivity that the Dalai Lama has maintained. Here's someone who has devoted his entire life to non-harming, who has faced the destruction of his country and the suffering of his people with incredible equanimity and compassion. Yet this one childhood act of killing a bird still moves him to regret.

This gives us a sense of how refined this practice can become. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should torture ourselves over every small mistake, but there's something beautiful about maintaining this level of sensitivity to the preciousness of life and the weight of our actions.

The cultivation of this sensitivity is actually a sign of spiritual maturity. As we develop in practice, we become more aware of the interconnectedness of all life, more sensitive to how our actions ripple out and affect others. What might have seemed like small matters before begin to carry more weight as our awareness deepens.

This is one of the ways that ethical conduct and meditation practice support each other. As our mindfulness grows stronger, we naturally become more aware of our motivations and the consequences of our actions. And as we become more careful in our conduct, our minds become more peaceful and concentrated, which supports deeper insight.

The Buddha often emphasized this reciprocal relationship. Good conduct creates the conditions for good meditation, and good meditation naturally leads to more skillful action. They're not separate practices but aspects of an integrated path of awakening.

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. 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."

So I hesitate to say that this is exactly where freedom from remorse leads, but it certainly goes in this direction. And he's only had about fourteen more lifetimes than us to practice it, so he's a little bit ahead of most of us.

This is the area of karma—taking care with the outer action and the intention. The Buddha also talked about what happens, what are the results of taking that care. This is a famous passage, the opening of the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you, like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you, like your shadow, unshakable."

This is the basic message of the teaching on karma. Wholesome actions lead to wholesome outcomes—that is, happiness. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome outcomes or suffering. That's the basic message. Again, this is one of the fundamental laws of cause and effect that works in the universe according to the teachings of the Buddha. You can see that this is also in that general form of dependent arising: when this is, that is; with the arising of this is the arising of that. It's just another form of that general teaching on cause and effect.

It's interesting that karma has become a common word in the culture today. Even if it's not quite clearly understood yet in the West, at least it's got a kind of fluency here.

A few years ago, I was teaching a class at a juvenile hall in San Mateo with James Barnes. We'd gotten an invitation from one of the nurses who worked with the kids to come in, and so we offered a six-week meditation class to them. We were in the maximum security unit—juvenile hall. If you're not American, you might not know this is where young people are held who are below the age of eighteen and not yet ready to go into the adult jail system before they're on trial.

So they were all awaiting trial. They were under eighteen, and they were awaiting trial. And in the maximum security system, they were charged with things like assault, grand larceny, attempted murder, murder. Some of them were sixteen, seventeen years old. They were in for really serious things.

You can imagine what it's like being that age, tossed into this holding pen, not knowing when your trial's going to come, not knowing what the outcome is going to be, and the fact you could be sent away for the next twenty years of your life. Think of the anxiety that those boys would be living with and the state of fear that they probably experienced. Combined with the fact that there are probably some fairly aggressive characters in that mix, you've got a mixture of fear and aggression that's really hard to live with, plus the uncertainty about their future.

So we went in and taught them meditation, and we taught it pretty much like we do in classes here. We started with the breath, we went into the body, and then we went into emotions. We taught them how to bring mindfulness to their emotions, and in doing that, that it was possible to create some space. Some of them became really motivated meditators—one, because they had a lot of time on their hands, but two, because they really needed the tools. They would lie down in their beds at night, this fear would just be going through their body, and they didn't know how to deal with it. Of course they didn't have any tools to deal with it, and mindfulness gave them a way to deal with it.

So they started to get a little receptive to us.

And those were rough places. I mean, here you have people who have lived through unimaginable trauma, who have lost everything—their families, their homes, their entire way of life. Many had witnessed unspeakable violence. The refugee camps were overcrowded, under-resourced, and tensions were running extremely high. There was a lot of anger, a lot of despair, a lot of people who had nothing left to lose.

So Maha Ghosananda made a decision that, from a conventional standpoint, looked completely foolhardy. He decided to go into these refugee camps—essentially alone, as a monk with no protection—and start teaching the dharma. He would walk into these places where people were carrying weapons, where violence could erupt at any moment, where the accumulated rage and trauma of years of brutalization were concentrated, and he would simply sit down and begin to teach.

Now, what's remarkable about this is that he was putting his complete trust in the law of karma. He believed absolutely that if he went in with a heart of loving-kindness, if his intentions were purely to serve and to help heal these traumatized people, then he would be protected by the natural law of cause and effect. Not protected in some magical way, but protected because kindness generates kindness, because compassion creates the conditions for safety, because when you approach others without ill will, you're much less likely to be met with violence.

And it worked. Not only did he not get killed—which many people expected would happen—but he began to have an extraordinary effect in these camps. People who had been consumed by hatred and revenge started to find some peace. Communities that had been fragmenting began to come back together. He would teach them the basic Buddhist practices—mindfulness, loving-kindness meditation, the understanding of karma—and gradually, the atmosphere in these places began to shift.

What Maha Ghosananda understood is something that goes to the very heart of Buddhist practice: that the law of karma isn't just some exotic metaphysical concept. It's describing something quite practical about how our actions create the conditions of our experience. When we act from greed, hatred, and delusion, we create the causes for suffering—both for ourselves and others. When we act from generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom, we create the causes for happiness and peace.

This is why the Buddha called this teaching a "universal law." It's not dependent on belief systems or cultural conditioning. It's simply describing how consciousness works, how actions and intentions shape our experience. Whether you're a Buddhist or a Christian or an atheist, if you approach others with genuine kindness, you're more likely to be met with kindness in return. If you approach life with generosity and honesty, you create conditions that support wellbeing. This isn't mysticism—it's psychology.

So Mahagosananda moved there to begin teaching them. I can't even imagine what it would have been like to be in those refugee camps. Probably most people had lost relatives, close family members, friends in the genocide because something like a million people out of six million died during that time. So everybody there would have had their hearts broken. They would have been enraged at what they'd witnessed.

Mahagosananda's task was to minister to them, to bring the healing message of the Dharma back to people who had lost their whole monastic order, lost the Buddhism in their country. What he conceived was that there needed to be reconciliation first and foremost—that nothing could proceed if the antagonism and conflict continued.

One of his main teachings was these pamphlets he printed with a chant in Pali, which many of the people had heard years before when they had been living in a Buddhist culture and could remember. It contained this great verse from the Dhammapada: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law."

Mahagosananda would hold these services once a week and hundreds of people, maybe thousands, would come to attend. He'd teach through loudspeakers, but mostly what he wanted to get all the refugees doing was chanting this Pali verse: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love."

But there were still Khmer Rouge in the camps, and there started to be death threats against him because they could see how much power this old monk had with people, how much respect and love he commanded. Some of Mahagosananda's supporters collected money—probably Western aid workers—and said, "We need to get you to France. You go to France, you'll be safe. You won't be killed. Look, we've collected the money. Go to Bangkok, buy a plane ticket, and get to Paris. You'll have safe haven."

So Gosananda took the money, took the train to Bangkok. But a few days later, he came back. They said,

"What happened?" He said, "Well, we were running out of brochures, so I got some more brochures printed up." He had ten thousand more brochures printed that said, "Hatred never ceases through hatred," and passed all those out through the camp. That was his trust in this law, this eternal law.

When the Buddha was talking about the results of action, he put it pretty strongly. He said, "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." This is the way the cause and effect relationship is understood.

Notice in this passage, the Buddha's not talking about the five aggregates. He's talking about beings. Just be aware that this is not one of the passages that points to the emptiness of things. This is one of the passages that's talking about relational activities, how we relate in the world. In that case, you don't need to look at the breakdown into the minute parts.

Westerners often feel some resistance to this message on karma—that beings are heirs of their actions—as though it implies that if someone is happy, that's their doing, and if they're unhappy, that's also only their doing. As though beings maybe deserve the suffering that they've got. That can seem like a really heartless view. You see someone in suffering and you say, "Oh, that's your bad karma. Too bad."

But that's a distortion of the teaching. First of all, there's no concept of deserve in karma. It's like the apple didn't deserve to fall to the ground and get smushed. That's just what gravity does. But also the Buddha didn't have any idea that beings deserve to suffer.

Do you remember the story of Angulimala? Angulimala was a spiritual practitioner whose teacher told him—because he wanted to get him in deep trouble—to collect a thousand fingers from people that he murdered. So Angulimala went out in the forest and started accumulating these fingers, which he wore on a necklace around his neck. Anguli means finger, mala means necklace.

So he wore this finger necklace, and he got up to 999 fingers. He only needed one more. And the Buddha was walking by Angulimala's area on that day. People told him, "Don't go there. Angulimala will take you as his thousandth victim." And the Buddha said, "I don't think so."

So the Buddha walked by. Angulimala tried to catch him to kill him, but through his psychic powers, the Buddha kept walking and Angulimala could never catch up to him. Finally, Angulimala shouted, "Stop! Stop!" And the Buddha turned around and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. Now you stop. Your mind is on fire with greed, hatred, and delusion. Now you stop."

So they met. Angulimala said he'd never met anyone who wasn't afraid of him before. If there was anybody in the whole range of the suttas who deserved to suffer, I would have thought it would be Angulimala. The Buddha didn't see it that way. He taught him the Dharma. Angulimala practiced sincerely and with great effort. In a fairly short period of time, he became fully awakened—one of the arahants. The Buddha wanted him to come out of his suffering. There's no concept that beings deserve to suffer or

should suffer. But sometimes the law just takes us there.

The other view that sometimes corrupts this understanding is: "Oh, that person's suffering is of their own creation. That's their problem, not my problem." That's also not what the teachings say. Compassion wants to alleviate suffering wherever it sees it. It doesn't matter what the causes are. The urge of compassion is to feel that suffering and want to take care. This quality of turning away from suffering is called indifference, and it's the near enemy of the brahmaviharaof equanimity. I think Sally talked about the near enemies. This is the near enemy of equanimity—indifference.

So we act, different fruits come to us. We can't understand all the details about how they happen, but they happen in certain ways. The Buddha said if you try to figure out how these actions come from karma, you'll experience vexation and go mad. This is one of the four imponderables—very complicated.

But he never said that everything that happens to us is a result of karma. He was asked one time, "Does all the pleasure and pain that comes to a being depend on someone's past karma?" And he said no. People who say that are wrong. He said you can look around the world and see other causes of pleasurable and painful feeling. He mentioned causes like illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault. These are other operative causes that also bring pleasure and pain to our experience.

The law of karma is one more, but it's not the only law. In our current language we might say there are physical laws, chemical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, and the law of karma. Many different kinds of cause and effect are operating. The law of karma is one, but it doesn't mean that everything that happens to us is because of past actions.

Sometimes the law of karma feels very weighty because we're in a difficult situation, difficult circumstances, and I've had people say, "I wonder what I did that was so bad that got me here?" We can't use karma that way because we can never answer that question. We don't know if it was one of our past actions or one of these other causes. That's like trying to use karma as a rearview mirror—what was on the road behind me? We can't see that.

But what we can do is use karma as the steering wheel of where we want to go in the future.

So how does that work? This is where karma and emptiness come together. At first glance, these two seem really contradictory, or they did to me anyway, because emptiness says there's no abiding or fixed self in this whole system, and karma says something that you do previously will come back to you. It's not that it comes back to somebody else. It comes back to you.

So a monk at the time of the Buddha was obviously confused by this and said to the Buddha, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" And the Buddha basically said, "You haven't been listening to me."

Actually, karma and emptiness need each other. I think Gil talked about this early on. They require each

other for all this thing to make sense at all. So let's talk about how this teaching on not-self interfaces with the teaching on karma.

First of all, the not-self teaching doesn't deny individuality. The Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem. It didn't solve ours. Each of us has a body. Each of us has a mind. And although we're interdependent, we're also to some extent independent. We each have an individual nature.

So I'd like to think a little bit about the image of a stream—the little creek that runs behind the dining hall. We tend to call that Spirit Rock Creek. I don't think it has water right now, but it will in a few days. It runs really well through the winter.

If you ever sit by the side of a creek and watch it for a while, it's very interesting to reflect on this concept of not-self. A river or a creek is a useful term. You know, if I say Spirit Rock Creek, everybody kind of knows what I'm talking about and where it is. And it's different from the Mississippi River—very different. So everybody knows that's the body of water we're calling Spirit Rock Creek.

But if you sit down by the edge of it and you look at it, is there anything fixed? First you have to ask, well, what's the creek? For the purpose of this discussion, the creek will be the body of water—maybe in geological terms we should also include the banks, but I want to talk about that body of flowing water that runs between the two banks.

Is it fixed when it's running? No. You know that old statement: you never step in the same river twice. It's changing in every moment. There's new water passing through. The water that was here five minutes ago is no longer here at all.

So the stream is a really good image for not-self. There's always stuff going on, but it's always changing. It's always new. It's useful to talk about Spirit Rock Creek. We know what we're talking about. It's different from other bodies of water. But if we look in it, there's nothing fixed.

In some schools of Buddhism, they talk about each of us as a mind stream. Within us, there is always this flow of mental activity—the saṅkhāras of the aggregates, the fourth aggregate—and feeling and perception. Mental factors are happening, emotions are going through, thoughts are arising and passing, and intentions arise and pass. And out of intentions, we sometimes act through body, speech, and mind.

So each of us is individual. We're unique. We have a different body of mind stream within us, but they all kind of work the same, and none of them are fixed.

Of the objects that are flowing in our mind stream, one of the key ones is this element of intention because intention is the core of karma. If we start to bring forth wholesome intentions and we start to not act on unwholesome intentions, that starts to change the flow of the stream. And this is really what the path is about—choosing what actions are skillful, what actions are not, which intentions we follow and which intentions we don't.

Then we start to see that the path itself is a karmic unfolding. The path operates by laws of cause and effect based on the quality of intention and the qualities of mind that we choose to strengthen and the qualities we choose to weaken.

So let's say we come into Dharma practice and our mind stream is flowing. As we all have when we first come, there's plenty of greed, aversion, and delusion in that mind stream, and plenty of actions coming out of greed, aversion, and delusion. Such a stream has a certain destination—let's call it Lake Samsara. Our stream's flowing along with this mixture of wholesome and unwholesome, moving toward Lake Samsara with our mix of pleasure and pain.

Then we start to hear the Dharma, and we begin to drop in new intentions. We start to drop in intentions for loving kindness, for compassion, for wisdom, for patience, for generosity, for stillness, for understanding and empathy. Little by little, it starts to change the flow of the stream. It doesn't feel like much in the beginning, but as we keep strengthening those intentions and those qualities start to arise in us, the whole direction of the stream moves in a different way. Instead of going to Lake Samsara, it's flowing toward the Nirvanic Ocean.

The only thing that's changed is our moment-to-moment intention. When you really think about it, that's all we have to change—that's all we can change.

For me, coming into the Dharma was like being adrift on an ocean that seemed chaotic. I didn't know where my life was going, didn't know if it was moving toward happiness or not, or how to guide it or where to go. I felt really adrift, a little bit lost. Then we start to hear the Dharma and understand we have a way to steer. We have a rudder on this boat that's in the midst of the chaos of life, and that rudder is intention. That's how we steer the boat.

So we start to direct our intention toward these wholesome ends, and we let that be the activity of our inner work of meditation or bhavana. We let that be the guiding force for our outer relationships and actions of speech and body. Then we're in tune with the wholesome side of the law of karma: "Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

Now, the only reason that karmic transformation can work is because there's nothing fixed in here from the beginning. If our ignorance was fixed, we couldn't change it. If our hatred was fixed, we couldn't change it. If our suffering was fixed, we couldn't change it. But nothing's fixed. That's the message of not-self—nothing is fixed in here. That's the groundless part. It's a little unsettling sometimes, but that's what makes liberation possible. Because nothing is fixed, we can shape it the way we want.

The power to shape our hearts and minds is entirely up to us. It just depends what direction we want to go and how many moments of intention we're willing to shape in that way. That's our Dharma practice. That's where you see the fruit in somebody like the Dalai Lama, who's been shaping it for so long. You get an idea of the possibility, the degree of development from this shaping process that only happens moment

after moment after moment, based on this factor of intention. That's the engine of the whole path.

Let's look at a couple of the quotes on page 20. Here's one that someone mentioned early—it might have been Sally—number 67: "The Blessed One took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said to the bhikkhu, 'Bhikkhu, there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. If there was this much form that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned. But because there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering is discerned.'"

So not only is there nothing on the outer form that's stable—not even a small smidgen—there's nothing of the inner either. And therefore this transformation of mind and heart is possible.

For karma to be able to unfold in us, we need this foundation of emptiness—the emptiness of self, the openness, the non-fixedness, the non-stuckness. And then as the path develops, we start to see this transformation taking place.

This is a quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj about this process. He was a teacher of Advaita Vedanta who died around 1990 in Bombay. He worked in the form of dialogue, and in the course of one such exchange, Maharaj said to a questioner, "Your own will was the backbone of your destiny."

Can you sense how that intention, as we understand the shaping quality of karma, creates a kind of trajectory for our life? Your own will was the backbone of your destiny.

The questioner responded, "Surely karma interfered."

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

Your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. This is the teaching about intention as our rudder in life.

The Buddha said that when one comes to the end of the path, one who is fully awakened—the arahat—has come to the end of karma. This is a really intriguing idea. I have no idea what it means. He says it in a number of places. Does it mean that there's no self-centered volition happening anymore? Or does it mean that intention is still active, but the fruits of karma are getting burned up really quickly, so there's no result of karma? I don't know.

But in the last quotes on page 20, he talks about this process of the ending of karma. In quote 69: "These four types of karma have been understood, realized, and made known by me. Which four? There is karma that is dark with dark result, karma that is bright with bright result, karma that is dark and bright with dark and bright result, and karma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result leading to the end of karma."

This is very cryptic, but there's some kind of unusual karma that leads to the end of karma, and he calls it neither dark nor bright. This is explained a little more in passage 70:

"And what is karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result leading to the ending of karma? Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

As he says again in quote 72: "It is this noble eightfold path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma."

It's very interesting characterizing the path as neither dark nor bright karma, because normally one would think of the path as the brightest kind of karma. But he says it's neither dark nor bright. My intuition—and I don't have any strong source for this except a little reference in quote 69—is that he says, "What is karma that is neither dark nor bright? The volition to abandon the other karma."

It's as though in coming into the path, we come into this place of deep letting go. Letting go of preoccupation, of obsession, of selfing. Letting go of this controlling instinct that is so integral to the self. Letting go of effort and striving for a result, trusting more in faith. Letting go of all the mental formations that we're accustomed to generating over and over again, and opening to that place of the stilling of all formations, the abandoning of effort, the abandoning of striving, the abandoning of action and volition.

And then from that place where there is so much stillness, so much surrender to the way things are, perhaps out of that there's an opening to the deep realization and liberation that is really the end of karma.

So let's just sit for a minute together.

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