Patterns of Becoming 4: Kamma and Rebirth

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:04:45

The talk tonight is the fourth in this series called Patterns of Becoming, describing how we create the self over and over again in these repetitive patterns that trap us in unhappiness or suffering, and how we release from these patterns.

The patterns I've been describing are basically karmic patterns. They're patterns that fit within the understanding of karma, the activity of karma, and the way out is also in the field of karma. So this evening, I want to explore this topic of karma as the foundation for understanding the next talk, which is how we come to the ending of these patterns.

Tonight I want to explore three aspects of action: karma itself, its results, and this question of rebirth.

The Dalai Lama was once asked if he had to choose between teaching Westerners about emptiness or about karma, which did he think was more important? He said it would be more important to teach about karma. We've talked quite a bit about emptiness in different ways on this retreat, but tonight I want to talk about this teaching on karma.

Bhikkhu Bodhi was giving an address to a group of Western teachers of Vipassana a few years ago at the study center in Barré, Massachusetts. He made the statement that if you don't teach karma and rebirth, you're not really teaching Buddha Dharma. So I want to be sure to fulfill Bhikkhu Bodhi's prerequisites tonight and make sure that at some point in this retreat we touch on these two themes, which are quite central in the teachings.

This word karma has entered our vocabulary in the West. You see it a lot, but it's not very well understood in the culture generally. I think the reason it's so important for us as human beings and as practitioners is that it's the science of happiness. If you want to become happy, there are very predictable and consistent steps that can be taken to lead to any kind of happiness you want to achieve. You can find human happiness, you can find heavenly happiness, and you can find the happiness of liberation through the different steps of the path once you understand how karma works. In this way, karma becomes our best friend along the path. In order for it to really serve us well, we need to understand its workings. Then it can take us anywhere we want to go on any of these destinations.

Much of what I'll talk about tonight is something I can't verify. A lot of our dharma talks discuss things that you can experience and we can experience and maybe we have experienced. This is not true for much of this topic. It takes extraordinary vision to be able to understand and see with insight the workings of karma. The Buddha said that he had this kind of vision. When he talked about karma and its

law, he wasn't talking from a speculative view—it would be nice if maybe the universe worked this way. He was talking about what he could actually see with his concentrated, clear mind.

This is not something that most of us can verify. Maybe never in our life will we be totally able to verify it. But I feel it's important to consider it. The Buddha thought it was very important. He talked about it quite a lot. As a teacher, I don't think it's my job to tell you what to believe when it's something you can't verify. But I do think it is my job to tell you what the Buddha said about it, and then to leave it in your hands to figure out your own relationship to it.

Please understand that in what I share tonight, I'm not saying that you have to believe this, but I'm saying it might be worth considering and having an open mind that it could possibly be true. The Buddha had a pretty good track record on the things we can verify. Maybe there's just a chance he was right about this too. If we just open ourselves to that possibility, that's enough.

The word karma is a Sanskrit word and it simply means action. The Pali equivalent is kamma, K-A-M-M-A, and it also just means action. It's another one of these words that was common in the language at the time that the Buddha took and put a special meaning to. But basically it just means action. I might use the words karma and action interchangeably through this talk.

In the time of the Buddha, every philosophical school had some kind of opinion about action. They'd get together, and this is one of the main things they'd argue about. Some of the schools said action mattered. Others said it didn't matter. Some schools said action had no consequences. Other schools said action had consequences. Some schools said that all action is predetermined—you can't affect the action in your life because it's all set already. Other schools said, no, there's absolutely free choice and you can choose any action that you want.

But from the Buddha's point of view, all these were speculative views because the teachers didn't have direct experience to know what they were talking about. Whereas the Buddha said that he did.

The Buddha gave the word karma a new interpretation, a new definition, and this is the central piece of the meaning. He said, karma is action with volition, or you could use the word intention.

The Pali word is *cetanā*, and it's the word that we've been using in the meditation instructions as intention. It is the driving force in the mind that causes our actions of speech and of body to come through.

Now one slight refinement: the Buddha also considered thoughts and emotions to be volitional actions. So we say that this field of karma encompasses actions of body, of speech, and of mind, and they are karmic because they're intentional. They're volitional. Other synonyms for volition could be urge, impulse, motive, or motivation. So it's saying that they're actions that come out of some inner direction, some impulse to achieve some aim. And that's what puts them in the field of karma.

Moreover, the Buddha said actions are either wholesome or unwholesome depending on the quality of

that volition or intention. If the volition is wholesome, the action is wholesome. If the volition is unwholesome, the action is unwholesome.

So, what do you think unwholesome actions come out of? Our three old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion are considered the roots of the unwholesome. Their opposites are considered the roots of the wholesome. The opposite of greed, the Buddha defined as renunciation—basically letting go, giving up. But you could also think of it as generosity, because in generosity we renounce something that we have. The opposite of aversion is loving-kindness, and the opposite of delusion is wisdom. So you can think of the wholesome roots as generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Then actions get influenced by either unwholesome or wholesome conditions in the mind. That's what gives them their karmic weight, their moral weight. So it's not the act per se; it's where it comes out of in our hearts and minds.

A simple example: an infant is lying on her bed, sleeping, rolls over and in her sleep knocks over a lamp that shorts a wire, causes an electrical fire, and the house starts to burn. Fortunately, because I don't want this to be a bummer, her parents come in and rescue her. She's fine. But the house might burn down. There's no karmic weight in her action because it was simply accidental, even though it led to a fire. No karmic weight.

Or consider a karmic action. Someone takes a sharp knife and slices open the belly of someone else and blood comes spewing out. Is that karmically wholesome or unwholesome? Could be either, couldn't it? If it's a surgeon who's healing out of compassion for the patient, it's wholesome. If it's a robber who's trying to steal the person's money or property, it's unwholesome. So it's not the action but the intention behind it that determines this kind of force.

And of course, as we look at our lives realistically, a lot of actions have mixed motives. If we look at our daily activities, we might give somebody a gift, which is very generous, but then we crave some recognition or appreciation or gratitude. So there can be a mixture of intentions in our actions.

Just looking, as an example with desire and aversion, at understanding how they become intentions or motivations, we see the basic thrust of desire is to gain something pleasant. The basic thrust or impulse of aversion is to push away what's unpleasant. The basic thrust of fear is to withdraw or back up from something that's unpleasant or threatening. So we see how a lot of these moods that we feel have hidden agendas or unspoken intentions in them.

The Buddha was quite clear about what kinds of actions particularly carry on this unwholesome activity. And he taught a list of what he called the ten unwholesome actions. I'm just going to go through them quickly so that we know the ground. They're very familiar from our practice of the precepts. Three of them are actions of body, four of them are actions of speech, and three of them are actions of mind.

So the three unwholesome bodily actions are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and engaging

in sexual misconduct—sexual conduct that harms. And if you look at these, of course these form the basis, refraining from these is the basis of the first three lay precepts: non-killing, non-stealing, refraining from sexual misconduct.

The four unwholesome actions of speech are lying—and that relates to the fourth precept, which is to refrain from speaking what is untrue. The other three unwholesome actions of speech are using harsh or abusive speech towards someone, speaking maliciously of someone else to undermine their reputation, or engaging in idle chatter and gossip. This one's fairly light. But you can see how, number one, it's not a good use of time. Number two, it uses the events of other people's lives for entertainment or judgment. That's the motive behind gossip. It's not very supportive, generally.

And the three unwholesome actions of mind, he said, were covetousness, which is about wanting what someone else has; ill will, wishing another person harm; and, most interestingly, wrong view—not understanding things the way they really are. Because when we have wrong view about the world and about ourselves, we act based on a false understanding of reality. And that gets us into trouble.

The ten wholesome actions are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome actions. This is wonderful because it gives us a guideline—a very practical guideline—for our daily lives. Once we understand the importance of karma and the results of karma, we have really clear standards by which to guide our external actions. It's extraordinarily helpful, especially in our outer life. The Buddha was very strong about taking great care with our conduct.

He said that one who has taken real care with their actions for quite a while enjoys what he called "the bliss of blamelessness"—a certain freedom from regret or remorse. When you come into a situation like this where things are really quiet for a while, often, if you haven't experienced this before, a certain amount of life review takes place. You start remembering things you've done that weren't so skillful, and one can be filled with regret. The mind can become very clouded as a result—heavy with self-judgment.

But having taken care with our conduct, we are free from that kind of regret. It brings the bliss of blamelessness and allows the mind to settle more easily in happiness, which leads to concentration, which leads to insight, which leads to freedom. So this moral foundation is a really important part of the meditative path.

How far can this be developed? I like to think about people like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who's been working on this for a long time now. The Dalai Lama had an interview a few years ago with Oprah Winfrey. This is one of the great things I think Oprah does—she brings great spiritual teachings to a very broad audience, and I really appreciate that. There's nobody else who does it quite like she does.

She started the interview by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable, not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. 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 experience 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."

Part of the reason for his meditative skill is this bliss of blamelessness. His mind can just rest very happily in its own nature because he doesn't have any regrets about his conduct. A beautiful statement.

So we're only about thirteen lifetimes behind him. We'll get there too.

This is the field of action, which has moral weight based on volition. And then the central teaching of the Buddha is that actions do have consequences. They have consequences based on the nature of the intention behind them. The basic message is that wholesome intentions lead to wholesome consequences, while unwholesome intentions lead to unwholesome consequences or unhappiness.

Ruth Dennison, a great elder in our tradition, has a way of putting things very succinctly. She said, "Karma means you don't get away with nothing, darling."

This is the law. The Buddha also said this very crisply near the start of the Dhammapada collection of verses: "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. This is the basic message of the law of karma.

And this understanding is becoming more accepted in Western culture. Some years ago, James and I were teaching a class to some young men in a juvenile hall in San Mateo. A friend of James worked in the juvenile hall and managed to get us the invitation to go in. These became the class series that eventually grew up and were taken over by the Mind-Body Awareness Project and the Lineage Project. This was the beginning of it.

We taught a six-week series on meditation, which we didn't call meditation because we figured they wouldn't be into it. We called it "Mind Power" so that they could dig it. At the end of the six weeks, we handed out certificates with each person's name stating they had completed a six-week training in Mind Power. One of the young guys—and you know, in juvenile hall, people are under the age of eighteen, awaiting trial—asked, "Can I take this certificate and show the judge?" These kids, whose whole life could be in front of them, don't know what's going to happen when they actually go to trial.

We'd been teaching them the usual suspects of mindfulness: being with the breath, being with body sensations, being with emotions, feeling emotions in the body. This emotional work was really helpful for them because, first, they were a captive audience, so to speak, and they were very receptive to the teachings. They had a lot of time on their hands. And juvenile hall, like most prisons, is emotionally a very charged place. These young men don't know what's going to happen to their lives. There's a lot of anxiety, and at the same time, there's a certain amount of aggression going on. They had a lot of time just to feel what was happening. It was not easy for them. So learning to relate with fear and anger were very helpful tools.

Near the end of the class series, we thought, "Well, we should say something about sila, shouldn't we? Should we say something about the precepts? Should we talk about karma?" James and I sort of looked at each other and debated it back and forth. We finally decided we only have one chance to speak to these guys—let's do it.

So we introduced the notion of karma and said something like, "If you act out of anger or fear, it's going to come back in your life in unhappy ways. But if you act out of kindness or caring, it's going to come back to your life in happy ways. Does that sound like something you've ever heard before?"

One of the young guys put his hand up and said, "You mean 'what goes around comes around'?"

"Yeah."

He said, "Sure, we can relate to that."

So that idea is already there in the culture. It just needs to be spelled out more. They got it quickly.

The Tibetans have a series of phrases for the brahmaviharas that are a little different than ours—quite similar, but a little bit different. And embedded in their phrases for loving-kindness and compassion is some of this same teaching. They call these states the four immeasurables because they're boundless states.

The phrase for loving-kindness is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." It's beautiful because it puts the understanding of how happiness comes about directly into the wish for happiness.

The compassion phrase is: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is

non-virtue." This becomes a daily kind of reflection that one might do in the Tibetan tradition.

The Buddha said that this law applies to all beings. It's a universal law. It doesn't matter if you believe it or not. It doesn't matter if you know it or not. It doesn't matter if your religion believes it or not.

It doesn't matter if your culture believes it or not. It applies to all beings because these forces of the wholesome and the unwholesome are in everyone. And particularly, our growth in the path is based on this same law, which we'll explore further next time.

So far in the Brahmavihāras, we've gone through loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy. In a couple of days, we'll introduce the practice of equanimity. It turns out the practice of equanimity in the Brahmavihāras is based on the teaching of karma.

The classical phrase I'll mention now—and you'll be given the opportunity to practice with it in a couple of days—is: "All beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are their relations, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs."

Sometimes for Westerners, this is a bit of a shock. This seems like kind of a tough phrase. If your mind doesn't relate to it easily, we have some softer versions that we'll be happy to offer in a couple of days' time. But this reflection points to how beings, to some extent, create their own destinies or their own journeys through life, and everyone has their own way.

It's a reflection that can be very helpful with friends and family members. Do you have any of those people in your life who keep making the wrong choices? You see it coming, and you want to tell them, "Don't do that. If you do that, it's going to be a train wreck. I can see it coming." But they don't want your advice, right? They never want our advice. So we allow them to make their own choices and we see how that leads in many cases to their own suffering. But that's how they have to live out their own choices and their own direction.

The Buddha in the suttas actually stated this phrase even more strongly: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their relations, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs."

This is quite a powerful reflection when you carry it in a sustained way like we do with Brahmavihāra practice, because we start to see how our very being is emerging from our own past actions. Moment after moment, we are born, we are taking birth from our own past actions in these patterns that go on over a whole lifetime. These patterns of acting and feeling and thinking that we are the owners of. When we start to understand in this way, it brings about a tremendous sense of personal responsibility. If we want the outcome to be favorable, we have to start the work from within our own hearts.

I find that Westerners often have a strong resistance to this notion. In Western culture, it's not familiar,

and it conflicts with some of our cultural values. I think especially in the West, we have very strong democratic ideals about equality. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, where the United States declared its freedom from Great Britain, starts by saying, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal."

This notion of equality goes very deep in the West, and it's a wonderful, inspiring ideal that I think points to a deep truth. It's inspired political movements all around the world in really beautiful ways. But somehow it comes along with another idea, which is something like people should be equally happy. And that doesn't seem to be the case. It just doesn't seem to work like that.

So when we say that people are to some extent responsible for their own happiness, it seems like kind of a cold worldview. Where's the compassion in that? Where's the caring? It can seem very cruel sometimes. As a reading into this teaching on karma, sometimes people think, "Oh, well, what the teaching is saying is that beings deserve their pain and they deserve to suffer. If they've done unskillful actions, then they deserve to suffer."

That is not implicit at all in the law of karma. The Buddha taught for forty-five years out of compassion to end people's suffering. I'm very convinced that if he could have looked within the heart of every person he met and plucked out the source of suffering, he would have done it. He didn't have any idea that people deserve to suffer.

A classic example is Aṅgulimāla. Aṅgulimāla was a sincere spiritual seeker and student who unfortunately took advice from a not-so-skillful teacher who told him that in order to progress on the path, he needed to murder a thousand people, collect a finger from each individual, and wear those severed fingers in a necklace. His name meant "finger necklace."

So Aṅgulimāla had hidden out in the forest and killed everybody who walked by until he'd reached the number 999. He just needed one more to make the teaching complete. The Buddha was planning to walk his way. So the Buddha's supporters said, "Don't go that way. Aṅgulimāla is staying there and he will rush out and kill you."

And the Buddha said, "I'm not worried. That's the way I'm going to walk."

So he walked that way. Angulimala came to attack him, but he wasn't successful. And when he encountered the Buddha, he was so impressed by the Buddha's dignity and poise and lack of fear that he bowed down and asked to become his student.

So at this point, the Buddha could have said, "Oh, sorry, but you deserve to suffer. You're a serial killer. And I think you just need to have your karma play out and you'll reap a lot of suffering and you deserve that." He could have done that, but he didn't. The Buddha ordained Angulimala, taught him the Dharma, taught him how to practice, and in a relatively short period of time, Angulimala was awakened. He remained a bhikkhu for the rest of his life, remained a part of the Sangha.

When he would go out on alms round, people still thought of him as the mass murderer, and they would attack him and not offer him food and throw things at him and want to injure him. And Angulimala came back and told the Buddha about that, and the Buddha said, "You just need to bear that. That's part of your karma. But your mind is free." And his heart was cleared of all that hatred.

So the teaching on karma doesn't imply anything about deserving to suffer, but it is a law. To expect that we can do unskillful things and not suffer would be like expecting an apple to come off the stem and not fall to the ground. The law of gravity says if the apple comes off the twig, it's going to fall to the ground. There's no way around it. You can't stop the law of gravity and you can't stop the law of karma except through deep spiritual realization, which we'll talk about more next time. And that's how Angulimala got out of the worst situation of his suffering due to the Buddha's compassion, due to the Buddha's wanting him not to have to suffer the consequences of those actions.

Another way we sometimes take this that's also off the mark is we think that karma becomes the reason not to care. We see someone in suffering and we think, "Oh, well, it's their actions that took them there, therefore it's their fault, so it's their problem, so I don't have to care about them." That's also a misunderstanding.

That attitude is called indifference. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. As you know, the near enemy is an unwholesome state that masquerades as the wholesome. Indifference is not the appropriate attitude toward any kind of suffering. So the proper attitude is compassion. When the heart is awakened and open, the response to suffering is compassion.

So it doesn't matter where the person's suffering came from. It could be a purely physical cause. It could be some mental cause. It could be an accident. It could be some kind of attack or assault. It could be many sources. It doesn't matter where it came from. Compassion wants to relieve the suffering. Indifference is off the mark of the teachings. So we often talk about in teaching equanimity, take care that it doesn't slide into indifference. And if it does, then the equanimity needs to be warmed up with more loving kindness and compassion so that it has that balance.

So these results of action come through in at least six different ways. There are six ways we can understand the results, the consequences.

We feel it before we act. If we're thinking about doing something wholesome, it feels good. You know, when Carol talked about the generous actions that she and her friends carried out in Burma, I know that as they were planning those actions, they got great feelings about the people that were going to be able to be supported by them. And when we think about doing something unkind, it doesn't feel so good, even before we do it.

In the moment we're acting, we feel that quality of the intention. When we're doing something loving and generous, it feels good in the very moment. When we're doing something unpleasant, unkind, it hurts in

the moment. Sylvia Borstein has this lovely expression: "Anyone causing great pain is themselves in great pain." And you can feel that, can't you? That harming and hurting.

After the action, as we recollect it, we can feel wonderful about the skillful things we've done and we can feel a lot of regret about the unskillful things. So in the metta practice, we often encourage this recollection of our past skillful actions, actions of love and generosity, as a way to feel good about ourselves as people.

The fourth way that we feel these consequences is that our actions come back to us from other people in the ways that we've related to them. So if we've been kind, supportive, generous, loving, affectionate toward people, then when we meet them, they're happy to see us.

They're very open. They're warm and generous and welcoming back. If we've been cold or critical or judgmental or angry, then when we meet those people, they're not so open to us. They're not so welcoming, not so inviting to us.

The fifth way that we can feel these consequences is in habitual states of mind. And this we get to know through observing these karmic patterns in our own meditation practice and in our lives. We find that our minds fall into fairly predictable grooves. And those grooves have been created just by the repetition of those habits of mind before, again and again.

This is from the Buddha: "Because whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

So through this repeated activity, we form this groove in the mind that by habit we tend to fall back into again and again.

These are five ways that we can feel the results of karma experientially, pragmatically, in our own observation.

Then there's a sixth way, and this is the kind of mysterious way that most of us cannot verify. And that is that our actions bring results in the future in some kind of unpredictable and unexplainable way. And this is mysterious. I don't know how this works. How is it that kindness brings happiness? How is it that kindness brings good things into our life? I don't know. But the Buddha said that he could see that from his own direct experience, that this actually is the case.

So this is the point at which when one says, "I don't believe in karma," this is the point that people don't necessarily believe in. And you don't have to believe in this. As long as you see the other five ways which are verifiable and come to trust in that, that's plenty to fuel your practice. But I encourage you to think

about, consider this other possibility a little bit. Because it's kind of a profound comment on the universe that we live in.

Originally some people think that the teaching on karma is cold or heartless or uncaring because it puts so much into personal responsibility. But I see it differently. You know, after hanging out with this teaching for a while, what it says to me is the truth of morality, goodness and ungoodness is woven into the very fabric of the universe—that this is a universal law that applies to all sentient beings everywhere. This is not just something that's constructed out of evolution for social ease in generating a better society. The Buddha's teaching points to this being an essential element in the fabric of the universe for sentient beings.

What that says to me is that we live in a moral universe. Not just a moral evolved human society, a moral universe. That this law has been there from the very beginning. So to me, this teaching warms the universe up. It doesn't feel cold and heartless. It feels like there's a heart of caring at the very center of sentient life. And it's the kind of universe that I want to live in, where morality is an integral part. And that's part of what the Buddha was pointing to.

Now, the way these actions play out are mysterious and they're complicated. The Buddha said that if you tried to figure it out, you would go mad and experience vexation. Which comes first, I'm not sure. But they both sound not so helpful.

So we can't figure it out, like how the karmic results unfold. All we can do is take it on some faith that this might be a possibility and then explore. So he called this one of four imponderables that are not advised to reflect on. The other three are the range of mind of a Buddha, the kind of insights a Buddha can come to; the beginning of things, the origin of the physical universe; and the third is the range or the power of a concentrated mind. These are beyond rational comprehension.

Another misunderstanding is sometimes we believe that everything that happens can be attributed to karma. So the Buddha was asked about that one time. He said, "Is everything painful or pleasant that happens to us the result of our past action?" And the Buddha said, "It's not like that. You can't say that." He said things come from other causes. And he mentioned illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault. So the understanding is there are several kinds of causes in the universe—physical, chemical, biological, genetic, psychological, etc.

And karma is another one. So karma is one force that causes things to unfold, but it's not the only one.

With this teaching of the mysterious unfolding, I would encourage you to keep an open mind about it. If we say, "I don't believe that—that's false, there's no basis for that view," that's just another speculative position because we don't have the insight to know whether it's false. You can simply keep an open mind and hang out with it.

As I've sat with this concept over time—it was foreign to me when I started practice—and as I've watched

people's lives unfold over the thirty-five years I've been in the Dharma, knowing people for that length of time, I've come to have considerable faith in this teaching and the mysterious ways that it works. But it took me a long time to arrive at that understanding. Just hang out with it, let it sit there, evaluate it over time, and see where you end up.

I want to talk a little about rebirth, because part of these karmic results have to do with future lives. Again, this teaching on future lives and rebirth is an integral part of what the Buddha had to communicate, and he considered it important. He wouldn't have taught it if it were merely incidental. He knew much that he didn't bother sharing, but this teaching on rebirth weaves through many, many discourses. It's not something that appears just once, which you could discount by saying, "Oh, that was added by later editors." It comes up again and again in many different suttas, on many different occasions, in many different contexts.

The understanding here is that the actions we carry out in this life influence the conditions of our next birth. After death, there is some continuity that takes place. There will be a birth in the future after our passing away that bears some connection to our life now. To see the full playing out of karma, one has to look at this possibility of future lives. Without this perspective, I don't think one can really come to have much faith in this teaching.

Consider a simple example: Pol Pot, dictator of Cambodia from 1976 to 1979, responsible for a regime that killed twenty-one percent of the population, exterminated the professional classes, monks, and nuns, and virtually eliminated the educated class and all the Buddhist clergy of the country. Pol Pot was driven out of power by the Vietnamese in 1979, but he formed a kind of shadow government near the border and lived until about 1998 when he died. Some suspect he was poisoned, but that's not entirely clear.

When I look at the trajectory of his life, I do not see any suffering proportional to the horrific crimes that he committed through his regime. I have to consider that the suffering that will eventually come to him is being played out in his next life—probably currently being played out. Sometimes it's not possible to see this cycle of karma and the unhappiness that results from actions within one human life. But the Buddha often talked about wholesome actions leading to happy births, unwholesome actions leading to unhappy births, in a way that makes this understandable.

The Buddha talked about the effects of specific actions which he could see. He said things like: killing living beings will lead at some point to a lifespan that is not long; injuring living beings will lead at some point to a lifespan characterized by ill health. But on the positive side: not killing living beings will lead to a lifespan that is long; not injuring living beings will lead to a lifespan that is healthy. Being generous in our actions will lead to a life in which we experience abundance at some point; being stingy will lead to a life where we experience lack or scarcity.

What he didn't say—and I want to make this clear—is that you can take current conditions and use karma as a rearview mirror. In other words, you cannot say, "Because I'm having health problems, therefore it

means I killed living beings in my past life." He never said you could use it to look backwards and draw conclusions.

In this understanding of karma, we cannot use it as a rearview mirror. Some people become concerned about this—if they're experiencing suffering in this life, they worry it means it's a result of unwholesome past actions. There is nothing in the teachings that provides ground to support that conclusion. Please don't take it in that way. We cannot see that clearly. That would just be a speculative view. So we shouldn't judge ourselves, and we shouldn't judge others, on that kind of basis. We don't know if suffering came through karma, accident, assault, genetics, or what—it could arise from many different directions.

The Buddha said again that karma is the womb from which we are born. In that agrarian society of India 2,500 years ago, grain was a form of wealth. "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents—none of these can you take with you after death. 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."

Therefore, do good actions. Gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death.

Now, you may not believe in this teaching about karma and rebirth. You don't have to believe it. But what if it's true? What if the Buddha was right about this the way he was right about all the things we've already verified? How would you want to live your life? We'd really want to be careful, wouldn't we? We'd be mindful not to harm and motivated to do a lot of good.

So the Buddha said this is a good bet to make. Act as though it's true whether you know it or not, believe it or not. Act as though it's true. If it is true, then you'll have the rewards in this life and in future lives. If it's not true, you'll still have a great life in this life. This is described in a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 60, if you'd like to read it. So it's a good bet.

But what's happening in rebirth? The question is: what is it that gets reborn?

I have to interject here with Trungpa Rinpoche's quick reply to this question. "You want to know what gets reborn? It's your bad habits." He's saying that from a perspective where the beautiful habits of mind are all intrinsically there in consciousness, so of course they carry forward. And the individual patterning is made out of bad habits. But that was a little cynical throwaway.

So let's talk about it in more detail. We can understand this process of rebirth either as one life to the next or moment to moment in this life. We've talked about this process of becoming and taking birth based on contact, feeling, craving, clinging. This is the moment-to-moment description of being born again and again. And then there's also the dying and taking a new birth description. The process of karma in both is pretty similar.

Let's think about it for a minute in the moment-to-moment birth in this life. Say you walk into a

meditation period and you're very untroubled about your basic identity. You walk in and you're Sari or you're Klaus or you're Don, and you know who you are and you sit down. You know who your personality is. You sit down and in the middle of your meditation you have a very clear recognition: everything is changing. Sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch and thoughts and emotions—they're all just coming and going. There's nothing fixed in this whole process. You see clearly it's all impermanent.

Bell strikes. Stand up. Oh, Sari's back. Klaus is back. Don is back. The personality reassembles, doesn't it? You can be in this vast openness, clear seeing of impermanence, nothing lasts—stand up, personality's back. It's like that, isn't it?

There are these ways that we feel ourselves that we could call patterns of our personality—familiar ways we think and feel and believe and see that go on, even though our moment-to-moment experience is totally impermanent, nothing fixed, totally changeable. But these patterns which kind of tell us who we are, that are consistent, continue.

So that's how, when I come out of a meditation, I don't get reborn as the Dalai Lama. Much as I might like to stand up and be him, I get reborn as Guy with my kilesas and all. So these patterns, both the beautiful qualities and the difficult qualities, kind of get recreated over and over and over. And this is that groove in the mind.

It's curious because if we look minutely, there's no continuity. There's nothing we can put our finger on and say, "This is continuing from one moment to the next." But somehow these patterns have some continuity.

So the way that happens is that one moment of consciousness conditions the next, and that moment conditions the next, and that moment conditions the next. This process of conditioning—one moment shaping the next, shaping the next, shaping the next—is what carries these patterns along. That's why we seem so similar hour by hour and day after day.

This process is basically the same process that leads to some continuity in the next birth. They're not very different. Ajahn Amaro put it this way: the process of going from one life to the next is not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next. Because one moment conditions the next, even though nothing single is carrying over, there appears to be continuity. And that's what happens with death and rebirth.

Let's look a little more closely at the mechanics of rebirth—how it's understood in our tradition. The Buddha did not describe it clearly. He considered it one of those things that one didn't need to understand in order to become liberated, so he didn't give many details about it. There are only a few hints, but there are a number of hints that are quite consistent. I'll tell you the way that it reads and a little of my interpretation of what that means.

The first thing is that the suttas talk several times about what he called the descent of consciousness into

the womb. What's being pointed to here is very different from the Western materialistic view that consciousness is generated as a result of the physical development of the body. The Buddha rejected that view—the Western scientific materialist view that egg and sperm come together and the cells multiply, then the being grows up and consciousness is just a byproduct of the complexity of chemical reactions that occur when the brain gets a sufficient number of neurons. The Buddha rejects that view.

He says, and I'll read this exact quote: "Bhikkhus, the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place through the union of three things: the union of the father and the mother, the mother's season, and the being to be reborn." In other words, the father's sperm meets the mother's egg, they join and form a union, and into that union comes a consciousness that's been associated with some past life. It's only the coming together of those three things that creates the ground for a human being to grow in the womb.

This is another way he described it: "If consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, would name and form develop there?" Name and form is a translation of the Pali nama-rupa—one of the aspects of the chain of dependent origination, basically the beginning of a human being. So the Buddha was asking one of his other monks, "Would name and form develop there?" "No, Lord." "Therefore, consciousness is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition of name and form." And name and form is the start of the new being.

This is how it's explained by Bhikkhu Bodhi: "It is the stream of consciousness coming from the preceding existence that functions as the nutriment consciousness—that nourishing element, nutriment consciousness—by generating at the moment of conception the rebirth consciousness which brings forth name and form, the beginning of the new human being."

How this happens is not explained. But somehow there is some continuity of consciousness from the past existence in which the karmic patterns are perpetuating themselves. This joins with the sperm and egg, the fertilized egg, to form the new being. That's why children come out with such distinct personalities right out of the womb—because they are carrying the karmic patterns of that past life.

The important thing is that the karmic patterns we're creating now not only fill the rest of this life, but to the extent that we don't become free of them, they also are the grounds for the arising of bondage and suffering in a future human existence.

The reason the Buddha talked so much about karma and rebirth, I believe, is to encourage us to clean up this chain. We can't just assume that if we don't clean it up in this life, it's going to end at death. According to the Buddha, it doesn't. This chain—which until we get free includes bondage and the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death—will go on and on and on until the mind becomes free.

When the mind becomes free, there is no more volition driving more becoming. There is no urge toward birth and becoming. So when an enlightened being dies, there is no reappearance of name and form. There is no reappearance of the five aggregates. The chain of samsara has been ended at that point.

Again, this may be something you believe or don't believe. I would just encourage you to keep an open attitude about it and just ponder it as a hypothesis. To me, it's the hypothesis that best explains all the observable facts of this world.

I came into this world with a certain personality and karmic patterns already formed. I don't know where they came from because I can't see that past life, but I feel I arrived partly shaped. I observe this same phenomenon in many other people.

If you're interested in exploring this scientifically, there is a professor at the University of Virginia named Ian Stevenson who researched this area for forty years. He studied approximately 2,600 case histories of young children who claimed they could remember their previous lives. He collected their data, examined the records of the people they identified, and attempted to verify the children's claims. If you read his books, it becomes difficult to find any other explanation for these kinds of continuity apart from the truth of rebirth.

If you remain skeptical, I encourage you to explore the writings of Dr. Stevenson. He is not a zealot, nor does he present his findings as absolute proof. He simply states that he cannot find any other logical explanation for all these case studies.

This is the force of karma—the evolution of karmic patterns and mental habits driven by intentions that, when we begin to understand them, are mostly unconscious and carry a large degree of unwholesomeness that binds us to suffering. This is what becomes illuminated by the light of mindfulness.

Next time I want to discuss how we come to the end of these compulsive patterns and how that liberation frees our heart and mind. But as a preview, I'll leave you with this quote from the Buddha: "What is the action that leads to the end of action? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the end of karma."

Let us sit for a moment together with this teaching.

What is the action that leads to the end of action? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the end of karma.

Thank you for staying present with these teachings. Thank you for listening.

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