Patterns of Becoming 5: The End of Karma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:59

So last time we looked at this creation of self, how nothing is staying the same from moment to moment. But because of each mind moment conditioning the next, there is this sense of the continuity of these patterns of becoming, which are basically the repetition of volitional actions, which is called karma. We talked about how we get kind of enclosed in these actions, and tonight I want to talk about how we can get free, how meditation practice releases us from these patterns.

I hope this is well-timed because by the end of the retreat we should be talking about release, right? You want the fourth noble truth at the end and not the second noble truth. So that's where we are in this process of release.

To start again, we're going to look at this question: the relationship between karma and the teaching of not-self. When you first think about it, they seem kind of contradictory, don't they? The teaching is, my actions come back to me. Where's the self in that? Somebody in the time of the Buddha, one of the bhikkhus, asked him this very question. He said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" Oh, that's good. And the Buddha basically said, you haven't been listening to me. You haven't got it.

So these teachings of not-self but karmic consequences coming back to us are, on the surface of it, contradictory. But as we go through it, I think you'll see that these teachings actually really need each other. The teaching of not-self depends on karma. The teaching of karma depends on the understanding of not-self. They're really related.

One of the things we have to remember is the teaching on not-self doesn't deny individuality, right? It doesn't mean that when we see anatta, we have this blissful merging with the cosmos and all is one. That's not the Buddhist understanding of things.

We may understand this by thinking of the concept of a stream. I like to look at the streams that are flowing on this property, and there's an analogy here. The streams don't have very much water in them this year, unfortunately, because of the lack of rain. But if you look at the water that's flowing, you might think, oh, this is the Spirit Rock stream, right by the meditation hall here.

What is this stream? I looked up the definition on the internet, so it must be true. It said that a stream is a body of water running in a channel or current bounded by its banks. But the main definition is a stream is a body of water.

So we look at that stream and we ask what it is. Does it change? Is the water changing? It's always changing, isn't it? You remember Heraclitus said you never step in the same river twice. You look at that

stream, it's a very predictable, consistent formation. But if you look at the definition of the body of water, there's nothing constant in it. It's always moving. And yet, this stream is different from the Mississippi River. So it's very helpful to know the Spirit Rock stream and how to relate to it. And it's different from the Mississippi River.

By the same analogy, each of us can be considered a mind stream. This is a word that's used in Buddhist teaching. We're a mind stream. And we've got ever-changing thoughts, impressions, perceptions, feelings, emotions, moods, ideas, images running through this mind stream. Also, of course, the mind is receiving sense impressions from the five physical senses. There's nothing constant in there, but there is a continuity to the stream.

So the stream that we call Carol is different than the stream we call Sally. And if you mix them up, you'll be in the wrong interview. And if they mix them up, they'll be in the wrong bed. We want to keep that straight.

So this is a very useful designation. It keeps things simple. Nothing is steady, is fixed in this mind stream, but there's a formation there that we can come to know and understand. Just like this stream has a certain shape and it has dams at certain points, it has currents and eddies at certain points, a big river might have a whirlpool in a certain place. So also there are patterns in each of these mind streams, and we can come to understand them.

In Western terms, we talk about this as personality.

From a Buddhist perspective, what do we mean by personality? Consider the common, ordinary understanding of personality. When you think about different people, they all have different personalities. Someone is generous, someone is not. Someone is caring, someone is indifferent. Someone is angry, someone is loving. Someone is funny, someone is gloomy. All these qualities are simply characteristics of different personalities.

When you examine the term itself, isn't personality basically about how we think, how we speak, how we feel, and how we act? This essentially sums it up.

This understanding of personality—if it concerns thoughts, feelings, speech, and action—closely parallels our definition of karma, which is volitional actions of body, speech, and mind. What we call personality, what makes each of us unique and individual, is really just these formations of our own volitional activities carried out again and again, expressed through these three spheres of action. It's simply karmic patterning.

There's nothing solid there, but the patterning remains relatively consistent. From one day to the next, one year to the next, we can observe a continuity. We see that our own personalities, our own mindstreams, have been conditioned by our own volitional actions. That's essentially all personality is—the repetition of volitional actions, which is karma.

This forms the basis for our self-view, which is why we call these patterns of becoming. We observe this repetition within ourselves, become familiar with this type of personality, and identify with it. We declare, "This is who I am. I'm the angry person, or the caring person, or the helping person, or the generous person." This forms our fundamental view of who we are.

We're identifying with a self, with these formations—mental formations, *sankhāras*, volitional formations, karmic formations, whatever you wish to call them. We're speaking about the fourth aggregate of *sankhār as* here. We're identifying with these phenomena which are all impermanent. They may arise and pass in us with some regularity, but they're all impermanent. There's nothing fixed there.

We form this concept that we project into the past: "I've always had this personality." We extend it into the future: "I'll always be this personality." Because it becomes so substantial, it feels like a burden. This concept of self that we create begins to weigh us down. In practice, it's one of the key elements we ultimately work with.

We don't see how this "I" has been formed. We began forming it very early on. We don't perceive it until we begin to examine it in practice. It's formed from our various volitions, and by the time we observe it, it's somewhat established. But we haven't been aware of its creation yet.

This entire flow of becoming is rooted in ignorance, rooted in delusion. It exists because we haven't paid attention to its formation.

There are many kinds of personalities we encounter in the world. We each have a personality. We meet other people. Everyone has a personality, and there's a very broad range. Many of them are characterized by different aspects of greed, aversion, and delusion. I want to share a brief list I've compiled of different personalities I've encountered in my adult life. This isn't from the DSM-IV or any clinical manual—just observations from lived experience.

As you hear these descriptions, I invite you to reflect on what kind of personality each represents. We all have these tendencies of mind. But when we speak of it as a personality, it means someone has organized their life around this as a fundamental urge.

That's what gives it the weight of personality. This pattern has become deeply established, repeated countless times, until we come to know ourselves and others through these familiar grooves of being.

So these are some of the underlying foundations of personality. I'm going to base them on greed, aversion, and delusion. As I mention each one, you might reflect on which of the three kilesas is most operative.

Let me go through them slowly. Types of personalities: dependent or addictive, craving for attention, ambitious, controlling, fearful, aggressive, perfectionist, self-critical, melancholy, lost or confused.

All of these movements of mind become foundations around which an entire life can organize itself, always trying to satisfy that particular tendency. They're all volitional—urges seeking satisfaction.

Now, these are the unwholesome patterns. But patterns can also emerge from a mixture of wholesome and unwholesome qualities. You may know people like this: the compulsive helper, someone who's going to help you whether you want it or not—and who's not your mother. Or the very strict moralist, someone who's ethical but holds it very tightly. You encounter these people often in monasteries—the ones who are experts in the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline. They tend to hold it really closely and expect you to hold it really closely. There's a mixture there, some wholesome, some unwholesome.

When we think about personalities that are truly wholesome—people who are loving, kind, generous, compassionate, joyful—we don't tend to think about these as patterns because the compulsive element isn't there. The constraining element is absent. We think of purely wholesome qualities as expressions of freedom, free choice.

The patterns that create difficulty are the ones arising from compulsion, and compulsion is always based on ignorance. These are the patterns I'm mainly going to discuss the undoing of. We don't need to undo wholesome patterns if they're flowing from freedom in our hearts.

But we wake up in practice and see some pattern in the way we approach life, and we discover it's not so easy to change. This is one aspect of the noble truth of dukkha—not so easy to change these habits of mind. We find ourselves caught in patterns that bring suffering, and it's not so easy to step out or transform them.

The Buddha's teaching is entirely about stepping out of these patterns. But he used different language—the language of kilesas, of craving, of clinging, and of becoming. That sounds rather dry and abstract, doesn't it? "Clinging" doesn't exactly get your juices flowing. But when I speak of fearful, ambitious, controlling, aggressive, self-critical—this is juicier, more immediate. This is the ground where Western psychology takes its stand, looking at individual characteristics.

But don't think they're any different. This is precisely what the Buddha was pointing to. We simply need to interpret his language in light of our unique personal experience of living. Each of these personality patterns, if compulsive, contains elements of the kilesas—elements of craving, clinging, and becoming. He's pointing to these very individual experiences that you and I know intimately, though we experience them differently because we have different personalities.

Don't be misled by the apparent dryness of his language. He's pointing to this very immediate, personal material that all of us are working with.

I think this is beautifully expressed in this quotation from the Buddha: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin."

This is karma. The word "action" here is karma.

So our volitional actions have bound us, have limited our freedom in the same way that a wheel is fixed to

the axle by a pin. All the teachings are about how to undo this fixing, how to undo this bondage that our own actions have put us into. This is the sense of karma as a burden and an obstacle—living beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin.

But if this was all there was, we'd really be in trouble. This is the territory of the first and second noble truths. The key is that within this stream of volitional actions, nothing is fixed. Nothing is even constant from one moment to the next. There is this essential openness, spaciousness. There's an essential freedom at the center of our beings. What this means is that anything that's in there can be changed. That's the purpose of dharma practice—to free us from these patterns that we have formed that constrict the mind and heart and bring suffering.

Let's talk about how dharma practice does this and how patterns get undone through what we've been doing here for the last month. Many of you have spoken about seeing these habitual thoughts and difficult emotions, and learning to work with them. These habitual patterns that arise in the form of thoughts and feelings—this is old karma. When we get quiet physically and sit down, we see the mind keeps moving in these old, rather predictable patterns, which we've repeated again and again.

As we come into meditation, we feel ourselves at the effect of these patterns. We experience qualities of anger and sadness and fear, judging and self-criticism, desire and wanting, longing. The meditation practice is to notice this old karma, which is a pattern, and to bring mindfulness to it. That's always the instruction.

This is where it gets very interesting. When mindfulness meets these old habit formations, something different can happen. This is the unfolding of freedom. Sometimes when mindfulness sees an old thought, the thought doesn't grip us in the same way. When mindfulness meets an old emotion, the emotion doesn't grip us in the same way.

Why is that? Because we're very aware. And we're very wise. Mindfulness has wisdom that knows how to see this as just another arising phenomenon. If the old emotion or thought comes up and we buy into it again and react in the exact same way that we have, then we're reinforcing the old karma and there's no change. But if the old pattern comes up and we see it with mindfulness, there's a new response. We don't have to believe the thought. We don't have to believe the feeling means that we're a bad person or unworthy. If we're afraid, we don't have to believe something awful is going to happen. We just see, "Oh, that's the emotion of fear. It arises, it persists, passes away. No problem."

When we can bring that kind of mindfulness to the pattern, there's a new response. There's a new kind of personality being shaped in that. The response of mindfulness is based in freedom. It's not based in compulsion. All of a sudden we have choice with these things. I don't have to do that act. I don't have to believe that thought. I don't have to feel afraid of my fear. I don't have to feel angry at my anger. We feel this freedom coming in through the power of our awareness and our mindfulness.

We start to see the door opening. This is really a big shift. We start to see the door opening. But then, you know what? Sometimes it closes again. We have all this wisdom. We understand we don't have to believe in it. We don't have to buy it. We don't have to get upset by it.

But many times again, we will find ourselves caught. We'll observe the pattern in action yet somehow still cannot see it clearly enough to remain free. This can be deeply discouraging and frustrating.

This is where we need faith to see the process through. Sometimes we lose that strong mindfulness and fall back into the old pattern. But the next time, mindfulness will be there again—stronger—and we'll see more clearly, with an even greater opening to freedom. Still, it can be maddening to see the conditioning coming, to know what to do, and yet find ourselves unable to do it.

I love an exchange that happened when Trudy Goodman was teaching at Dharma Prajna Parami a year or so ago. During the discussion period, someone asked, "I'm so tired of seeing my same old stuff coming up again and again." Trudy's response was perfect: "Whose stuff would you like to have?"

The truth is, it doesn't matter. We all have our conditioning, and we all must work with it. All these patterns are binding in their own way.

This represents an intermediate stage in our relationship to the patterns. We know enough to understand what needs to be done, but we cannot always do it. We feel caught sometimes, but not all the time. And this is actually beautiful—it's a sign that the practice is working, that mindfulness is developing.

Once you begin to feel that momentum, the pattern is essentially doomed. Because you've understood how not to buy into it, not to believe in it, not to identify with it, it's as if you've cut a tree at its root. When you sever the root of a tree, the leaves don't all fall off that day, but the tree cannot survive because it can no longer receive nourishment. It will live, and the leaves will remain strong for a while, but not forever.

This is the crucial shift. When mindfulness enters, the pattern begins to lose its power in two fundamental ways.

First, we stop identifying with it. We no longer claim it as "I" and "mine." We simply see it as fear arising, or anger arising, or sadness arising. We don't construct a new sense of self around it—just an emotion arising and passing away.

Second, as mindfulness strengthens and continues to grow, the pattern loses its impact on us. It cannot touch us as deeply or move us in the way it once did. A strength of mind and wisdom develops that provides protection and refuge.

As mindfulness dissolves the pattern's power, the pattern itself begins to fade away. Sally Clough Armstrong used the term *virāga* in her recent talk on transcendent dependent origination, pointing to this same phenomenon. In her presentation, it was the *kilesas* as a whole that were fading away. But we can each feel our particular patterns fading—those specific ways that the *kilesas* have crystallized in our

experience and our lives.

We discover that we don't need to work these neurotic reactions out on the level of the neurosis itself. There is a greater strength that emerges through the Dharma and takes care of it for us. We don't have to trace back to what our mother or father did, or examine how patterns developed during our teenage years. Simply being present and understanding the empty nature of these formations does the work.

As the patterns fade, the emotions themselves remain—they're not completely uprooted. But they become the emotions that everyone has: anger, fear, sadness, wanting. They resume their natural place in the flow of life. Children have these emotions, we have them, but they're no longer binding forces that define the center of our being.

This is our work as practitioners. The Buddha expressed it beautifully: "A wise one makes straight this restless mind as a fletcher straightens the shaft of an arrow." A fletcher is an arrow maker. We can imagine the practice as straightening our minds from these entangling reactions we've believed in through long misunderstanding.

This intermediate stage of the path requires tremendous patience.

These patterns can come up and be seen, come up and be seen, grab us and drop us many, many times over years. So we don't know how long it's going to take for them to undo, for them to release. But we do know that it will happen.

The Buddha offered this beautiful image: "Suppose, bhikkhus, an ocean-going boat rigged with ropes, having been exposed to the water for six months, has been dragged to the shore for the winter. Then the ropes that had been affected by wind and sun, when soaked by the monsoon rains, will easily go to waste and rot away. It is similar with a bhikkhu who applies herself to the meditative development of her mind. Her fetters will easily be loosened and rot away."

This meditative development is bhavana—the cultivation of the wholesome qualities of mindfulness and concentration and all the factors of enlightenment. This is the development of the path, and it's helpful to know where the path is leading because the path is its own unfolding.

Here it's useful to reflect on a quote from one of the great wisdom masters of the last century, Yogi Berra, who put it this way: "If you don't know where you're going, you could end up somewhere else." So let's think about where the path is going so that hopefully we can end up there.

We're developing our bhavana, our meditative development. We're generating wholesome mind states that begin with mindfulness. Mindfulness is the first of the factors of awakening, and it's the key to unfolding all the others. In parallel, we're also developing the brahmaviharas—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

I feel it's very helpful for Westerners to develop these two movements together, because mindfulness is

basically understood as the wisdom training, while loving-kindness and the brahmaviharas represent the opening of the heart. The brahmaviharas have the potential to bring so much self-confidence. When we start feeling that goodness unfolding in ourselves, we can really trust what's in our own hearts, relax into it and let it take us. And that brings a lot of ease and happiness.

Mindfulness and wisdom start to unfold, bringing along qualities of energy and determination, renunciation, calm, non-identification. This is a very potent process unfolding in our minds through our dharma practice.

What's happening is we come into practice and we've got this old stream of becoming. Generally we're not so wise when we start to meditate. We have this stream of becoming that's been formed in not understanding and is mostly based on the kilesas. As we sit, we feel all that. We begin to see that this cycle has been going on over and over in our lives. Often we can trace it back to childhood and teenage years and all through our adulthood—these different personality tendencies.

And where it has taken us again and again is to lake samsara, just recreating the suffering over and over in the same kind of predictable ways. It's helpful to see that this has happened out of our own intentions. Basically, the kilesas are all expressing intentions. These personality styles are all expressing intentions. So this intention, repeated, has brought us to this place of lake samsara.

But now there's a new river coming in. This is the river of the dharma. To these old intentions, these habitual patterns, we start adding the intentions of mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion, investigation, energy, calm, concentration, equanimity, joy, non-identification, wisdom. All of these are intentional too.

That stream flowing into the lake starts to turn the flow. Lakes are fed by rivers, so there's an inflow and an outflow. Now we flow this stream of intentions into this river that's going into lake samsara, and it starts to divert it. It starts to turn it in a new direction, and that direction is the nirvanic ocean. So we're no longer flowing to lake samsara—we're going to the nirvanic ocean. That's where we're headed. That's the only place we're headed.

If these streams of becoming, these old patterns of becoming, really referred to something fixed in us, we couldn't divert that river. All the dharma in the world couldn't shift it. If ignorance was planted in the heart forever, if greed was planted in the heart, if self-criticism was planted in the heart forever, all the dharma couldn't move it.

But it's because our basic nature is open and empty that nothing is fixed in us. These old patterns have a lot of power—they've been active for a lot of years, some would say lifetimes—but they're not fixed. And so these wholesome forces come in and they start to wear away the patterns of misunderstanding, the patterns based on ignorance and craving.

We can become liberated because our being is not fixed, and the dharmic elements only lead in that

direction. This stream of intention, which is also karmic, only leads in one direction.

So we understand the path itself is a karmic unfolding. We are taking advantage of the law of karma by generating these wholesome intentions moment after moment after moment. Basically, mindfulness and metta. Those are the primary intentions we work with, and all the rest springs from that.

As we generate those intentions moment after moment, we're changing inwardly the karma of our being. This is part of the new karma that's getting added, and it sends us in a completely different direction. If one doesn't believe in karma, it's very hard to explain the workings of the path. The workings of the path depend on karma.

So we start to see that intention, even though it feels light in the beginning—remember the first moment you were taught to become mindful? Did that feel like a transformative life experience? It didn't for me. It felt like a sore butt. But you see how you keep applying that moment after moment for a month, and it goes to a really deep place.

So this intention to be present, to pay attention to our experience, generates enormous power—enormously liberating power—as we just keep doing it moment after moment after moment. We see that our tool, our basic tool, is intention. To tell you the truth, it's our only tool. It's our only tool to change the karmic flow: to put in new intentions.

Tibetans have a way of pointing to this that's really succinct. They say everything rests on the tip of motivation. Everything rests on the tip of motivation. So we start to put these new intentions into the karmic stream.

You know, it's kind of like when I came into Dharma practice, my life was chaotic. I had some happiness, I had some unhappiness, I had no idea what caused either one, and I just felt vulnerable to the winds that were going to blow me. So it's kind of like, to continue the lake analogy, before we understand how this all works, we're adrift on the sea. A current comes and sweeps us that way, and another current comes and sweeps us that way. We may go to happiness, we may go into suffering. But it's all out of our control. It seems so random. The chaos is happening outwardly, the chaos is happening inwardly, and we have no way to steer. We don't know where the harbor is.

As we listen to the teachings and find out where to put our intention, we find the rudder. Intention is our rudder on this chaotic ocean of life. And if we hold to that rudder, it will take us to the harbor. The only direction of the teachings is to the harbor. So this is the value of intention. It lets us steer our lives because it influences the whole karmic flow.

This is a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj. A questioner put this question to him. He made a statement. The questioner responded. This is a dialogue.

Maharaj said, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny."

And the questioner said, "Surely karma interfered."

So tease this out. Your own will is a synonym for intention. So Maharaj is saying it's your intentional actions that have shaped your destiny. And the questioner says, "Well, surely karma interfered."

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

Your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. And how do you do it? Through your own will, through your own intention, through setting your own karmic direction using the tools of the practice.

So there are two kinds of threads in the teachings of the Buddha. One is if you want worldly happiness and the other is if you want liberation. If you want worldly happiness, the basic prescription is dana, sila, bhavana—generosity, morality, and development of the mind, primarily loving kindness. These are basically enough over time to take us to normal worldly happiness.

But some of us want another dimension, and that's the dimension of liberation. That needs a different set of instructions. So let's talk about what leads to that happiness of liberation, which the Buddha said is the highest happiness.

This is where we get into the teaching on the end of karma. The Buddha said that for one who has fully awakened, such a person has come to the end of karma. This is a mysterious statement, and I don't pretend to understand everything it means. But essentially it means that they are no longer bound by action in any dimension or in any way. There can still be the results of past karma—like when the villagers were assaulting Angulimala when he went out for alms, even after he was awakened. Past karma can still come to fruition. Mahamogalana died in a very unhappy way that the Buddha said was the result of some of his past actions. But the arhat, the liberated one, is not generating any future karma, anything that's going to play out in future circumstances.

So how is this? I think that something like this was pointed to by the Buddha when he talked about the night of his enlightenment. There are two suttas in the Majjhima Nikaya, numbers 4 and 26, that describe the night of his enlightenment from slightly different angles. They're very worth reading.

From Majjhima 4, he said that on the night of his awakening, his mind became very concentrated. He called it purified, bright, and malleable. When the mind is malleable, we can turn it to whatever we want to turn it to. So he said he directed his mind that night to the recollection of his past lives. He recollected one past life, ten past lives, a hundred past lives, a thousand past lives, a hundred thousand past lives. You may believe this or not, but this is what it says about the night of the Buddha's enlightenment. He recollected, "I was born here and I lived this kind of life. Then I was born there and I lived that kind of life."

Now, there's a little connection between the three insights that night. There's a little connection between them that isn't in the suttas, but I kind of imagine. So I imagine after that, the Buddha goes, "Well, why are those lives formed like that? What was responsible for creating lives like that?"

So then he took this concentrated mind and turned it in a different direction. He turned it to see many, many beings passing away and reappearing, dying and being reborn, and to try to understand how it came about that people were born in such different circumstances with such different strengths and weaknesses. He saw in that second insight of the night that it was owing to their actions that beings reappeared in the world in a new birth according to their past actions, that their circumstances were shaped by that.

So now there's another little interlude. And here I'm going to suggest that he saw good actions led to a happy rebirth, harmful actions led to an unhappy rebirth, but in both cases they led to rebirth. This is interesting because if you think of it in terms of becoming and the self, you can see how we can do good things from a self-centered viewpoint. "I'm going to go out and fix the world and it's I that am important. I'm going to be very generous because I'm such a good and helping person. I'm going to be so strict with my morality because I am going to be perfect in that realm."

So there can be self even around good actions, good karma. Here I'm thinking the Buddha thought, "Well, doing bad is certainly not the way to go. That leads to unhappy birth. But doing good has its limitation too. You still get born and go through birth, aging, illness, and death. What could be the way to real liberation? What could be the way to a peace that doesn't ever stop?"

So he said then he turned his eye, his purified mind and his eye, to the destruction of the taints. The taints are another grouping for these impure qualities of heart and mind that lead us into suffering. He said that at that moment he understood the Four Noble Truths. He understood that the taints were being destroyed in him, these afflictions that bound him. At that point, he realized his own liberation.

So what was this understanding that brought him out even of the realm of good karma into the complete liberation of mind? That's the interesting question. What leads to the end of karma, being hooked on karma at all?

But I want to talk a little bit about this moment of awakening—and we'll come back to that question. He expressed it in a couple of different ways that really point to this ending that he had experienced. One quote, from Majjhima 26: he said he saw right then, "My deliverance is unshakable. This is my last birth."

Now there is no renewal of being. This is my last birth. I have stepped out of that cycle of becoming, of being born and aging and getting ill and passing away. I've stepped out of it.

And then there's this famous poem that's in the Dhammapada that you probably will recognize: "Through many a birth, I have wandered through sorrow, seeking but not finding the builder of this house—this body, this mind, this self. Painful is birth again and again. House builder, you are seen. You will build no

house again. All your rafters are broken. The ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving." House builder, you are seen, you will build no house again. This is the end of becoming, the end of birth, the not even taking up good karma.

So then the Buddha follows this. There's good karma, there's bad karma. And then he says, what karma? Well, let me put it a different way. There's karma that he called dark leading to suffering. There's karma he called bright leading to happy states. And then there's this third kind: the karma that leads to the end of karma. What is the karma that leads to the end of karma? It is this noble eightfold path—namely right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It's the eightfold path that leads to the end of karma. So it's the eightfold path that leads to the end of becoming.

So as you put yourself on this eightfold path, it's helpful to understand that that's where it leads. There are good habits being cultivated, but basically the eightfold path is leading to stepping out of birth altogether. And you can understand birth on a moment-to-moment basis if you don't like to think of it as rebirth. Either one is fine, but we're stepping out of the process of becoming anything at all.

So we've talked about this in an earlier talk. We talked about discovering this quality of awareness within ourselves that is present, knowing all the changing phenomena, but is not involved with them, is not caught up with them. And we've given some different names to this. Carol has talked about this as the pure citta that's free of the three kilesas. Upasika Ki used the phrase "unentangled knowing." One teacher talked about resting in the gap between feeling and craving. Or Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it as temporary nibbana. These are all pointing to that same experience—an open awareness that's not caught up in the phenomena.

This kind of awareness has a flavor of unbecoming, has a flavor of unborn, has a flavor of undying, has a flavor of unconditioned. It's not constructed out of other elements. It's there when we stop doing. When we stop grasping, it's there.

So again, the Buddha describing his insight on that night of awakening: "I discovered the unborn, unailing, undying, supreme security from bondage—nibbana." This open space of the pure citta, of unentangled knowing, is unailing. It's healthy. And that's why the ability to rest there is so healing. Because we are resting in an element that is essentially free and unailing and undying.

So again, it's why we don't have to work it out on the level of the emotions, which are all subject to coming and going. We discover this other dimension. And it's this unailing element that rots the fetters. This is the sunlight and the wind on those ropes and sails that have been drenched in the monsoon rains.

So the Buddha said, "If there were not this unborn and unbecome and unconditioned, there would be no escape possible from what is born, become and conditioned. But because there is this unborn, unbecome, unconditioned, there is an escape possible from what is born, become, and conditioned."

So this unborn element, this unailing element, has the potential to free us from all the patterns of becoming, which we've created again and again through our own volition.

So what's the essence of this quality? There's something in it about peace. There's something in it about calm. There's something in it about stillness. There's something in it about non-doing.

Here's one of the descriptions of nibbana, the fullness of nibbana: the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments, the destruction of craving and cessation. That is nibbana.

So in this full awareness of unentangled knowing, we can stop doing. We can stop all the different forms of activity and just rest in that stillness. Someone mentioned in an interview the other day that their meditation for a while was like a completely flat lake on which no wind was blowing. So there were no ripples at all. That is that quality of the stilling of all formations.

In that place, we let go of all kinds of self-centered activity, even good self-centered activity. We let go of it all. And then there's a stillness we feel. We can trust in that stillness. We can rest in that stillness. We don't have to do anything with it. We can rest in it, and out of that stillness some other dimension may emerge.

I had one particular meeting that revealed to me something of this other dimension. I was in Kathmandu visiting a teacher in the Tibetan tradition, Satni Rinpoche. I had received teachings from him over a number of years and wanted to visit him at his home monastery in Kathmandu. So I stayed in Kathmandu for a couple of weeks and would go up and receive teachings from him.

While I was in town, there was this very highly regarded older Tibetan Lama staying at Rinpoche's monastery named Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. I'd heard a lot about him—he's a famous Dzogchen master in his lineage. Rinpoche asked me if I wanted to meet Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. Actually, let me back up a bit.

A friend of mine was a student of Nyoshul Kempo and asked me to give him some dana. So I told Rinpoche I'd like to offer some dana, but I could just give him the envelope and he could offer it to him. He said, "Wouldn't you like to meet Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche?" I said no, I don't need to. You can just offer the dana. Because I sort of thought, you've seen one Rinpoche, you've seen them all.

I sat with that for about a day and thought, no, I would like to meet him. I've heard a lot about him. Friends have spoken really highly of him. I would like to meet him.

So it was all prepared. It was a little bit of a formal occasion. It happened in one of the shrine rooms where he was staying. He got dressed in this kind of gold robe, and an interpreter was there and Satni Rinpoche was there and Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche's wife was there. I came in feeling nervous because I'd heard a lot about him and heard he was a very special teacher.

I went in and did my three bows when the time was right. On my knees, I approached him and offered the envelope containing the dana that my friend wanted to offer him. He received it from me. Then he took my head in his hands and looked right into my eyes.

At that moment, something shifted in him. What I remember is his eyes moved a little bit apart, like he was looking way in the distance. His gaze opened up into something I had never experienced before. Looking into his eyes, there was this kind of stillness and vastness that I didn't know was possible. His mind was—it was just like looking into some still ocean and it just seemed like it went forever into him. Even to say his mind was still wasn't accurate. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. There was just this presence that was completely undefended.

His eyes were just open and completely unguarded. I was looking right into his vastness. Then my self-consciousness came up. I got nervous because I thought, he's so undefended. I guess I'm also undefended. He's going to see my nervousness, and I felt uncomfortable. At that moment, something kind of closed in me.

But I just had the feeling that if I could have kept looking into his eyes a little longer... But then the moment passed. Yet it was an amazing revelation, a kind of transmission of what's possible for us. What level of development is possible that he could move into a space like that?

I have no doubt that he was resting completely in the unconditioned, completely unmoved by the sight of me or the room or anything. And that he had the ability to do that at will. He just moved there and he was simply there. This gave me a sense of how the Buddha could have transmitted awakening to so many people as he did, because I believe he had at least that stillness and more to share with people.

So this is possible for us. This is part of our potential as human beings, through this practice, through the practice of the Dharma.

I want to close with one final quotation from the Buddha. This is from the Udana, also on this state of nibbana:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit together for a moment, please.

silence

One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

Thank you for listening.

Patterns of Becoming 5: The End of Karma

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