Emptiness and Karma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:06

One of the main themes we've been touching on since the beginning of this retreat is cause and effect. Gil mentioned it very early when talking about the general form of dependent arising: when this is, that is; this arising, that arising; when this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases. We talked about it in terms of the Four Noble Truths—suffering and its cause, liberation and its cause. Then Sally discussed the detailed chain of the twelve links of dependent origination.

It's not an accident that when we address emptiness, cause and effect comes right to the foreground. When you take the self out of the picture—when you remove the idea of a controlling entity—you see that everything in the universe arises according to certain causes and conditions in very lawful ways. The universe unfolds lawfully through different causes and conditions from different directions and sources.

One of these central laws I want to discuss tonight is the law of karma, and I want to explore how it operates. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, I think it's really needed to complete the understanding of not-self. Second, we're all moving back into daily life now, and when we return to daily life, we're moving into the field of action.

This week we've been studying primarily in terms of the Eightfold Path, focused mainly on right view. We've been examining the view that understands the selfless nature of things, the empty nature of things, the lack of solidity and substantial essence in anything. Now we're returning to the field of action, which in the Eightfold Path is described as sila: right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

There's one important link between the path factor of right view and this whole field of action. Right intention—samma sankappa in the Eightfold Path—is the bridge between right view and right action. This is closely connected with karma as well.

The Dalai Lama was once asked if he had a choice between teaching Westerners about emptiness or teaching them about karma, which should he teach? He said karma. So perhaps we've missed the boat this week, but we're going to try to fill it in this evening.

Teaching about karma is interesting because it's one of the topics we can't verify so easily. I can't verify the Buddha's teachings on karma, and I doubt that many of you can verify them experientially. I can't tell you from my own experience whether this is true or not, and I don't think it's my job to try to convince you that it's true. But I think it is my job to tell you what the Buddha said about karma. Then it's up to you to figure out how you want to hold it and relate to it.

Personally, I think it's helpful to believe in, and coming from the man who gave us the Four Noble Truths

and the Eightfold Path, it might be worth considering. He might have had some insight here.

I want to explain two things this evening. First, the basics of karma and how we can relate to it in a sensible way, because there are some misconceptions and obstacles for Westerners. Second, how it relates to the theme of emptiness, because at first it can seem contradictory.

Let me begin with some basics of what karma is. The word karma is from Sanskrit; the Pali word is kamma. Both were simple words in the Buddha's day that meant action. As I use the terms tonight, I might say karma, kamma, or action—I'm using them all synonymously.

This was a big topic of discussion in the time of the Buddha. Wanderers and philosophers would cross paths and debate with one another about the meaning of action. There were all kinds of different views. Some people said actions mattered; others said actions didn't matter at all. Some believed there was no ability to make choice, that everything was determined in a fatalistic way.

Some people said there were results from action; others argued there were no lasting results from action. All these different debates were swirling through the spiritual communities.

But the Buddha introduced a revolutionary perspective on the central importance of action. He taught that what truly matters is action with volition. As he stated clearly—this appears in the first quote on page 20 of the study guide—"Volition, oh monks, is what I call action. For through volition, one performs the action." This comes from the Numerical Discourses.

The word "volition" translates the Pali term cetana. Sometimes I'll say "intention," even though this can be confusing because we often use "intention" to translate the second path factor, samma-sankappa. They're related but not identical. I apologize for any confusion, but I may use either "intention" or "volition" to translate cetana, which lies at the very heart of karma. Other synonyms that convey this meaning include urge, motive, impulse, or will.

The essential understanding is that actions arise from some inner movement within us—the motivation or driving force, some kind of emotional energy that makes the action happen, that brings it forth.

Actions are considered to take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. So thoughts and emotions have volitional energy behind them. This is why the fourth aggregate of sankharas is sometimes translated as "volitional formations." The energies of desire and hatred, joy and compassion, all express some motivation.

Karma refers to the action as it happens in the present moment. The results of that action are given another term: vipaka. In the West, we tend to mix them up—like that John Lennon song "Instant Karma." I think he's really talking about results, but the proper term for that is vipaka. Karma truly means the action as it's happening in the moment.

Here comes the revolutionary aspect of the Buddha's teaching: actions are considered skillful or unskillful

depending on the volition behind them. He was clear about what constitutes skillful motives and what constitutes unskillful ones.

When an action arises from the energies of greed, hatred, and delusion, he labeled these as unskillful actions. He called these three forces "the roots of the unwholesome." When an action comes from the forces of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, those actions are considered skillful. Non-greed could be understood as generosity or renunciation; non-hatred as loving-kindness; non-delusion as wisdom.

It's that urge that makes an action skillful or unskillful. An action could be described similarly but have two very different motivations. For instance, if I tell you I saw somebody plunge a knife into a person's belly and blood flowed out—is that skillful or unskillful? Was it a thief trying to rob the person? Or was it a surgeon removing an appendix to heal an illness? The action might appear similar, but the moral weight is entirely different.

We must look at the motivation from which actions arise to determine their skillful or unskillful nature. Of course, when we examine our own actions closely, many are mixed. We have a combination of wholesome, beautiful motives alongside motives that are more self-centered, desire-based, or anger-based. These actions are considered mixed in their karmic weighting, their skillfulness or unskillfulness.

As we return to daily life, this field of action becomes not only important but genuinely fascinating. It's so interesting to tune into our own intentions and observe the mixture of motivations influencing us.

I've had several conversations here about life choices. One thing that seems crucial when making important decisions is that we wait until the mind settles and we can trust that the energy surrounding the decision is based on clarity and wisdom—and certainly kindness toward ourselves—rather than arising from confusion and a tangle of wanting and not wanting.

To me, one of the greatest values of retreat is that it allows our inner turmoil to settle enough that we can begin to see with some clarity. When that clarity is present, it provides a good foundation from which to make significant choices or decisions or to take action.

This process of tuning into our own intentions as we speak, as we act in the world, even in the thoughts we grasp and follow—this is very significant in terms of karma and deeply interesting as a way to explore what's happening inside us.

The basic guidelines as we move into the world as committed practitioners are the five precepts: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, not misusing drugs and intoxicants. These can be refined to quite subtle degrees.

Mostly we take the precepts—perhaps we'll do this tomorrow morning before leaving retreat—and we aspire to follow them. But I don't really expect myself to follow them perfectly. I take them expecting that I'm going to break them at some point in some way, but I try to use that as an opportunity for learning.

We recommit ourselves again and again to this aspiration of causing no harm in the world. How do we live in such a way that we truly cause no harm, make no unskillful ripples through our life's choices and actions? This is a really important inquiry.

When we can do this successfully, we enjoy something the Buddha called "the bliss of blamelessness."

The interviewer was moved to a profound state of wonder. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about," she said slowly, letting the words settle. "That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

When asked about his service, the Dalai Lama responded with characteristic humility: "Regarding service to Tibet, 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 practitioners—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

You get the sense that part of the reason his mind can settle so evenly and deeply is this foundation of care in his actions—to have a life free from regret. What a beautiful aspiration for us.

This is the area of karma. We look at our actions, their impact on others, their impact on ourselves, and we understand that actions do have consequences. They have implications. This is one of the early verses in 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 teaching on karma: that if we act out of wholesome motivations, happiness will come into our life. And to the extent that we act out of unwholesome motivations, sadness and unhappiness will come into our lives.

This is wonderful instruction because it can provide a template for our whole life—for our meditation practice and our life in the world—to follow in a way that gives us the greatest likelihood possible of happiness. And then we also understand how we can create choices that lead to unhappiness.

I imagine you know people in your life where you can see examples of both of these. When you know somebody about whom you would say, "Wow, they're a really good person," can you look and see how their choices help establish their happiness? I have people I can see like that. And then do you know other people whose lives have a lot of unhappiness, which leads to confusion, and they keep making the wrong choices, and you see the effects of that in their life?

So we can kind of see this lived out—looking at our own life, looking at the lives of people that we know. Fortunately, I think this idea is getting popular in this culture. Karma isn't quite understood fully, but a little bit.

I was teaching a meditation class in Juvenile Hall some years ago—it was a great privilege, actually. One of my co-teachers, James Baraz, had a friend who worked as a nurse in San Mateo Juvenile Hall, and she was able to get us admitted to teach a six-week beginning meditation class. We were in the maximum security wing, so these were young men, usually sixteen or seventeen years old, who had been arrested and charged with things like assault, armed robbery, murder, and different kinds of felonies like that.

We didn't know if this class would fly at all—a couple of old middle-class guys coming in and talking about Buddhism and meditation. But we decided to give it a shot and see what happened. One thing that was very conducive was that they had time on their hands. You might say we had a captive audience.

Not only that, but emotions were running very high for these young men because they were awaiting trial. The trial might mean they would go to jail for years, or it might mean they could be released back to their families. Here they were, not knowing what the outcome would be. So there was a lot of fear, and a certain amount of aggression present in that population—another cause for fear. Of course, they didn't know how to deal with the fear they were experiencing.

The main thing we emphasized was how to work with strong emotions—to feel them in their body, generate mindfulness, and create space around them. The people who took to the practice found it really helpful. We got a lot of positive feedback, and the project kept continuing after we left, eventually transforming into the Mind-Body Awareness Project and later the Lineage Project.

As we were getting near the end of the class, James and I said to each other one morning, "Should we teach them about karma? And should we teach the precepts?" We really didn't know how that would go down. We thought, this is the last chance we'll probably have to meet with these guys. Let's do it.

So I gave the talk and presented it as the science of happiness—if you want to get happy, this is what you might want to think about. I explained how wholesome motivations lead to wholesome results, unwholesome lead to unwholesome, and so forth. Then I asked, "Does this sound like anything you've ever heard before?"

A young guy raised his hand and said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around?" Sure. So it was very accessible for them, and they took it in very easily.

Later—this is kind of a postscript—we also taught them the loving-kindness practice. Someone who went in after us as a follow-up with this group said that one of the guys who was in there was a gang leader. He explained to the other guys in the group how they should practice loving-kindness for the rival gang members because they also had mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. It was very moving.

So this understanding is becoming more widespread, and it really can change lives when it's seen and we take it as a direction.

The Tibetans in their teachings also have what we call the Brahmaviharas, the divine abidings. They call

them the four immeasurables—a term you can also hear in the Theravadan tradition—for metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity. They're called immeasurable because there's no limit to the beings they can be extended to. They're boundless states.

But they phrase them a little differently, and this teaching is embedded in their phrases. The phrase for loving-kindness is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." For compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." These are the phrases they say to themselves as they're practicing love and compassion.

The Buddha taught this as a pretty universal law for human beings. It basically doesn't matter if we believe it or not—the law applies. It doesn't matter if our religion believes it or not—the law applies. It doesn't matter if our culture believes it or not—the law applies in quite a universal way to all human beings everywhere.

The Buddha stated it in quite a strong way in several places in the texts. Here's one quotation: "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.

Westerners often have some resistance to this notion—one, because it's not immediately verifiable, which is understandable. But I think there's a kind of inner resistance. Perhaps it goes back to our democratic roots. Very early in the formation of this country, the Declaration of Independence states—and I paraphrase—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal.

Somewhere in this comes the notion that maybe everybody should be equally happy. But according to the teaching on karma, we are to some extent responsible for our own happiness. Certainly the actions of others—society, parents, and so forth—will affect our happiness. But the teaching on karma can seem kind of cold or uncaring or cruel to say that people have some responsibility for their own happiness.

Sometimes there's also an overlay of, "Oh, it means if they're responsible for their unhappiness, then they deserve to suffer." I don't think this is in the Buddha's teachings at all. This notion of anybody deserving to suffer—I don't find in his approach at all.

The simplest example you probably know about is Angulimala. He was a spiritual student, quite a sincere spiritual student, who unfortunately got some bad advice from a teacher. His spiritual teacher told him—this is out of a bad motive—that what he needed to do to advance in his practice was to kill a thousand people, cut off a finger from each one, and deliver it to the teacher.

At the point at which we pick up the story, Angulimala was said to have killed 999 people and taken a finger from each one and woven it into a necklace which he wore around his neck. He was looking for his thousandth victim to complete his commitment when the Buddha was going to be walking by where

Angulimala was living. People said to the Buddha, "Don't go there. Angulimala will come and kill you." The Buddha basically said, "I don't think so."

Undeterred, he walked by. Angulimala approached him to try to kill him as his thousandth victim. The Buddha eluded him and Angulimala yelled after him, "Stop, stop!" The Buddha turned around and said, "Angulimala, I have stopped, but you're still burning with greed, hatred, and confusion. You stop. Stop."

Something about that turned Angulimala's mind. He said he had never seen anyone who wasn't frightened of him before. So he approached the Buddha and bowed down and asked to be instructed.

Now, you're the Buddha. Here's a guy who's killed 999 people. If there's anybody who deserves to suffer, isn't this guy pretty high up on the list? If you're the Buddha, would you teach him? Or would you let him stew in his own karma?

The Buddha taught him. Not only did he teach him, he ordained him. He admitted him into the Sangha. He gave him teachings. And in a relatively short period of time, Angulimala became awakened, became liberated, became one of the arahants.

So I don't think the Buddha had any idea that anybody deserves to suffer. If he could have plucked out the suffering of every being he met, I think he would have done that. But it's not in anyone's power to pluck out that suffering.

By the way, it's said that Angulimala continued to go for alms round in some of the villages where he had killed people. The villagers threw stones at him because they still thought of him as the mass murderer who had killed their friends or relatives. He would come back and complain to the Buddha, "I went for alms, but the people hate me, they stoned me."

The Buddha said, "Bear it, Brahmin, bear it, practitioner, because this is your karma for those actions for which, if you hadn't developed in spiritual practice, you would be suffering for a long, long time. So just bear it. That's the result of your actions."

So I don't think the notion of deserving is there in the teachings on karma at all. But doing unskillful actions and expecting not to have suffering consequences would be like an apple coming off its stem when it's ripe and not falling to the ground. You can't arrest the law of gravity. You can't arrest the law of karma. It's just part of the way things work, according to the Buddha.

Another way people sometimes take it as being a heartless view is that one might say something like, "That person is suffering. I see their suffering, but it's their fault. They created it. Therefore, I don't have anything to do with it."

I'll turn my back on them. That is not wisdom. That's indifference.

The Buddha talked very clearly about compassion being appropriate in all situations. Indifference is

closing off the heart. So we can rationalize why we shouldn't care about someone's suffering, but that's still indifference that closes off the heart of compassion and care. The heart of compassion wants to address suffering, whatever its cause—whether it's karmic or psychological or physical or biological, whatever it is, compassion wants to address the cause of suffering.

So it's a misuse of the teachings to say, "That's their problem, not my responsibility." Indifference is actually considered in the Brahma Viharas the near enemy of equanimity—an unwholesome state that looks like equanimity, but is not.

So we can see how actions create consequences in at least six ways. I'm just going to mention them briefly.

When we're thinking about doing an action, if we're thinking about doing something wholesome, generous, loving, or kind, we feel good just thinking about it. If we're thinking about doing something that's going to be hurtful, it doesn't feel so good. So we feel it already in planning it.

In doing the action, it feels beautiful to give or to love or to help. And it feels awful to hurt. As we get sensitive, we can feel that in the moment. So in doing the action, we feel it.

And then when we contemplate it later, we feel what it was like—the goodness of generosity and kindness, the awful feeling of regret if we've hurt or harmed someone. So these are three ways: planning it, doing it, remembering it.

Then our actions have consequences in the way people relate to us. If we are consistently warm, friendly, thoughtful toward people, then they will like to see us coming and they will welcome our presence. If we're judgmental and critical and angry or resentful, then they'll feel that energy and they'll close off and they'll back up and they won't be so welcoming.

The fifth way is in habitual states of mind. When we enact certain patterns again and again, they wear a groove in the mind. The Buddha pointed to this centuries ago. Neuroscientists are finding the same thing when they say neurons that fire together wire together. Whether you think of it as a karmic pattern or a brain pattern, these things get reinforced and a groove is developed in the mind.

This is from the Buddha: "Monks, 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 will incline to thoughts of renunciation, kindness and compassion."

Then there's this one other quotation that I really like a lot. I've heard it attributed to the Buddha, but I don't believe that it's anywhere in the text. I don't know what the source is, but he could have said something like this, so I'll just repeat it as though he had. This is how these impulses become set and formed as habits of our personality that develop into character. So this is the fifth way.

The sixth way that we can see our actions have consequences is one we can't see. And that is what the Buddha often talked about—how our actions have results in the future in mysterious ways that we cannot understand the mechanism of. You hear stories like this in the suttas all the time.

Somebody has a life situation. For example, there was a man at the time of the Buddha who was very wealthy, but he lived in very miserable circumstances and didn't let himself enjoy any of his wealth. So he ate crummy food, he didn't have comfortable clothes, he lived in a miserable little dwelling, although he actually had a lot of wealth. The Buddha said, "Oh, that's a result of an action in a past life. He gave to an awakened being, which is a very wholesome thing to do, but then he regretted it later out of stinginess." So he said the result of the gift was that he has wealth, but the result of the stinginess was that he couldn't enjoy it.

So the Buddha would talk about these things that he could see. He said that he could see the workings of karma in ways that we can't. And the range of mind of a Buddha is vast. So he pointed to these things, but it's not something that most of us can verify. So this is the area that's mysterious. We can't quite tell for ourselves whether it's true or not. But this is just one of six ways that we can see how our actions have consequences.

Mostly when people say "I don't believe in karma," they mean this sixth way. They can't see these mysterious workings. But we can all see the first five—the ways that our actions have results in our life.

In fact, the Buddha said you can't figure out the detailed workings of karma, how it unfolds in the future. It's one of four things he called imponderable. And he said that one who speculates about them will go mad and experience vexation. I'm not sure which order that's in, but either way—not a good idea.

Another thing that sometimes gets confusing about karma is that people try to use it to explain everything that happens. The Buddha was once asked, "Does all pleasant and painful feeling come from our own past actions?" It's another way to say, "Does everything that happens in your life come from your past actions?"

And he said that people who claim this don't know what they're talking about. You can't really say that because you can see there are other kinds of results that come from other sources in the world. He pointed to causes like illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault. He said you can see things are also caused by these forces. So it's not right to say that everything comes from past actions.

The way I would interpret that in modern terms is that karma is one law in our universe, but there are a number of other laws too. There are the laws of the physical world, laws of chemistry, laws of biology and genetics. So there are many different kinds of laws at work, one of which is the law of karma, but it doesn't deny the operation of the others.

Sometimes people use a current situation—like if you're struggling or have an illness—and they'll say, "What did I do in my past actions to bring this on?" We don't know that it has anything to do with our past actions. Bodies break down for their own reasons. We inherit certain tendencies of mind from our

parents. We don't know it has anything to do with our actions.

This is like trying to use karma as a rearview mirror. Here's the present—what happened in the past? We can't do that. If you and I try, we're just making up speculation. We can't see. So don't even try. There's no point.

Where karma is useful is as a map to drive down the right road in the future. We have choices now. These are the ones we want to make based on the teachings on karma. We can't interpret the past—we don't know. So let's use it going forward. That's the skillful way.

Now I want to talk about how that works. This really comes to the idea of the relation of karma and emptiness. These two seem opposite at first. Let's take it as emptiness of self—karma and anatta. How can karma land when there's no self? There's no self doing the action. How can it land?

This was raised by a bhikkhu at the time of the Buddha. This monk asked the Buddha, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" The Buddha basically said, "You haven't been listening to me." That was really all he said. But this is the question, isn't it?

To approach this, the first thing to say is that the teaching on not-self doesn't deny individuality. There's Gil and there's Sally. They're not the same, and it's good that they understand that. Sally doesn't wear Gil's boots home tonight.

Gil doesn't drive Sally's car away after the retreat. That's very helpful. So the individuality is still here, but there's nothing fixed in the individual.

A useful way to understand this is through a term in some Buddhist traditions called the mind stream. It's said that every sentient being has a mind stream or is a mind stream. In this mind stream arise all the different sense impressions, thoughts, feelings, concentration states, meditative states, and so on. Each of our mind streams is somewhat different.

Like there's this little creek running down by the meditation hall. We could call this Dharma Hall Creek, and it has its own particular way of being. It's good to designate it. "I'll meet you by the Dharma Hall Creek." We can designate that—it's helpful. We know it's different from the Mississippi River. I'm not meeting you by the Mississippi River; I'm meeting you by the Dharma Hall Creek.

But if you go and look at the Dharma Hall Creek, there's this flowing body of water. That's really what a creek is—the flowing water. It's not the same from one second to the next. You never step in the same river twice. The water's always changing—new water all the time. But there's something about the form of it that has some constancy and consistency. It will change too as the rains get bigger or smaller, but there's some consistency to it.

Each of us is this stream of being, and particularly a stream of mind states. That's where karma is important—a flow of experience. It's tending in a certain direction, and this direction kind of describes

our personality. What is personality? Isn't it the flow of thoughts and feelings and speech and action that each of us embodies? Isn't that basically what determines your personality—the way you think and feel and speak and act in the world? This sounds very much like karma: volitional formations of body, speech, and mind.

As I understand it, personality is basically just these karmic patterns that we have become habituated to, which have hardened into character, that repeat again and again, that we support and reinforce by our own choices and interests and tendencies. So personality is the sum of our karmic patterns. Always changing—sometimes generous, sometimes not; sometimes loving, sometimes not. Always changing, but personality is somewhat predictable. We each have our own grooves, you might say.

But within that flow of the mind stream, nothing is fixed. Nothing is fixed. It's always changing. Now, it's not so easy to change in big ways—that's why dharma practice takes so much work. That's why the Buddha put it this way: "Action makes the world go round." Here the word he's using is *karma*. "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action, like the chariot wheel by the pin."

You can feel this in practice—how these grooves that we've worn in the mind are very hard to unstick. We're bound by our past volitional actions, and it's hard to move out of them. But it's not impossible. Anything that's within the mind stream can be changed. Nothing is stuck in there.

Our dharma practice uses this principle for our transformation. Or another way to say it is: the path is a karmic unfolding. Our path unfolds by the principle of karma.

We come into practice carrying mostly unconscious tendencies of mind that have shaped our character in a particular direction. Our inner flow moves in a certain trajectory. Generally, for most of us entering the Dharma path, we're flowing toward Lake Samsara—cycling into birth again and again, not understanding, repeating unwise choices, heading inevitably toward that familiar destination of suffering and confusion.

But then we take up Dharma practice, and a whole new set of intentions begins entering this mind stream. We cultivate the intention toward mindfulness, toward loving kindness, toward wisdom. We develop intentions for renunciation, for stillness, for understanding. All these fresh intentions arise as we generate, strengthen, and repeat them moment after moment in our formal meditation practice and throughout daily life.

These new intentions flowing into our consciousness begin to change the entire karmic river we've been riding. They start to reorient the very direction of our stream. At first, this influx appears quite minor—it doesn't shift the overall current very much at all. But as these wholesome intentions build up and gain power, as we become more skilled and strong in our practice, they truly begin to alter both the direction and contents of our inner stream. Now it starts heading somewhere completely different: toward the nirvanic ocean. This is how our Dharma practice redirects us.

This entire transformation rests on understanding karma, because everything centers around our intention in this present moment. As we change our volitions, the direction of our stream—our life patterns, our very trajectory—becomes completely transformed. These new intentions can turn us around precisely because nothing in that original stream is solid or fixed. Yes, ignorance has been a major player. Yes, craving has dominated the flow. But these forces aren't permanently stuck there. Our fresh intentions can uproot these old patterns. We all know they have certainly weakened them for us, and eventually they can uproot them entirely, to the degree of complete liberation.

This is karma working through our practice.

The way it appears to me is this: you and I, all of us in life, are floating on a sea of constantly changing conditions. All the shifting circumstances of existence, internal and external—our inner world of emotions and thoughts, our outer world of relationships, livelihood, politics, environment, ecological developments. We're exposed to all these changing situations over which we have very little control.

So we drift on this sea which contains many aspects of chaos. The world doesn't always function well. The environment doesn't always support us. We remain exposed, vulnerable to countless forces and changes. Everything seems rather chaotic, with no clear sanctuary in sight.

Yet we possess one navigating tool on this uncertain sea: our intention. Intention serves as our rudder, the one instrument that can steer our boat through all these shifting and unpredictable conditions. When we align our intention with the principles of Dharma—with the principles of wisdom—that boat heads toward safe harbor.

So we begin cultivating those intentions I mentioned: mindfulness, loving-kindness, wisdom, compassion, simplicity, generosity. These lead us in the right direction.

There's a dialogue with a teacher I mentioned earlier, Nisargadatta Maharaj, who works primarily through direct conversation with students. Someone was discussing with him their sense of direction in life, their destiny. Maharaj responded, "Your own will was the backbone of your destiny."

The person replied, "Surely karma interfered." This reflects the common understanding in India that past actions push us in certain directions beyond our immediate choosing.

Maharaj's response was profound in its simplicity: "Karma shapes the circumstances. The attitudes are your own."

"Ultimately your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character." This is the profound message of karma. We take up skillful intentions that form our character, and these have amazing consequences in our life.

If you've been practicing Dharma for some time, you've probably witnessed this yourself. Did you make all those positive changes happen? Are all those positive changes only in your inner life? Or do you see

positive changes in your relationships and your circumstances? I believe our Dharma practice truly impacts our outer life as well. It takes time—it doesn't happen overnight—but I have deep faith that this inner development expresses itself outwardly as well.

This is the promise of karma. It can steer us to happiness, it can steer us to refuge, and it can steer us in the end to freedom.

The Buddha spoke of this liberation in some of his more enigmatic quotations, where he talks about awakening as being synonymous with the end of karma. In the Anguttara Nikaya, he says: "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."

What is he talking about?

As I understand it, karma that is dark comes from unwholesome motivations—greed, hatred, confusion, cruelty. Karma that is bright is action done willfully with the motivation of moving toward the positive: generosity, loving-kindness, positive actions inspired by the wish to do good. Then there's action that's mixed—you give somebody a gift, but you want recognition back. That's dark and bright together.

Then there's this karma that is neither dark nor bright with results that are neither dark nor bright, leading to the end of karma. The end of karma is a synonym for liberation, for arahantship. The Buddha said that the fully awakened one has come to the end of karma.

So what is this karma that is neither dark nor bright? The Buddha explains: "It is the volition to abandon the dark karma with dark results, to abandon the bright karma with bright results, and to abandon the dark and bright karma with dark and bright results."

This means at some point—and this is my interpretation, as it's not spelled out so clearly—we stop trying to do anything at all. We definitely don't want to do harm, but in the refinement and subtlety of meditation, we also stop trying to cultivate beautiful states like generosity and loving-kindness, and of course, anything mixed. We're abandoning volition. We're letting go of individual will. We're not calculating our life at that point. We're opening up to the fullness of not-doing, letting the stream of Dharma carry us wherever it will.

The Buddha becomes more specific in the next passage: "And what is karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the end of karma? It is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

That is the Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path, as I understand it in its refinement and depth, is a way of deeply letting go of

personal desire and action based on personal interest. It's such a complete letting go that it opens into the profound stillness of awakening from a place of great trust and non-doing—the end of karma.

But it remains something of a mystery. So let's sit for just a moment with that mystery: the karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright results, leading to the end of karma is just this Noble Eightfold Path.

Thank you for your attention.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.