Kamma and the End of Kamma (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:26

The talk tonight is on karma and the end of karma.

As you probably know, one of the central philosophical concepts in Buddhism is the concept of emptiness. A number of years ago, some Western teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, discussing dharma matters. They asked him what he thought they should really be teaching Westerners about. He said it's more important that you teach Westerners about karma than to teach them about emptiness. Why? Because it's so practical. Karma is so practical for our understanding of how to live and conduct ourselves in the world. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

This word has entered our Western vocabulary, but it's not very well understood in the West. James and I, some years ago, were teaching a meditation group at a juvenile hall in the Bay Area. We went in with some trepidation because we weren't sure if they would be interested in listening to two middle-aged white guys. But we were there for six weeks, one class a week, and it was very rewarding for us and for some of the people there too.

If you're not from this country, you may not know Juvenile Hall is a jail for people who are under the age of eighteen who have been charged with fairly serious crimes. People were accused of things like assault with a deadly weapon, grand theft, murder, and attempted murder, and they were awaiting trial. There was a huge amount of anxiety and worry on their part while they were in this facility. So we shared meditation techniques, much as we've shared with you, to give them some tools to meet the fear and anxiety and come to some calmness. Many of them really appreciated it. That work has since continued in a couple of other projects, both in the Bay Area and on the East Coast. It's good work.

When we were nearing the end of our class series, we said, should we talk about the precepts? We decided yes. And then, should we talk about karma? Yes, we thought we might as well talk about karma too. So on our last class, that's what we talked about—the precepts and karma.

We presented karma in the way that I'd like to present it this evening as the science of happiness. Whatever level of happiness you want to aim for—the three kinds: human, heavenly, and nirvanic—the teachings on karma give you instructions for how to get there. So karma as practitioners becomes our best friend, our most sincere and trustworthy friend on the path.

The teachings on karma get into mysterious areas, as you've probably been feeling as you've been doing

the practice with the equanimity phrase these last few days. Some of these areas are not things that I can verify from my present experience. They are things that the Buddha said he could verify from his experience and his insight. I'm going to share some of that with you tonight. I don't think it's my job to tell you what you should believe, though I think it would be to your benefit to believe it. But I think it is really my job to tell you what the Buddha said on this topic. Then, as adults, you can form your own views and take it where you will, but it won't be because you haven't heard it.

We're going to look at this topic from a few angles. We're going to look at karma itself. We're going to look at the results of karma. We're going to look at the relationship between karma and the understanding of not-self. And we're going to look at the end of karma. So we'll come at it from a few directions, so please be patient as this unfolds.

First, what is karma? Karma is a Sanskrit word that originally simply meant action. That's all it meant at the time of the Buddha—action. The Pali term for it is kamma, with a double m, k-a-m-m-a. This evening I'll use the terms karma, kamma and action interchangeably.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a lot of debate from all these different philosophical schools about what action meant, what constituted significant action. Some teachers said that actions didn't mean anything. You could do anything and there were no results. Some said that results of actions were very important and had theories about what constituted them. Some philosophers said that actions were predetermined. There was no free will. Everything you were going to do in this life was already laid down by existing laws. Others said, no, there's free will and what you choose does make a difference. All these different theories were going around.

The Buddha said they're all speculative. He said that what he saw with his own direct insight from an extremely concentrated mind led him to a new formulation of the meaning of karma.

And this is how he described it. He said karma means action with volition. The Pali term for volition is *cet anā*, and we've been using it in our instructions with the translation "intention" — looking at the intention before we adjust a posture, before we walk through a door. This can be extended before we speak or act.

This is a direct quote: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action."

We could think of a few different synonyms for this word volition. Sometimes you could call it intention, motivation, urge, impulse, or will. I hope you can see that it's the underlying energy that makes an action happen, that pushes it forward.

In the Buddha's understanding, an action becomes wholesome or unwholesome depending on what this underlying motivation is. If the underlying motivation is wholesome, the action is wholesome. If the underlying motivation is unwholesome, the action is considered unwholesome.

Unwholesome volition, the Buddha said, is that which is influenced by greed, hatred, and delusion. We can see this in our personal lives, we can see it in the lives of individuals around us. These three motivating forces lead to the suffering of the world. That's why they're called, in the Buddha's language, roots of the unwholesome — these three factors.

We also see it in society and the institutions in society. Consumerism promotes greed. Racism promotes hatred. Biased media promote delusion. These forces are rampant in our world today, and they're all extremely destructive.

Wholesome volition comes out of the opposite of these unwholesome roots. So the opposite of greed is letting go, or the generic term the Buddha used is renunciation, sometimes relinquishment, and it's more often seen actively as generosity. Renunciation or generosity is the undoing of greed. Aversion or hatred is undone by loving-kindness, by *mettā*, and delusion is undone by wisdom.

So these are the wholesome roots: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. When actions come out of these motives, the act is considered wholesome.

Now, you can describe an action — someone takes a sharp knife and slashes open another person's stomach. Unwholesome? It depends on the volition. What if it's a surgeon removing a burst appendix? Then it could be a very wholesome action. If it's a robber trying to steal someone's money, it would be a very unwholesome action. So the volition is what we judge the action by.

Another example: if a baby is asleep, rolls over in their sleep, knocks over a candle, and the candle burns the house down — but somebody rescues the baby — that act has no karmic weight at all because there was no intention behind it. It was purely accidental rolling over, so there's no karmic result from an action like that.

And then there are actions that have mixed motives. We give something to someone, which is generosity, but we do it because we want something back, which is desire. So that has mixed wholesome and unwholesome motives, and many actions in the world have that mix, so they have mixed results as well.

The important thing here is that actions coming out of our volition have moral force based on the value of the volition. There are wholesome volitions and there are unwholesome volitions.

These actions in the Buddha's view happen in three areas: body, speech, and mind. Body and speech I think we can clearly see as actions. We may not have stopped to consider that our thoughts and emotions also are active and so carry karmic weight. However, the karmic weight of a thought or a feeling, if not acted upon outwardly, is much less than if that same thought or feeling is acted upon outwardly. So don't get too worried about the bad karma of seeing unwholesome thoughts because mindfulness is there to see them — they may actually be reducing. Don't get too concerned about the weight of that karma, although we'll talk about it more later.

Fortunately, the Buddha was very clear with us about what constitute wholesome and unwholesome actions. In specific, he listed ten types of unwholesome action — three of body, four of speech, and three of mind — that give us really clear guidelines on what not to do in the world.

The three unwholesome actions of body are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct.

And you'll recognize these as the first three of the five precepts that we chant regularly.

The four unwholesome actions of speech are first, saying what is not true. And this is the fourth precept of the five that we regularly take. The other three are using angry or harsh speech, speaking maliciously of others, or entertaining ourselves with idle chatter and gossip.

There are three unwholesome actions of mind: covetousness, which means wanting what belongs to someone else; ill will or hostility; and wrong view. This is very interesting. If we misunderstand the nature of the way things are, this leads us to act unwisely in the world. So having the wrong understanding about the way things are is actually considered an unwholesome action. It's one reason that understanding right view is so powerful.

So the ten wholesome actions are to refrain from these ten unwholesome. And of course there are other wholesome actions that you can extrapolate, such as generosity, loving-kindness, and so forth.

A number of you will be heading back into daily life soon, and then the relational field becomes very, very important. So it's very helpful to reflect on these wholesome actions as you head back into daily conduct. We have a lot of choice in our actions in the world. And sometimes people ask, well, if everything is conditioned, that means my motivations are conditioned, how can I change?

Just because motivations are conditioned doesn't mean that they're determined. And they're not. Because as influence comes to bear in the moment, wisdom starts to change the habit of our intentions. So the wise approach is to act as though you have a choice. Act as though you have free will and bring as much wisdom as possible and kindness into that moment.

So then this leads—the actions then lead to future results. The result of karma is called vipāka, vipākakamma. And the basic teaching is that wholesome actions lead to wholesome results, or put briefly, happiness. And unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results, or unhappiness.

When James and I were teaching at Juvenile Hall and we started to explain this concept of karma, we asked them, "Do you get this? Does it make any sense to you?" And one of the young guys raised his hand and says, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around?" And we said, "Yeah, yeah. That's pretty much it."

Put simply, here's the way the Buddha put it at the start of the Dhammapada: "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."

You may know that in Tibetan Buddhism, they also have the brahmavihāras, but they call them a different name. They call them the four immeasurables. And I want to read you the phrases that the Tibetans use for mettā and compassion and see if this sounds a little familiar.

Here's the phrase for loving-kindness: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." And this is the phrase for compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." This is their meditation on love and compassion.

Here's another way the Buddha expressed it, and you'll see how this ties into our equanimity meditation: "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."

So this is stated as a universal law. One of the things the Buddha stated that applies to all beings. So it doesn't matter if you know this law or not. It doesn't matter if you believe this law or not. It doesn't matter if your religion believes this law or not. It doesn't matter if your culture believes this law or not. This law applies. It's a universal law that operates for all beings. And the fact is that your growth in the path depends on this law, which we'll explain in more detail as we go.

So this reflection becomes the basis for our equanimity meditation.

All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions more than on my wishes for them. The phrase "more than on my wishes" is somewhat optional, but I like including it.

This is obviously something that takes time to understand deeply, so I want to explain it carefully. There's often resistance to such a blanket statement, especially in the West, and I want to qualify it in ways that may make it more comprehensible.

I mentioned earlier the beautiful scene in the movie Kundun, the biography of the Dalai Lama, where the nine or ten-year-old Dalai Lama receives teachings from his tutors about the Four Noble Truths. They ask him to restate the Second Noble Truth in his own words. After a few formulaic attempts, he arrives at: "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind." The tutors respond, "Very good."

Most of our suffering does come from our own habits of mind. So another way to frame this equanimity wish is: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own habits of mind"—because our habits of mind are also karmic actions. They influence not only our thoughts and feelings, but our speech and actions as well. If this formulation makes it more reasonable for you, this is also an excellent equanimity phrase.

The Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification, offers another perspective on this phrase, describing the four brahmaviharas in detail. Here's their explanation: "Beings are owners of their deeds. Whose, if not theirs, is the choice by which they will become happy or will get free from sufferings? Whose is the choice if not ours by which we will become happy or get free from suffering?"

This suggests a more forward-facing formulation: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness will depend on their own actions." This orientation helps because the backward-facing interpretation becomes problematic.

Consider the children in the Holocaust who died in the camps or watched their parents, sisters, or brothers die. Do we imagine that those four, five, or six-year-old children had created such negative actions in their short lives that they were destined for such suffering? Personally, that's difficult for me to accept.

We must question whether all visible suffering can be traced to individuals' past actions. Even in our society today, some people are born into favorable conditions that give them advantages throughout life, while others are born into circumstances that create obstacles and social headwinds in their development.

I'll share an example from a training on undoing racism by the People's Institute—highly recommended if you're interested in understanding the roots of racism in this country more deeply. One presenter was Diana Dunn, a white woman who had been with the organization for years. Diana had two children from two marriages. Her first marriage was to a white man, and their child was obviously white—perceived and recognized as white by society. Diana described how this child moved through the world with tailwinds at their back. All kinds of opportunities opened up in terms of schools, relationships, jobs, and so forth.

After her first husband died, Diana married Jim Dunn, the founder of the People's Institute, who was a black man. She had a child with Jim—as she put it, "went in the same way, came out the same way." But this child was perceived as black by society. This mixed-race child, raised with the same care, love, and wholesomeness of heart, faced headwinds as they moved through the world. The same doors did not open for them in school, relationships, work, and other areas.

Personally, I have no inclination to call such a situation karmic. It might be—I don't know. It might not be. We'll explore other causes in a moment. We simply cannot perceive such things clearly. To judge a situation we don't fully understand as purely karmic is a misunderstanding and misconstruing of reality.

The Buddha identified the workings of karma as one of four "imponderables"—things we simply cannot understand through reasoning. The others are the range of a Buddha's mind, the beginning of the universe, and the power of concentrated mind. The Buddha warned that whoever speculates about these four would go mad and experience vexation. Not recommended.

Yet speculation about karma continues extensively, doesn't it?

Have you ever gotten sick and had a friend say, "Oh, that must be your karma"? I don't know how you feel when you're told that, but I don't feel very happy when I hear this because it's simply a speculative view and it doesn't really help. Someone like a Buddha may be able to see the effects of karma, but generally we are not. So it's not helpful to speculate.

The Buddha never said that everything that happens is the result of past actions. He was once asked to endorse this view, and he would not. He said that philosophers who make such claims are overshooting themselves—meaning, it's a polite way of saying they're talking about what they don't know. He explained there are many other causes for painful and unhappy conditions we see in the world, mentioning illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault.

As I understand it, there are many causes for the way our lives unfold—physical causes, biological causes, chemical causes, as well as karmic causes. All these different kinds of causes flow together and create the life we live. But the Buddha never said that everything about our life is due to past karma.

The way I read this teaching on karma is in a very broad view: wholesome acts lead to wholesome results, unwholesome acts lead to unwholesome results. It's much more helpful to think about it going forward. We don't have the vision to see karma as a rearview mirror. We can't tell what acts got us here, and to speculate about them would be futile.

So let go of any judgment about the situation you find yourself in—thinking, "Wow, I must have done something really awful to get here." Over time, we've probably all done everything. We have all done everything. Trying to figure out what particular actions led to one particular result is not possible to do. I would let go of using karma as a rear view mirror and try to use it going forward. Let it guide your path and your life looking ahead.

Westerners often feel resistance to the teaching of karma. Perhaps it's because we have very strong democratic ideals of equality in the West, and it seems as though saying people are to some extent responsible for their own welfare is being cold or cruel or heartless or uncaring. But one thing not implied here is that beings deserve to suffer or deserve punishment for their actions. That sense of deserving and punishing is not at all in the flavor of the teaching on karma.

I believe if the Buddha had had the ability to reach into other human hearts and pluck out the cause of suffering, he would have done that for everyone who came to him, even the most hardened criminals. There's this beautiful story of Angulimala, who had killed 999 people—what's sometimes not mentioned is that this was under directive from his former spiritual teacher, a misguided teacher. He had killed 999 people and needed to kill a thousand. The Buddha was going to be his last victim.

So he stalked the Buddha and met him in the woods, intending to kill him. But the Buddha turned away from him, and Angulimala could not catch him. Finally Angulimala was so taken by the Buddha's presence that he asked why he had not run away out of fear. The Buddha said, "It's because I have stopped,

Angulimala. But you have not stopped. You are still running."

At that, Angulimala asked to be taken as his student, and the Buddha assented. He gave Angulimala the teachings, the Four Noble Truths, led him to practice. And as these stories go, in a very short period of time, he was liberated. This was someone who had done many unwholesome actions out of deep wrong view, and yet the Buddha's relationship to him was entirely compassionate, leading him completely out of his suffering.

So the teaching on karma doesn't have any aspect of punishment, but it is a law. Expecting to do an unwholesome deed and not have any karmic result would be like expecting an apple to come off a branch and not fall to the ground. You can't interrupt the law of gravity and you can't interrupt the law of karma, according to the Buddha's teaching.

Another reason people sometimes resist is they think that karma, putting some responsibility on the individual, gives us an excuse for not caring—as though we would say, "Oh, that problem is their fault. They created that, so I don't have to worry about it."

That's not equanimity—that's indifference. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. It closes our heart off to others' suffering. True equanimity has to go along with metta and compassion.

So when we see suffering, we don't really care where it came from. If beings are suffering, compassion wants to alleviate it. We recognize the source could have been societal, internal, parental, or physical. We don't really care. If beings are suffering, then love and compassion want to alleviate that. And equanimity needs that infusion to be complete.

If equanimity leads to coldness of heart and not caring, it needs to be balanced with more metta and compassion. The four Brahmaviharas really need to work together.

When we look at the results of actions, we can see at least six ways that they happen. Let me name these and give examples.

First, there are results before we act. When you're thinking about doing something generous, how does it feel? It feels good, doesn't it? It feels uplifting. If you're thinking of doing something unkind, how does that feel?

I was on a conference call with a committee of a retreat center not long ago, and I had a conflict of opinion with someone else on the call. After the call, this person sent me an email and was still kind of taking on the argument in a tone that I felt was really disrespectful, not acknowledging any validity in my position.

My first impulse was to forward this email to the other committee members so they could stay current on our discussion. Something just didn't quite feel right. Although normally that's a reasonable thing to do, I saw that my motivation was actually to expose their disrespect to the other members and therefore undermine their status a little bit. Once I saw that, I couldn't send it. So I just picked up the phone and

called the person and talked it through. That was a much happier solution.

When we're thinking of doing something unkind, if we look into the feeling as we're planning, it doesn't feel so good. We can pick up on that.

Second, in the moment that we do the action, we get a certain feeling from it. Doing something kind feels good in the moment. Doing something that hurts another, if we're sensitive, we feel the hurt ourselves. Sylvia Boorstein has this very nice saying: "Someone causing great pain is themselves in great pain"—even though they may not know it. As we tune into that, we feel how it is to be kind, feel how it is to be unkind.

Third is when we remember our past actions. In metta practice, we're encouraged to start metta for ourselves by remembering things we've done that have been kind or generous. As we do that, we really rejoice in those memories. We appreciate having done those things and it aids the metta.

The other side is that in long retreat, often there will come to mind ways that we've hurt other people. We sometimes go through this process of a life review. When I first sat a long retreat, many memories came up of unskillful things I'd done—some when I was very young, some when I was in my teens. Each one landed with a strong hurt as I reviewed them from this place of caring about people.

This life review is important, and it's important to feel that we're open enough to feel that remorse for the things we've done that were unskillful. Gradually, by allowing the remorse to be felt, we still regret the actions, but the intensity dies down. It's as though we've taken that into account and we strengthen the resolve not to act that way again.

Fourth, our actions come back to us in the way people relate to us. If we're warm, generous, caring, and loving, people will respond with warmth and generosity and care and love. If we're often angry, critical, and judgmental, people will shy away and not want contact with us. Our relationships are often mirrors of our own moods and mind states.

Fifth, we see actions come to fruition in habitual states of mind. Where does your mind go when it's left alone? Often we have deeply ingrained habits and tendencies that vary from person to person. Some will be in the loving direction, some may be in an angry direction, some may be in a generous direction, some may be in a desirous direction. In many ways, what we're seeing when we sit and these moods and thoughts come, we're seeing the effect of past investments of energy and volition.

These habits have gotten created in our minds like grooves—well-worn grooves that very easily, left to their own devices, allow thoughts and emotions to fall back into familiar patterns out of habit.

The Buddha taught: "Bhikkhus, 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, their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and 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."

This was 2,500 years ago—the Buddha describing the neural wiring and patterning of our reactions. There's a lovely quotation sometimes attributed to him, though I don't believe he actually said it. Still, it captures something very accurate: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit, and habit hardens into character. Therefore watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

The sixth way that results come, according to the Buddha's teaching, is through the mysterious workings of karma—events that happen to us in the future springing from past actions where we cannot see the connection, but which the Buddha says are happening nonetheless. We may not see the immediate result of our generosity, love, or compassion, but the Buddha says: be assured that those actions will bear wholesome results. Don't doubt that this is the case.

I find this deeply interesting because it suggests that morality is woven into the very fabric of the universe. If this is a universal law applying to all sentient beings wherever life exists, then morality is fundamental to how the universe is designed. It cannot be avoided.

For me, this view brings heart, warmth, and care. I don't want to live in an immoral or amoral world. I want to live in a moral universe. Karma as a teaching points to the essential nature of morality as being woven into the way existence itself is structured. It's more than just an evolutionary adaptation—it's in the heart of sentient life itself.

I don't know how that happens. I think it's a huge mystery. But I think it's a beautiful mystery, and for me, it's a heartwarming one. It tells us we don't live in a cold universe.

When someone says, "I don't believe in karma," they usually mean this sixth kind—mysterious things happening based on our present actions. The first five kinds of results are quite verifiable. You can observe all of these from your own experience over time. The sixth one isn't really verifiable unless you're very developed, as the Buddha was.

So I would simply say: keep an open mind and consider that it might be true. If you take a stance today saying it's not true, you don't know that for a fact. You're closing off a possibility based on something you don't really know one way or another. If you keep an open mind, you can investigate and observe over time—yourself and your friends—and see if long-term results of people's actions begin to make sense through this lens.

And if you're willing to keep an open mind about this, then you can keep an open mind about the next topic: rebirth.

When I came into dharma practice, I was skeptical about rebirth. I had a scientific background in college, and it didn't land naturally for me. But I kept an open mind and remained open to the possibility.

There are discourses where the Buddha speaks very specifically about actions and how they influence future life. He says that generosity leads at some point in the future—perhaps in some future life—to abundance in material things. Non-killing leads to having a long life. Non-injuring of living beings leads to health of body. Inquiry, asking questions of wise people, leads to growth in wisdom.

These are instructions for how to act now with the possibility that future wholesome results will come into our lives either now or in a future birth.

Here's another quotation from the Buddha—you'll recognize that he comes from an agricultural culture: "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents—none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside when you die. 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."

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

I'm not saying you have to believe this, but you might want to consider what the Buddha said. If it's true, you'd really want to live carefully, right? And if that turns out not to be true, you wouldn't have wasted your life either. So it's a good wager.

The next teaching is not-self. How can karma and not-self go together? This was pointed up by a question that someone asked the Buddha in his time: "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" If there's no self, where do these actions come back and land? There's no self in the action, so where do they land?

The Buddha basically said, "You haven't been listening to me," and he didn't explain it any further. As fools rush in where angels fear to tread, I'm going to explain it a little further.

Here's how I understand it. The teaching on not-self simply means that there's no fixed entity within this mind-body process. But it doesn't deny individuality. This mind-body process is labeled Guy. That mind-body process is labeled Guru. They are different. The Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem, but it didn't solve mine. So we each have our own individuality that we live with and work through.

The metaphor that's often used for this is of a stream. A stream is a flowing body of water. If you step out here, the stream is flowing really strongly with all the winter rains. If you look down in that water, is there anything fixed in it? No. That water is changing every moment. There's new water, new pebbles, new twigs flowing past in every moment. It doesn't stay the same for one second.

Similarly, with what our experience is, does anything stay the same in the objects of the senses moment after moment after moment? It's all changing, isn't it? So this is called a mind stream. And we have in this room roughly a hundred different mind streams this evening, all carrying their own karmic patterns or whatever we want to call them.

There's a flow of experience that constitutes every sentient being. But just as we can call this the Spirit Rock stream, and it's different from the Mississippi River, so the mind stream we call Carol is different from the mind stream we call Sally. Those are useful designations.

So what's personality? Often what defines our core idea of self-image—who we take ourselves to be—is our personality. We think, "I'm a happy person" or "a caring person" or "a sad person" or "a fearful person." But what is personality really? Is there anything fixed in personality? Isn't it just the changing stream of thoughts and feelings and speech and action? Isn't that how you know someone? How they act, how they speak, how they feel and how they think? Isn't that roughly what describes someone's personality?

This is all karma—actions of body, speech and mind. That's our personality. That's all it is. And it's always changing. Our personality isn't fixed. Just as you've seen, your thoughts and feelings aren't fixed. They can change in a finger snap. So they're always changing, but they do have a patterning. Each of us has a sort of recognizable personality, which is the kind of patterning that we've developed in actions of body, speech and mind.

And as you know, it's not so easy to change one's personality. This is what Dharma practice is about—changing our being, transforming our being. But it's not so easy.

This is the profound meaning of this quote 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." We're bound to our karma by the way it shapes us. We're conditioned by these patterns that we've invested in over and over again by reinforcing the volitions that are playing out in us.

These patterns are strong, but the beautiful thing is they're not fixed. Nothing in our being is fixed—not the patterns, not craving, not even ignorance. These are all still just arising and changing moment after moment after moment. And anything that has arisen can also pass away. Any patterning that has been established can be undone. This is the karmic principle that makes Dharma practice transformative.

The path itself is a karmic unfolding. We start with the conditioned habits of mind that we bring into practice from perhaps lifetimes of not understanding, craving, ignorance, and so forth. But as we encounter the Dharma, we start to bring in wholesome mind states: mindfulness, loving kindness, renunciation, tranquility, concentration, equanimity. And all these start to change us little by little by little.

It's as though we've got one big mind stream—let's call it our karmic river—that currently is flowing into Lake Samsara. Samsara is a very curious lake where what flows out just feeds right back into the source again. Lake Samsara is just this endless cycling of currents, and that's where we are when we come into Dharma practice.

But now some other streams start to come in from the side: mindfulness, compassion, factors of

enlightenment, brahmaviharas, paramis. All these new karmic effects start to steer the stream in a different direction. They start to move it away from Lake Samsara directly toward the nirvanic ocean. That's the only place this leads. And it's important to know this because, as Yogi Berra said, if you don't know where you're going, you could end up somewhere else. We want to know where we're going, and we want to end up in Nibbana.

If there was anything fixed in us, the streams of Dharma practice could not change us. They couldn't turn us in that other direction. That's why the teaching on not-self—meaning there is nothing fixed at the center—is the avenue by which karma can unfold in us and we can change the patterning of our actions. They can liberate us because craving is not fixed and ignorance is not fixed. And that's the truth of not-self.

If you don't believe in karma, how could you explain the development of the path? We really can't.

Our situation is this: all of us are afloat on a sea of changing conditions. Most of them are outside our control—external things like the weather, to some extent our body, the interactions we have with people, the successes or disappointments we have in life. A lot of these are really beyond our control. But we have one really important thing: we have a rudder. We know how to steer.

The rudder for our journey on this unpredictable, uncontrollable ocean is karma. We steer through the force of our wholesome intentions. And the Buddha said that intention repeated over and over and over again is what takes us to a safe harbor—the safe harbor of peace, of safety, of security, of release, and of liberation. It's the only reliable rudder: loving kindness, mindfulness, wisdom, compassion, equanimity, concentration.

There's a quotation from a teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj, a great Vedanta teacher in India in the last century. He mostly taught through dialogue. In one conversation, Maharaj says, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." The questioner responds, "Well surely karma interfered." And Maharaj replies, "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. These are the wholesome intentions of Dharma practice.

This brings us to the end of karma. In this very mysterious statement, on a number of occasions, the Buddha said for the arhat, there is no more karma. For one who is fully liberated, that person has come to the end of karma. It's not that the enlightened person doesn't act anymore, but somehow that person has stepped out of the cycle of karma.

How does this come about?

There are a few quotations in the Anguttara Nikaya that point to this. The Buddha asks: what karma is

neither painful nor bright, with neither painful nor bright results, which leads to the destruction of karma?

He's outlining that there are painful actions that lead to unwholesome results. There are bright actions—positive actions like generosity, acts of loving kindness, acts of compassion, positive outgoing expressions of wholesome intention. But he's saying there's another type which is neither painful nor bright, and it leads to the destruction of karma.

What is that kind of action? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This Noble Eightfold Path is the action that leads to the destruction of karma.

Because even positive actions like generosity or loving kindness can be done from a base of self: "Oh, look how good I am. Oh, they'll really like me for this. Oh, I'm really a good person if I do this kind of action." They can sustain a self-image. But the Buddha isn't after a beautiful self-image.

And so here's what he says about peace: "This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

The stilling of all formations. So at a certain point in practice, we're not even attempting to do loving kindness. We're not even attempting to do generosity. All formations are coming to stillness. And this means that at a certain point in practice, meditation moves into more an arena of non-doing, of stillness and of rest.

This is the gateway at a certain point. We abandon any kind of self-oriented activity because at some point we see that all the urges are not helping at that point. And we trust more in the rest and the peace and the stilling and the non-doing. We trust in a deep stillness from which the mind may lean into the realization of the unconditioned, which is the root of liberation.

And as the Buddha said, it is this Noble Eightfold Path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma—the peaceful, the sublime, the stilling of all formations, the end of karma.

So let's just sit together for a moment. "This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

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