Emptiness and Kamma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:06:23

The talk tonight is on emptiness and karma. I hope you all came back in one piece from your little excursion into activity. Because we're going back into the world of activity and relationship, I thought this might be an appropriate time to talk about karma. Sally talked about it earlier in the retreat in regards to the practice of equanimity. Tonight I want to talk about it in regards to emptiness, because karma and emptiness might seem like they oppose each other. If there's no self, who do actions come back to? If there's no self, who does actions in the first place? These are the kinds of things we want to look at.

We've talked about how the self tends to get formed around taking ourselves to be the body—this is my body, or I am the body. We form it around emotions: I am happy, I am sad, my joys, my sorrows. We form it around thoughts: I'm the thinker. We form it around an identification with consciousness when we take ourselves to be the observer looking out from the eyes and experiencing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—like there's an observer, a little being inside our head. You've had weeks to look at these questions, and hopefully these are not so firmly held anymore, this sense of self around these areas.

But there are two other ways that self sneaks in. One is we identify with making a decision. Who decides? When you decide to stand up after a sit, who decides? When you decide how much food to take at lunch, who decides that? Often in this moment of choice, it feels like there's an "I" there who's doing the choosing or the deciding. You may remember our former president famously said, "I'm the decider." That identification comes in easily.

The second place it comes in is around the area of personality. We take ourselves to be a certain way based on our personality, the way we show up in the world, the way we manifest. Maybe most deeply, that's who we take ourselves to be—this particular personality. And that's who we take others to be. We know somebody by their personality, and we think that's who they are.

Both these questions—the decider and the personality—are really questions about karma. We want to look at them in relationship to the concept of emptiness and see if there's a self lurking there that isn't actually a self.

So we're going to look at this field of karma, which means action. In the Indian languages that we work with, karma is a Sanskrit term. It just means action originally. The Pali term is kamma—same thing, just meant action. In the time of the Buddha, there were all kinds of theories in India about action. Some schools, philosophical schools, said action doesn't matter: I can kill someone, I can steal, it won't affect me. Actions have no consequences. Other schools said action is all predetermined, all set beforehand by prior causes and conditions. So it doesn't matter what you do or don't do, the same thing's going to happen. That

was another school. And another school said it's all God's activity. There's no individual responsibility because God is directing everything.

The Buddha came along and said these are all speculative views—you people don't know what on earth you're talking about. This is when he defined kamma from his own direct insight and his own knowledge. This is in the study guide, quote 15 on page 4. This is the foundational teaching that he gave on the question of karma: "It is volition that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind."

Two important things here: Action is based in the volition.

In the sphere of speech, we find four unwholesome actions that the Buddha identified. These are lying speech, speech that divides people—sometimes called divisive or slanderous speech—harsh speech, and frivolous speech or idle chatter.

When we examine these carefully, we can see how each one creates suffering both for ourselves and others. Lying speech breaks down trust and connection. Divisive speech destroys relationships and communities. Harsh speech wounds hearts and creates enmity. And frivolous speech wastes precious time and energy, distracting us from what truly matters.

In the sphere of mind, there are three unwholesome actions: covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view. These mental actions might seem less tangible than bodily or verbal actions, but they're equally powerful in shaping our experience. Covetousness fills the mind with wanting and dissatisfaction. Ill-will poisons our hearts with resentment and hatred. Wrong view distorts our understanding of reality, leading us to make choices that bring suffering.

Now, the Buddha didn't just tell us what to avoid—he also gave us clear guidance on what to cultivate. For each of these ten unwholesome actions, there's a corresponding wholesome action. So instead of killing, we practice protecting life. Instead of taking what isn't given, we practice generosity. Instead of sexual misconduct, we practice wise and loving restraint.

For speech, instead of lying we practice truthful speech. Instead of divisive speech, we practice speech that brings people together. Instead of harsh speech, we practice gentle, kind words. And instead of frivolous chatter, we practice meaningful communication that serves wisdom and connection.

In the mental sphere, instead of covetousness we cultivate contentment and appreciation for what we have. Instead of ill-will, we develop loving-kindness and compassion. Instead of wrong view, we cultivate right understanding—seeing things as they truly are.

This framework gives us a very practical roadmap for living. Every day, in every moment, we're making choices in these three spheres. We're either moving in the direction of wholesome action, which leads to happiness, or unwholesome action, which leads to suffering. It's really that simple, and that profound.

The beauty of this teaching is its clarity. We don't have to guess what will bring us happiness. The Buddha

has laid it out with perfect precision. When we align our actions of body, speech, and mind with these wholesome patterns, happiness naturally follows. When we don't, suffering inevitably arises.

This is why the Dalai Lama emphasized teaching karma to Westerners. It's not abstract philosophy—it's the most practical guidance we could ever receive for living a fulfilling life.

There are four unwholesome actions, and the first is also found in the precepts—false speech, telling lies, speaking what is untrue. The three other kinds of harmful speech are harsh speech or angry speech, divisive speech that sets one person against another, and meaningless speech—essentially gossip or idle chatter. These are not helpful.

And then we come to something very interesting: there are three unwholesome actions of mind. You rarely hear this list discussed. They're not included in the precepts because they don't rise to the level of bodily conduct, but the unwholesome actions of mind are covetousness—wanting what belongs to someone else—ill will, which means wishing harm to another, and wrong view.

This last one is particularly fascinating. Wrong view means not understanding the way the world actually works. You can see this, can't you? If someone believed, for instance, that action doesn't matter and that it's fine for them to kill people, that wrong view can lead to real injury for others and for oneself. The Buddha taught that wrong view is the foundation of all the other wrong actions.

The ten wholesome acts are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome acts. If you don't commit any of the unwholesome actions, then your conduct is considered wholesome. This is not easy to do. Have you ever found yourself killing insects or telling little white lies or saying something to one person that you know would hurt another if they overheard it? These are profound areas for practice, and we can continue refining our conduct in all these dimensions.

Some years ago, James Baraz and I were teaching a class in the Bay Area at a juvenile hall. This was the first I know of Vipassana teachers going into juvenile facilities. It later became well established, with several different projects in the Bay Area offering such programs. James and I had been invited in by a nurse who was a Vipassana practitioner working in the juvenile hall.

If you're not from the U.S., you might not know that a juvenile hall is a holding facility—basically a jail for people under eighteen, below the adult age. These young people are awaiting trial. We were taken into the maximum security wing of this juvenile hall in San Mateo, where we worked with a group of young men accused of serious crimes: larceny, grand larceny, assault with a deadly weapon, murder, rape. They had not yet come to trial, so we didn't know if they were guilty or not, but they were in on serious charges. Generally they would be held for months before their trial date came up.

These young guys—sixteen, seventeen, maybe fifteen years old—had little self-knowledge at that age. None of us had much self-knowledge at that age. They were penned up for months with other young men in similar states of worry, anxiety, and fear about their futures because they didn't know what the judge

would decide. They might be imprisoned for years if convicted. There was this atmosphere of intense anxiety and underlying aggression that they were living within and trying to cope with as best they could.

We went in and met with a group of about ten from this maximum security wing. Fortunately, one of their guards—or probation officers—was someone they respected. He was a big, strong guy, somebody they would listen to. He sat in on the sessions with us. We went in and taught meditation. I don't think he was there because he was interested in learning meditation, but he supported the program to make it work for us.

We had no idea what these young men would think about a couple of middle-aged white guys coming in and talking about Buddhist meditation. But we just taught them. We structured it over six weeks, with a different class each week covering breath, then body, then sounds, emotions, and thoughts.

When we reached the emotions, the liberating potential of the practice became clear to them. We gave them specific instructions for working with fear and anger. These young men took these instructions seriously, and because they had considerable time just being in their cells or lying on their beds, they could practice. They discovered that mindfulness could actually relieve the stress of the emotions they were experiencing.

By the end of about five weeks, we had gained a certain amount of credibility—just a little bit. As James and I approached the last class, we wondered: should we teach about karma? Or to phrase it another way, should we teach about sila? This was potentially fraught territory because these young men didn't want to be lectured to. They didn't want us to come across as moralistic.

And so we were curious whether we should do it or not. We said, "What the heck? It's our last meeting. Why not? We're going to be out of here."

So we went in and framed the teaching as the science of happiness. We basically said, "If you want to be happy, these are some things you might want to think about." And then I started to lay out the general principles of the way karma works, and I just asked the group, "Does this sound like something that might fit for you?"

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

I said, "Yeah, absolutely, you got it."

So this concept was not all that far away.

One of the interesting things about the teaching on karma is that it operates whether you know it or not. It operates whether you believe in it or not. It operates whether your religion believes in it or not. It operates whether your culture believes in it or not. It's a universal law. It's one of those things about nature that the Buddha discovered. It works.

So as we go back into daily life, it's really helpful to start to look at this area of cause and effect in relation to our own conduct. And one of the things the Buddha said is that when we take real care with our conduct, we enjoy what he called the bliss of blamelessness, which is a really delightful thing to have.

Here's one quote from his discourses: "Restraint in conduct is for the sake of lack of remorse. Lack of remorse is for the sake of gladness. Gladness is for the sake of peace of mind."

So as we take more and more care with our conduct, our heart gladdens and the mind comes into peace. This is the beauty of taking care with conduct. And it's all based on our intentions. You start to see how important this factor of volition or intention is.

The Dalai Lama was at Spirit Rock some years ago. It was a really wonderful opportunity. He came to address a meeting of teachers at Spirit Rock. It was really terrific to have him there. Actually, Sally and I brought down a chair from our house because it was the biggest chair that we could find at the time, and he sat in it for two days. So we've never really cleaned that chair since. Still got the vibes going.

It was kind of interesting. It was fun to watch him with a group of Western teachers. I don't think we used the time so well, but people would give a presentation to him, like a five-minute presentation on how the Dharma was unfolding in the West, and then we'd ask him to respond. And sometimes he'd say a few things about what he thought. But another time, people made this presentation, and he said—oh, we asked what he thought—he said, "Oh, nothing left up here. A few minutes ago when you were speaking, I had some thoughts, but all gone now. But never mind." He just cracked up. He's very funny. He was just really honest and real with us.

So at one point, one of the teachers who had a lot more chutzpah than I would ever have had said, "You know, Your Holiness, as Buddhism is coming to the West, there's a lot of popularizing going on. And as it gets popularized, some of the deeper aspects of the teaching might be getting lost. And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of all of us. What advice do you have for us?"

So the Dalai Lama just got quiet and reflected for a moment. And he said, "Some people, you see, call me living Buddha, or they call me the God King. No, I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. Others call me counter-revolutionary, or they call me a wolf in monk's clothing."

But you see, I look back at my own intentions. If my intention is sincere, then that is what is important. How I'm perceived is up to others. I don't care." He said that really emphatically: "I don't care."

That was a remarkable thing to say for somebody who carries the entire weight of Tibetan culture on his shoulders, responsible for all the international relations between Tibet and China and the rest of the world. And he said, "How people perceive me, I don't care." He checks his intention. If the intention is sincere, that's what matters.

This is a powerful statement. If we are in touch with our actual motivation when we act and we come

from a wholesome intention, then that's the place we can rest, even if we're criticized. Even if our words land in a way we hadn't understood or expected and the impact is different than our intention, if we're sincere about our intention, we can learn from that. We can acknowledge, "Oh, I didn't know that. Okay, I'll do better next time." But our intention was sincere.

This area of karma is hugely important, which is revealed in the next quote, number sixteen: "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, good or bad, of those they will be the heirs."

The Buddha is basically saying we've inherited the actions of our earlier self, and whatever actions we do today, we will inherit later on. They're the womb from which we're born. So beings take their nature from the actions they have created earlier. Whatever acts they perform, of those we will be the heirs.

Notice in this passage the Buddha is talking about beings. He's not talking about the five aggregates. Beings, as we've said, is a conventional designation for the assembly of the five aggregates, but it's a conventional term. He's not doing an ultimate kind of pointing, not trying to see emptiness in this passage. He's trying to see the effect on beings.

Westerners often feel resistance to this idea. Perhaps it has to do with our democratic ideals of equality. Maybe we think it puts too much responsibility on individuals for creating some of their own suffering. And maybe this view seems cold, uncaring, or cruel.

But that's not the way the Buddha intended it to be understood. It doesn't mean that beings deserve to suffer. If the Buddha could have taken away the suffering from the most murderous criminal on the face of the earth, I'm convinced he would have done it. You can see that in the way he related to Angulimala.

You probably know the story of Angulimala. He was told by a spiritual teacher—a so-called spiritual teacher—that he could only advance in the teachings if he collected the fingers of one thousand hands from one thousand people whom he'd killed. He had to collect one thousand fingers and wear them in a necklace, a mala, around his neck. Angulimala means "finger necklace."

It's said that Angulimala had killed 999 people, collected a finger from each, and decided the Buddha would be his thousandth victim. The Buddha's friend said, "Don't walk that way, Venerable One. There's a killer out there who wants to take your life and finish his vow." And the Buddha said, "I'm going to walk that way."

So he walked on this mountain path near where Angulimala was hiding. As Angulimala saw the Buddha, he rushed out to kill him, but he couldn't catch him. The Buddha used special powers, and though Angulimala ran as fast as he could, he couldn't catch the Buddha. So Angulimala shouted out, "Stop! Stop!"

And the Buddha said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. Now you stop." Meaning, stop your mind. Angulimala

was so impressed that this person wasn't afraid of him that he said, "What's up with you?"

And so the Buddha gave him teachings right there. Angulimala did come from a spiritual background, but he was seriously misguided. So the Buddha gave him teachings and invited him into the order, the monastic order. Angulimala practiced hard because he knew he didn't have a good outlook if he didn't—that was a good motivator. And as it says, in not too long a period of time, Angulimala became fully awakened.

So this is the Buddha's compassion. You can look at the horrors of those crimes. You can look at the terrible karma that Angulimala had created for himself. And yet the Buddha's compassion was: let me free this being. I think this being has potential to wake up. And he did.

Interestingly, as Angulimala continued in his life as a monastic, he would go out for alms and people would stone him because they knew of his prior actions. And Angulimala would come back and complain to the Buddha: "But people are stoning me." And the Buddha said, "You must bear it. This is just a small portion of the suffering that you would have endured if you hadn't become awakened."

So I believe the Buddha didn't want anyone to suffer, regardless of their background, regardless of their actions. But karma is a law. Expecting someone to commit unwholesome acts and not receive unwholesome fruits would be like expecting gravity not to operate. That would be like expecting an apple in late summer to come off a tree and not fall to the ground. If the apple comes off the tree, it's going to fall to the ground. If we do unwholesome actions, there is going to be some result of unhappiness in our lives.

Sometimes people think this is a really heartless view—that it condones heartlessness. Because we say, "Oh, if someone is suffering, well, that's their karmic result. So that's their problem. It's not my problem. I don't have to worry about that. They brought it on themselves."

Well, first of all, we don't know that everything someone experiences is the result of their action. We don't know that. But even if it is, to respond as "it's not my problem" is called indifference. This is the near enemy of equanimity. It's not equanimity—it's closing our heart to them. If our heart stays open, we see the suffering, and compassion wants to relieve the suffering, whatever the source. Just like the Buddha was able to relieve Angulimala's suffering, even though he could see all the unwholesome acts behind it.

So seeing karma does not bring indifference, if understood correctly. We want to alleviate suffering, whatever the source. And often we don't know the source of someone else's suffering.

You can see these fruits of action in at least six different ways. One is before we act, we become aware of the motivation in doing the action, and we can either feel great about it, or we feel a little off about it.

I was on a conference call once with an IMS committee and we were disagreeing a lot about what to do about some particular topic. I was particularly disagreeing with one other person on the conference call. Afterwards, this person sent me an email that I thought was very disrespectful. Other people on the

committee had been listening on the call too. My first thought was: I'm going to forward that email to the rest of the committee because it would show how unreasonable they were being and then would undermine their view. I was kind of enjoying the thought of doing that.

Then I realized, "Oh, something doesn't feel right." I thought, "I won't send that email." So I picked up the phone and called the person and we talked it through instead. But I knew that it didn't feel right.

On the other hand, when you're thinking about doing something wholesome, it feels good to think about it. So we feel the effect before we act.

We feel it in doing the action. When you do something kind for someone, who enjoys it more—you or them? When you give a present that really touches somebody, doesn't that feel great? When you do a favor for someone who needs some help, when you help an animal that's injured, it just feels great to do that. So we feel it in the immediate moment of doing the action.

And on the other hand, if someone is harming somebody else, there's harm to them in that very moment as they're committing the action. Sylvia Boorstein has this beautiful phrase: "Anyone causing great pain is themselves in great pain." This is a really good thing to remember. Harm comes out of inner pain, and so we can have compassion there too.

The third way we see the effects of karma is when we remember our past actions. One of the instructions in beginning the loving-kindness practice is to reflect on good actions we've undertaken—things that have helped people, actions that have come out of a spirit of caring. When we reflect on those wholesome deeds, we feel good about ourselves. That sense of well-being then becomes the proximate cause for loving-kindness to arise toward ourselves.

The other side of this in metta practice is that often, as a purification practice, we remember things we've done that haven't been so skillful. When those memories surface, we don't feel so good. We experience the pain of regret or remorse or shame.

The fourth way karma operates is that our actions come back to us in how people relate to us. If we're kind, thoughtful, and caring to others, people are happy to see us and we receive love and care in return. If we're consistently grouchy, critical, complaining, or judgmental, people don't really want to see us coming—they move away or close their hearts to us. Our actions return to us through our relationships quite quickly.

The fifth way is that our actions come back in habitual states of mind. I don't know if you've noticed this during this month of practice—when the mind moves, why does it move and how does it move? Does it seem like a habit? Basically, it moves where we have invested in the past. Where we've put our time and energy and attachment previously, that's where the mind goes when we get quiet and sit.

This insight comes directly from the Buddha: "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, and cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, of kindness, of compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

These habits of mind reinforce themselves. They wear grooves in consciousness, and then those grooves play out again and again.

The sixth way the law of karma operates is that results show up in the future in mysterious ways that we can't fully understand or verify.

So what about the Buddha's statement that when you speak and act from a pure mind, happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable? One of the basic teachings of karma is that happiness follows goodness. Happiness follows goodness. This is mind-blowing to me—this is a law of the universe.

How does that work? I don't know, but I believe it. When you understand that this is an immutable law for all beings everywhere, it destroys the notion that karma is cold or uncaring or amoral. The connection between virtue and happiness is woven into the very fabric of the universe. It's not a cold, indifferent, amoral cosmos. The relationship between kindness and happiness is woven right into reality itself.

For me, this is what makes the world a warm, caring, and moral place to be—a trustworthy place to be. This law of karma creates that trust.

Now, the Buddha taught that we can't figure out the precise connections between actions and results. He said that anyone who tries to decipher these patterns is going to go mad and experience vexation. He identified this as one of the four imponderables—four topics that if you turn your mind to them, you're not going to figure them out, and the attempt will really stir you up and frustrate you.

The workings of karma—how results flow from actions—is one of these imponderables. The Buddha could see these connections through his powers of mind, but it's not something we can understand rationally. It's too intricate, too complex.

The other imponderables are the range of mind of a Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the beginnings of the universe. Scientists are still working on that last one—they haven't figured it out yet.

We don't know how karmic results manifest, and we don't know what in our life or someone else's life represents a karmic consequence. I don't know if this has ever happened in your circle of friends, but sometimes when someone gets seriously ill, another friend comes along and says, "Oh, that must be your karma." This is a horrible thing to say, because we simply don't know that, and it can't possibly help the person who's suffering.

It's a very unkind and insulting thing to say. So when the Buddha was once asked whether all the pleasure and pain in our life comes from past action, he said we cannot make such a claim. He explained that there

are many other causes for the pleasure and pain we experience. These could arise from illness, diet, climate, accidents, or assaults. He said that people who tell you everything comes from past action simply don't know what they're talking about.

So we don't say karma is responsible for everything. It's one of the laws that operates in the universe, but it's not the only law. There are physical laws, biological laws, chemical laws, and perhaps psychological laws also operating, and karma is one among these.

Sometimes we want to examine our present circumstances and wonder whether they came from our past actions. We usually ask this when we're suffering: "What did I do in the past to bring this on?" But we can never assume that our current situation is because of a past action, because we simply don't know.

This would be like using karma as a rearview mirror. Here I am in the present—what was there in the past? We can't see that. The Buddha could see that at times, he said, but we cannot. Whatever story we make up is just speculation. It has no real truth value. It would just be a story we were telling ourselves.

So it's not useful to try and figure out the past cause of our current situation. Where the law of karma becomes useful is in moving forward, because it shines a really bright light on our path ahead. We take it from here onward. Now that I understand, how can I make the best choices possible going forward to create the conditions for happiness in the future? So we use it as a headlight and not a rearview mirror.

Sometimes people will say, "You know, I don't really believe in karma. I know what people say, but I don't really believe in that." What they usually mean is they don't believe in this sixth kind of result—those consequences coming into the future that they can't see or verify. But the first five kinds I talked about are verifiable. You can see those in your life. It's this mysterious one they question: "Oh, I'm not going to believe in that. That's just a theory."

So my suggestion is to hang out with the possibility that it might be true. Over time, you might come to have faith in it. I've come to have a lot of faith in the law of karma. I've observed many people's lives over the course of many years now, looking at them through this lens, and I have developed great faith in it. But we all have to do our own investigation. I'm not telling you what you should believe, but I am suggesting it's worth considering.

And also, don't form the opinion that it's not true, because you don't know that either. If you take up the opinion it's not true, that's part of what the Buddha would call wrong view. So be careful. Keep your mind open and keep looking.

Now let's explore karma and emptiness. When we consider the emptiness of self, at first they seem contradictory. If there's no self, who acts? Who's affected by the results of action? In the Buddha's time, one of the monks asked him this very question. The monk said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" And the Buddha simply replied, "You haven't been listening to me." He didn't try to answer it directly. You haven't been listening to me.

But actually, karma and not-self need each other to make sense. They rely on each other.

The first thing we want to examine is whether there's a self in volition or intention. When you undertake an action, is there an "I" inside that's doing that?

So let's take an example of a simple volitional action and look.

I might be sitting in my room in the morning when it's chilly, and later say, "I was cold so I put on a shawl." That's a simple sentence we could say any day of the year and everybody would understand. But when we examine that action in more detail, there's far more happening than meets the eye.

Let's say you're sitting mindfully, present in the moment, and the first thing you notice is a sensation in the body that registers as cold. So it begins with mindfulness of sensation. The cold aspect is felt as unpleasant—there's a vedana to it that's unpleasant. Based on this unpleasant vedana, there's easily a reaction of aversion, not liking the cold.

Based on this aversion, there's some searching. Maybe you feel that the rest of the body is warm, or there's a memory of warmth—so there's a perception of warm. Then perhaps an image comes of the shawl that's right next to you, so a memory arises. Then there's a desire for that warmth, that remembered warmth. Another mental state has arisen. And out of that, the arm moves, picks up the shawl, and places it.

So it's not simply "I was cold, I pulled up the shawl." There was a cold sensation, there was a reaction of aversion, there was desire, there was perception of the shawl. All these things cascaded before that volition formed to make that action happen.

The volition is just one more link in the chain of all those physical and mental events flowing back and forth, eventually reaching a directive from the mind to the arm to pull the shawl up. Volition is simply another impersonal factor of mind, conditioned by all the other things happening at that time. It's born out of that process—conditioned by sense contact and by other mental factors: qualities of aversion, memory, perception, desire, before the volition comes to action, before it actually does something.

So then the question arises: given this mechanical nature of volition and action, is it all determined? It's so conditioned—is it determined? Or do I actually have any free will?

Maybe you never really generated out of your own free will the interest to meditate. It was just the piling up of many conditions in your life.

Here's what I would say in response: Is there free will? I would say that volition is conditioned, but it's not determined. If we said it was determined, we fall into the view of fatalism, which says there's really nothing to be done—it's all going to play out according to some predetermined scheme.

We see that volition arises based on other factors, especially of the mind. If we want wholesome volitions to come, the mind ought to be in a wholesome place. In other words, volition needs to come from a place

where it's supported by factors like generosity, kindness, and wisdom. Because if the mind is in a state of greed, aversion, and delusion, the chance of wholesome action emerging from that is not as high.

This is why it's so important as we walk the path to keep the mind in a wholesome place, so that our actions will come from a wholesome place and the actions themselves will be wholesome, bringing wholesome results and happiness.

If there were truly free will, we could all declare, "All my actions will come out of generosity, kindness, and wisdom. All my actions will arise from wholesome motivation." Can you say that? No. Because we still fall into greed, aversion, and delusion, and sometimes we act from those states. Even though we don't want to, sometimes we do, because those are the accompanying mental factors from which volition arises.

This is why walking the path is so important for happiness. We want to make the mental factors more and more wholesome so that appropriate actions will naturally emerge from them.

So this is the first area where self could form around volition. But when we look into it, we really see it's just another impersonal factor of mind arising based on other mental factors present at the time.

What about personality? Sometimes that's really who we think we are. "I'm this kind of person. I'm not that kind of person." We have an image of ourselves.

We have an image of others and what we call their personality. Personality is fascinating because if I ask you to think of five of your friends, I could ask you to describe their personalities, and you could probably do it in a paragraph. You kind of know who people are, right? They show up with some consistency time and time again.

So we say personality has some consistency. Is there a self in there? That's really the question.

If you've been a parent, you really know personality shows up as soon as the child is born. Parents will have two children with very different personalities, and they recognize those personalities when the kids are really young. So there is some consistency to personality, but the way I like to think about it is like a stream.

In some Buddhist schools, there's this concept that beings have or are a mind stream. I think this is a great way to think about it. If you've walked during this retreat around Gaston Pond, you get to one side of the pond and there's a creek, a stream that flows out from the pond. The overflow crosses the road and goes down a little stream.

You could stand by that stream and ask, "What is a stream?" Well, it's not the banks. Really, it's the flowing water. You look at that stream closely—is there anything fixed in a stream? No. A bit of water's here and then it's there. It's always moving, always changing. The stream is never the same for two moments in a row. The water's flowing by and disappearing. So in the stream, is anything fixed? No. That water is constantly changing.

But different streams have different characteristics. The stream that flows out of Gaston Pond is fast, clear, clean. But if you drive an hour to the west from here, you'll cross the Connecticut River. The Connecticut River is very broad, it's brown, it's muddy, and it's slow moving. So there are two streams, but they're very different from one another.

Personality is like that. Personality is a mind stream, but one can be very different from another. In both the river stream and the mind stream, there's nothing fixed. It's always changing, always flowing. In our mindstream, different states circle past each other, one after another, sometimes really quickly, as you all have noticed this retreat. And yet, for each individual, there are similar patterns that come up again and again.

We know some people come across as warm and caring. Some people come across as cool or aloof. Some people are shy. Some are extroverted. Some are funny. Some are serious. We know people by these qualities, and there is some consistency in that.

If I were going to define personality—take it or leave it—I would define it as collective habits of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting. That's how you know someone. What are those habits for each person that you know among your friends? That constitutes their personality.

Does this remind you of any of the aggregates? Which one? Sankharas, isn't it? Formations. Volitional formations. There's that word volition again. The fourth aggregate is volitional formations. It's more or less the exact same description.

Volitional formations are habitual ways—so far we've mostly said—of thinking and feeling. The speaking and acting come out of ways of thinking and feeling. And in the full definition of sankharas, it includes actions of speech and actions of body. We didn't bring that in earlier because in silent meditation you're not doing much speaking and acting. But in the full definition of sankhara, it does include speech and bodily action. So it's more or less identical to the definition of personality.

There's consistency.

Is personality a fixed thing? If you look at that stream of sankharas, is there anything fixed in there? No. Just like a river stream, just running on, one after the other, after the other, after the other. Yet, in each of us, certain kinds of actions come up again and again and again through the force of habit. But it's not always like that. Even if you have a friend who you think is kind, sometimes they're probably mean. Even if you have a friend who you think of as generous, sometimes they're probably contracted and not so generous.

So the personality is a pattern, but it's not fixed. There's nothing fixed in it. But until we start waking up, the patterns have a certain circular quality. They just keep going around and reinforcing each other. So it's kind of like there's this lake that's been designed by M.C. Escher where the outflow circles around and feeds back into the inflow. And so the same patterns keep going around and around and around,

repeating themselves. And that's called Lake Samsara.

So that's our mind stream when we come into the Dharma. When we first meet the Dharma, we've been circulating in Lake Samsara for a long time. And those grooves have gotten worn into our minds, even into our brains. As many people have said, it's not so easy to change one's personality, because of these strong forces of habit in our mental actions.

So we have this quote from the Buddha. And when he uses the word action in this, the word 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." Beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin. That's a strong bond. And that's the Buddha speaking to the strength of these mental habits that we've been cultivating for years, if not lifetimes. We're bound to them. And that's why Dharma practice is so difficult. We're bound to our habits in this way.

It's strong, but it's not invincible. It's not unbreakable. And that's what practice is about. That's what the path is for.

This is a quote from one of my teachers: "The purpose of our Dharma practice is to transform the habits of mind that lead to suffering. There is no other purpose."

And interestingly, Dharma practice uses the law of karma for this transformation. So the path itself is a karmic unfolding. As we practice wholesome mind states, they arise more often. These qualities that you've been generating—of mindfulness, loving-kindness, energy, renunciation, patience, calm, non-identification, wisdom—each moment of one of these is like a new tributary flowing into our stream, flowing into our mind stream. And over time, they start to redirect the course of the stream away from Lake Samsara. And now it's flowing toward the nirvanic ocean.

That's why we practice. We're starting to turn the stream in a different direction. If there was anything fixed in personality, the stream couldn't be turned. But there isn't anything fixed in personality. There are patterns, but nothing is fixed. And so the new intentions start to move it in a completely different direction.

They move it in the direction of liberation. And they can do that because our ignorance is not fixed either. Ignorance is just another changing part of that karmic stream, that mind stream. And as we shift the intentions that are flowing in that mind stream, the mind starts to move in a new direction toward liberation.

So we start to see the mind still a little bit and we look at our situation. We're adrift on this changing sea of circumstances that is life—some pleasant, some unpleasant, some predictable, some completely unpredictable. Where are we going to go? How are we going to go? Where is safety? The only thing we have to steer by is intention. That's all we've got. And the intention is just in this moment.

So practice is always about what's the appropriate intention in this moment that will advance the mind to a wholesome state and move the path forward. That becomes our rudder. That's what we can count on. That's what we can rely on. That's how we steer in this chaotic seeming thing called life. We find that we have a reliable rudder, which is our own intention. And then our life moves in new directions based on our sustained intentions. Our life totally transforms. And I don't just mean our mind transforms—our whole external life transforms also based on our wholesome intentions.

This is another quote from the study guide. It's on page five. This is a wonderful Indian teacher named Srini Sargadatta Maharaj who worked with Westerners in the form of dialogue. He didn't give dharma talks, but people would come and talk with him. And one of his books is on the reading list called *I Am That*.

In this particular excerpt, a Westerner is in dialogue with Maharaj, who says to him, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." And the questioner says, "Well, surely karma interfered." 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. And the way we shape our character is the intention we bring moment after moment after moment in the direction of mindfulness, loving-kindness, wisdom, renunciation, patience, equanimity.

And then the Buddha said that for the Arahant, there is no more karma. This is very intriguing, mysterious. He didn't fully explain it. There is no more karma. It means the Arahant's not creating new karma. And the Buddha said that such a person has come to the end of karma.

And then the Buddha posed the question: what is the action that leads to the end of karma? And he answered his own question in quote seventeen—I'll let you read it another time—with the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is the action that leads to the end of karma.

So this is kind of poetical, and I don't have the first-hand experience to be able to tell you about, but the way it's suggested to me is that self-centered activity goes out. For one who has awakened, it has gone out. Self-centered activity has gone out. And for those of us who are awakening, it gets less and less. So our action comes from a wisdom that sees the good of ourselves and the good of others at the same time and leads in the direction of non-doing.

The end of karma has something to do with non-doing, at least from a place of center or self. So for me, it has these qualities of resting, not acting, stopping, not fabricating, surrender, allowing things to be as they are. Does it remind you of any meditation practices you've done recently?

So I think part of the beauty and the power of the awareness practices that we've been doing is that we are practicing the end of karma. We are practicing for the end of self-centeredness. We are practicing for the purpose of awakening.

Let's just sit for a minute together. Karma shapes the circumstances, the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character.

So there are about twenty-five minutes for walking and then we'll have the last sit with chanting.

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