Karma

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 54:11

A group of Western teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama a few years ago and asking his direction on what Dharma should be communicated in the West. He said there are these vast teachings of the Buddha on emptiness and the whole tradition, and then there are the more relative teachings on cause and effect and karma. What do you think is really most important for Westerners to learn about?

The Dalai Lama said that in his opinion it was far more valuable that Westerners learn about karma than that we learn about emptiness. So tonight I'd like to take the Dalai Lama's advice to heart and talk a little bit about this mystery of karma.

The word has become popularized in our culture now but in a slightly misleading way. John Lennon had his song "Instant Karma" and you hear it bandied about. What the Buddha actually meant by karma was related to the word at the time in his language where karma just meant action. That's all it meant was action.

But in explaining how he understood it, the Buddha said, "By action, I mean volition because it's from volition that action comes." So a synonym for volition really is intention. You can think of it as intention or will or desire or volition. They're all pointing to the same thing. There's an urge that arises in the mind, and from this urge spring forth various actions—actions of body, of speech, and of mind.

So the term karma doesn't actually mean the results of the action. It means the action itself when it's accompanied with a volition or an intention. There's another term that means the results of the action, and that term is vipaka. When people talk about karma vipaka, it's the results of actions.

The results of actions can be wholesome or unwholesome, basically according to the intention or the volition in the action. Volition is a mental factor that's said to accompany every waking moment. There's some kind of intention or volition present. And the volitions can be categorized as either wholesome—those which lead to happiness—or unwholesome—those that lead to more suffering.

So the karma or the action takes on a wholesome or an unwholesome quality depending on the wholesome or unwholesome nature of the volition or intention that guides the action.

When we look into the roots of karma, the wholesome roots are said to be our old friends: non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom. So the unwholesome roots then are our old buddies: greed, aversion, and confusion.

In the way the Buddha saw things, an act itself isn't wholesome or unwholesome in itself. It's the intention

that accompanies it. For example, the same act could have either very wholesome or unwholesome intentions. A robber might stab somebody in the belly with a knife in order to steal their belongings, but a surgeon might cut the same person with a knife in order to perform an act of healing. So the act itself isn't the source of the karma—it's the wholesome or unwholesome intention.

It's also said that karma is acting out in three fields: body, speech, and mind. Each of these three fields has different levels of impact, different degrees of strength. The actions of body are said to be the strongest, the actions of speech the second strongest, and the actions just of thought the weakest.

Someone mentioned the other day they were a little worried about getting into thoughts of anger in their meditation. Just to reassure you, when you're just thinking about the anger and not actually acting on it, the karma of that is relatively weak. When we carry it into speech, it gets stronger, and when we carry it into bodily action, stronger still.

You can look at this really directly in your own experience. I was having a discussion with someone a couple of weeks ago about practice. We were talking about whether a certain teaching was going to inspire people to do practice or not—formal meditation practice. This person who's also a meditator said, "Well, it doesn't really matter because that's not the point. It's not the point whether people do the formal practice or not. The point is, does it change their daily life?"

I found myself getting a little reactive because I feel very strongly that there is some value to doing the formal practice, and that not to honor that was overlooking a really important aspect of the Eightfold Path. As the person talked more and more, I found myself getting more and more reactive and more and more annoyed. I was holding myself back from saying something until finally I couldn't hold any longer and it just blurted out of me: "Oh, I must have missed something then. I must have missed something in the Buddha's teaching in that case." It's just a very sarcastic thing to say.

As soon as I said it, I could feel the amount of reactivity in me, the amount of irritation take a quantum jump up. Before, it had sort of been manageable, and as soon as I said it, it was like putting my foot right in a big pile of something. Automatically, there was just a lot more energy.

I've also noticed times when I'll be in the middle of an argument—and these levels of intensity usually happen with my devoted wife, who is the only one who hangs in there with me through them. We might be having just some exchange of words. Then at some point, if I get really angry, I'll stomp off and slam a door. I notice that when I move from the speaking to the taking bodily action, like stomping out of the room and then slamming a door, again, the energy level goes up another notch.

So just to start to tune into that in your own life. The power of thinking a friendly thought towards someone is good.

That's really what the metta practice is based on. The power of saying something kind to someone is stronger. And if you've noticed what power there is in giving someone a gift—if you've really carefully

thought about what would make them happy and you actually give them something as a bodily action—that can be even stronger still.

Now, of course, this isn't the time and place for the saying of kind things and the giving of kind gifts. But again, back in your daily life, notice these different strengths connected with action.

The Buddha felt so strongly about this he said that karma makes the world go round. You might have thought it was a 20th century lyricist who said something like, "love makes the world go round." The Buddha said, "karma makes the world go round. Living beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin."

So the basic teaching is that when we act out of wholesome intentions, it leads to happiness for others, and it leads to happiness for ourselves. When we act out of unwholesome intentions, it leads to unhappiness for others, and it leads to unhappiness for ourselves.

The Tibetans have this very beautiful phrasing of the metta and compassion phrases. They actually have a set of phrases for all four of the Brahmaviharas—for mudita or joy, and also for equanimity. But I love their phrasing for metta and compassion. The metta phrase is in a chant that they call the four immeasurables, and the phrase is: "May you have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." And their compassion phrase is: "May you be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue."

To me, this is a beautiful reflection because it really points to the root of human happiness and unhappiness. The Buddha expressed it really clearly in the second verse of the Dhammapada when he said, "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind and trouble 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."

So the teaching is that actions have consequences. I find it interesting that this idea is really filtering into the mainstream of our culture today. Very different situation than 20 or 30 years ago.

A couple of years ago, James Baraz and I were giving some teachings on meditation at a juvenile hall—a juvenile hall in San Mateo. For those of you who don't know about the justice system in this country, juvenile hall is where teenagers are detained before they go to trial. So these are kids generally between about 13 and up to the age of 18 when they become adults in the eyes of the law. It's a holding facility before they go on trial for things like armed robbery, assault, murder, grand larceny, and so on.

One of the people who was working at this facility in San Mateo is a meditator and thought it would be great if the people who were staying there could get some exposure to the Dharma. So she asked James and me to lead a class, and we did. We did a five-week series, and we didn't call it meditation because we figured that would turn everybody off. We called it "mind power." That's a better marketing term in that environment. At the end of the class, we gave them a little graduation certificate that showed they had

completed their course in mind power. And one of them asked me, "Could I show this to the judge?" I said, "Sure, you can try."

So we'd been teaching them for about four classes. We went down every week, and we'd been teaching them for about four weeks on the basics of mindfulness and paying attention to the breath. And mostly what we tried to teach about was how to work with their fear and their anger. Because you can imagine that they're cooped up in these cells all day long, they're just kids, and in a few weeks their life is going to be on the line when they're brought to trial. And they don't know whether they're going to end up in jail for the next 10 or 20 years, whether the judge will decide to try them as an adult when they could be put away for life, or what might happen to them.

So they're in a great state of insecurity. They have no way to deal with the emotions. We gave them very basic body and emotion techniques for paying attention to their feelings. And several of them said that they found it very helpful. So they kept coming to the class. We weren't sure that they would, but they kept coming.

So the last class was coming up and I said to James, "You know what? I'd really like to teach on the precepts." And he sort of looked at me like, "Are you crazy with these guys?" Because we were dealing with the guys who were in maximum security, which means they were in for some of the offenses that I mentioned earlier.

And I said, "Yeah, you know, it might be the last time that they ever hear these teachings. I'd like to try it."

So I approached it through the Buddha's understanding of what brings happiness and what brings unhappiness. I told them, "This guy, the Buddha, sort of figured out the science of what makes people happy and what makes them unhappy." I said, "Have you ever noticed that when you do things out of a kind heart, kindness comes back to you? And when you do things out of an angry heart, anger tends to come back to you? Have you ever had that sense?"

One of the young guys put up his hand and said, "Do you mean like what goes around comes around?"

And I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Yeah, I get that."

So it was a language that they could really grasp instinctively. There were many beautiful moments in that class. One thing that touched me deeply was a young African-American man with a very soft, sweet presence in the group. We'd ring the bell at the end of sitting, then ask them to share about their experience. He said, "When I heard that bell, I just followed it on up to the window in the roof." We were in a room with a skylight. "I just went right out the window with the sound of that bell." Very beautiful.

The teaching is that actions have consequences. We can think about this and see that we can relate to it directly in our lives. Actions have really immediate consequences in the moment. When we act out of

kindness, when we act out of giving, it feels good in the here and now. When we act out of contraction, out of fear, or out of cruelty, it doesn't feel very good. You can actually feel the pain of the contraction when that is happening. As Sylvia said the other day in a talk, anyone who's causing a lot of pain is himself in a great deal of pain.

We also find the results of our actions in the memories of them. Often in metta practice, we encourage you to reflect on things you've done for yourself or for others that have been really helpful—to reflect on your own good deeds. This is not to generate pride, but so you can actually take joy and delight in the memory of your goodness, to have real conviction of your own goodness, to feel it directly.

Also in meditation, as we get still, we may often find memories coming of times when we haven't been so kind, of times when we've been unthoughtful to people.

The teaching on karma is also that these actions have consequences in the future in really mysterious ways, in ways we cannot fully understand, in ways we can't directly see for ourselves. The Buddha talked about this clearly, and it's a part of the teaching that, for the most part, we can't really verify.

Most of the Buddha's teaching is wonderful because it's so pragmatic, so empirical—we can check it out. If you pay attention to the breath, you become peaceful. Check it out. See if it's true. You can find that out for yourself. If the mind is contracted with fear, it brings pain. Check it out. We can look and see.

But this level of the teaching on karma we're not really able to verify. So in talking to you about it tonight, I really want to just put it out as part of the Buddha's teaching, as something he felt was important, and then kind of leave it with you. It's not something that anybody else can convince you of. It's not something that I want to try to convince you of. But I do want to let you know what the Buddha said about it so that you can hang out with it and reflect on it and see if it resonates for you. See if it feels true.

Over many years of practice and observation, I've developed great faith in it. To what extent it's blind faith and to what extent it's verified faith, I can't really say. But I have very deep trust myself in this teaching.

One of the ways that karma really makes sense is in the field of ethical conduct. When we opened the retreat, we talked about all of us taking the five precepts together. Those precepts are really expressions of the wholesome intention of non-harming. They have immediate benefits in that we don't cause suffering to others. They have long-term benefits in that we don't cause suffering to ourselves. The precepts are really great protections for each of us.

The Buddha actually outlined a list of ten unwholesome actions that he said were expressions of unwholesome karma. Three of them are expressions of body, four of them are expressions of speech, and three of them are expressions of mind. So he gave us very clear and concrete guidelines for working in this area of wholesome and unwholesome action.

Basically he said that in actions of the body, killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are unwholesome and

lead to further suffering. In actions of speech, the actions of lying, speaking harshly or abusively to someone, speaking maliciously about someone, and gossiping

are unwholesome actions of speech. And in thought, he said the unwholesome actions of thought are covetousness, ill will, and this last one is really curious—wrong view. That is, having an understanding of the world that doesn't align with the truth.

The Buddha said a lot of suffering arises from misunderstandings. He identified one of the most pernicious forms of wrong view as believing that actions don't have consequences. You can see this in the world today. There's a level of nihilism or lack of faith that leads to things like a callous disregard for other people, that leads to stealing or killing or infidelity—not being aware of the pain that sexual misconduct causes others. There's harshness of speech that isn't moderated or restrained. I think you can see in the world that society at large doesn't have this understanding that actions have consequences. It's a great gift for us as meditators that we have this appreciation of the precepts.

Sometimes this getting stuck in nihilism actually comes because people get too attached to the teaching on emptiness. When people think that seeing the wisdom side of emptiness is all that matters, they start to believe that actions aren't important. There's a really beautiful quotation from Padmasambhava, the Indian saint who brought Buddhism to Tibet, that states the truth about this. He said, "Though my view is as spacious as the sky"—meaning his understanding is vast and his equanimity is equally vast—"my actions as regards cause and effect are as refined as grains of barley flour." This is that combination of a vast degree of freedom and real impeccability in action.

At retreat centers, you get many great opportunities to look at this skillful means in terms of not taking what's not given and not killing. There was a dilemma at the Minneapolis Zen Center, which was led by Katagiri Roshi, a Dharma brother of Suzuki Roshi and Japanese Zen master. They were finding at that time that there was a problem with cockroaches in the Dharma hall. People would come in for sitting, come in to hear the Dharma, and there'd be the scurrying of little feet that you'd hear in the silence. Some people were really bothered by that. They didn't want to sit with cockroaches, and the attendance started declining.

This put the students in a real dilemma. What do we do? If we kill the cockroaches, we break the first precept. If we don't kill the cockroaches, nobody comes to the zendo. They really didn't know what to do. So they went to Katagiri Roshi and put the problem to him and said, "Roshi, what shall we do?" He took it in and said, "I'm not going to tell you." And he didn't. He put the problem right back on the students.

They decided in the end to have the hall fumigated. So the cockroaches were killed, and then people started showing up for meditations again. Even though this is the precept not to kill, even though they were aware that it was an unwholesome action, there was also the understanding that sometimes it may be the appropriate thing to do, even in a dharma context. Similar questions arise for really sincere practitioners around issues like euthanasia—maybe where pets are concerned—and abortion. There's real

deep struggle around these questions, but sometimes the action that the precept is stating not to take may actually be the right action in that situation.

It was also interesting to be on staff at a retreat center because in being on staff for long retreats, the meditators would get really comfortable in the place and start to feel that the kitchen was their home as much as any other part of the facility. One staff member came into the kitchen one night about two in the morning and found about four meditators in there frying eggs and making toast. It was a little disconcerting because from the point of view of the cooks, not taking what isn't given means taking what the cooks put out and drawing the line there. That's the way it's meant to be understood.

Another time, a staff person walked into the walk-in fridge, and one of the meditators was in there with his hand in a box of dates, lifting a date to his mouth. The staff person said, being a friendly, compassionate staff person, "Can I help you?" And the meditator said, "Oh, I was just looking for the caretaker's office." Which they were then happy to show him to.

I know one time I got a really early teaching on karma when I had just graduated from college and taken my first job. I was twenty-one years old and very nervous about going out into the world and not having enough money, leaving the protected life of university and moving into the work world full time. I didn't have a great deal of resources, and my car, which was a VW Beetle that was about ten years old, broke down. I took it in for repair, and they said, "Well, to repair this, it's going to cost you about $600." I said, "No, I can't do that."

So I sold the car, and I sold it to somebody without telling them how bad the damage was, even though I knew. I didn't actually tell a lie, but I also wasn't truthful. I knew I was hiding something from them. My conscience tormented me about it afterwards, but I still kept the money. I went out and bought a little sports car. After I'd gotten a couple of paychecks, I bought a Triumph TR4.

It was really representative of British auto engineering in the 1960s, which meant it broke down all the time. I owned it for two years and had two valve jobs on it, which is a really major expense. And I started to realize, oh, maybe this is happening because I sold somebody a bad car and somebody just sold me a bad car. Since then I've done a little more truth and disclosure in advertising and I haven't had those problems. It was an instant lesson.

So paying attention to the areas of right conduct in body and speech and mind really can lead to a lot of clarity and a lot of happiness.

In fact, the phrase of the equanimity meditation, also in the Brahma-Vihara family, points to this truth as well. The basic phrase in the equanimity meditation is a little hard for Westerners to accept when we first hear it. It says something like, "All beings are the heirs of their actions. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions more than on my wishes for them." This is a very sobering reflection.

In doing the equanimity practice, you basically repeat this phrase over and over again all day long,

holding the different individuals as you have in the loving-kindness—yourself, a benefactor, a friend, a neutral person, and so on—with the reflection that each person's happiness and unhappiness comes from our own past actions. It was a very powerful practice.

One year, in an intensive retreat of about six weeks, I did each of the Brahma-Vihara practices for ten days in an intensive fashion. And for me, after the metta practice, which has been the strongest for me, the equanimity practice was the most powerful of the other three Brahma-Viharas.

The Buddha went on to say that if you want to see someone's past actions, take a look at their present circumstances. If you want to see someone's future circumstances, take a look at their present actions.

Now I want to throw in a caution around this area, and that is that it's really impossible to know the details. We can get really inclined to figure out, "Oh my gosh, I got this terrible illness. It's a life-threatening illness. What did I do wrong in the past that has caused this?" You can really dwell on a question like that. Or something really unfortunate happened—"I got in a car accident this week. What did I do that was responsible for that?" This isn't productive thinking.

It's really impossible for us to know the workings of karma to that level of detail. The Buddha actually said that the workings of karma are one of the four imponderables. And if you think about them, he said, it will drive you mad and cause you vexation. He didn't say which of those was stronger, but you'll go mad and experience vexation.

The other three imponderables, just in case you're curious so you don't have to think about them either: the range of mind of the Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the beginning of the universe. So just to take a load off your mind, don't worry about those.

So I take this teaching on karma in very broad brush terms. People's general level of happiness and unhappiness are related in some mysterious way to past actions. And that's really as refined or as detailed as I feel I can be about it for myself.

One of the other teachings that comes in around the teaching on karma is the teaching on rebirth. And I want to talk about this a little bit too because the Buddha talked about it quite frequently.

Basically, the Buddha taught that if we're not fully free at the time of death, the unfree parts of ourselves—the degree to which greed, aversion, and confusion are still active in us—has a propelling tendency of forward momentum that will lead to another being arising linked in some way to the continuation of our habits of mind. These tendencies, the forces of greed and aversion and delusion, until completely uprooted, result in future becoming. And something about the tendencies passes on to the new being.

Moreover, he said, the life situation that we take birth in is a reflection of the wholesomeness of our actions from the past. So if we have acted in a very wholesome way in this life, chances are that we can

take birth in a situation that is basically pleasant. And people who have acted in very unskillful ways and caused a lot of harm to others in this life find themselves reborn in situations that are intrinsically painful.

The Buddha actually described different realms or planes of existence that beings take birth in that are categorized by these qualities of pleasantness or unpleasantness. This is all part of a grand cosmology that is unfolded in his teachings.

Again, whether you believe in this or not is completely up to you. It's possible to be a very dedicated practitioner and not have any sort of faith or belief in this at all. But for some people, this is an inspiring view of practice because it means that the unfolding of our path takes place over a vast, vast period of time, and it can give an inspiring and awesome view of the project that we're embarked on—this great and total purification of the heart.

So I'll just say a few more things about the cosmology. There are thirty-one realms of existence in all, and they're sort of graded from the most suffering to the most pleasant. Beginning at the lowest, the most suffering realm, the Buddha also referred to realms of hellishness—very intense suffering. And then working upwards through realms that are ruled strongly by desire, which are called the realm of hungry ghosts. Realms that are ruled by ignorance, which is the realm of the animals. Realms of demons, of conflict and aggression. And on top of those four comes the human realm.

It's said that in the human realm, a particular capacity of our mind is that we have the ability to experience the mental states of the beings of all thirty-one realms.

From the human realm, ascending in happiness, there are said to be six heavenly realms called the deva realms—realms of intense pleasure filled with great sense enjoyments. Beings in these realms experience no suffering at all until they die, and their greatest suffering at the time of death comes from being ignored by the other beings of that realm.

Above these are even higher realms called the Brahma realms, essentially godly realms of existence. Among these divine figures are considered to be creator beings who may have actually shaped this world and other worlds in which beings take birth.

However, whether one takes birth in a realm of intense suffering or intense pleasure, one's lifetime in that realm is limited. There is no such thing in Buddhist cosmology as eternal birth. The sequence generally unfolds as beings experiencing pleasure for a time based on past wholesome actions, but unless they have renewed the wholesomeness of their actions, it becomes possible that past unwholesome actions will lead to rebirth in a less happy realm.

The picture emerges of beings moving from one realm to another, experiencing happiness in one lifetime and pain in another over countless eons. The Buddha said that if you gathered together the skeletons from all your lifetimes, they would form a vast mountain.

I offer this simply as a glimpse into the potential vastness of the view of life that the Buddha himself claimed to see. In the teachings and ancient texts, this is presented not as speculation, but as something the Buddha said he could actually perceive through his own developed psychic powers. Again, whether you believe in this or not is completely up to you.

Manindraji, who was Joseph's first teacher, used to teach about this material, always prefacing it by saying, "You don't have to believe in this. It's true, but you don't need to believe in it." If you feel completely disbelieving of it, you're in good company. Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand and a deeply respected monk, considered this entire teaching on rebirth completely irrelevant. He didn't teach it, didn't believe in it, and didn't think it held any particular value for his practice. And he was a very good Buddhist—a wise and enlightened practitioner.

Stephen Batchelor, whom I consider one of the most creative writers on Buddhism today, is also an agnostic when it comes to rebirth. He essentially says, "I don't know from my own experience. I'm not going to say it is or isn't. I'm going to stay with this position of not knowing because for me, that's the truth." This too is a deeply respected position within the tradition.

All the teachings on rebirth that we encounter can be understood in terms of these thirty-one planes that the Buddha described. We can also understand them in terms of moment-to-moment birth, because we actually take a new birth every moment we identify with an aspect of our experience. A new "I" gets formed.

If you come into a sitting and experience great calm and concentration, and there's any clinging to that, any identification with it, then you take birth as "the good meditator." This is quite a happy birth, as births go in this human realm. You can enjoy that identity for a while, carrying it out to the walking period, feeling pleased with your sitting and this sense of yourself. It's a genuinely happy birth—until you die, until you return to the hall expecting that same concentration and calm to be there as before. When it's not like that, there's suffering in that death.

Or you might become filled with hunger. Perhaps you're sitting here in the 11:45 session and suddenly find yourself very hungry. You think about that wonderful meal you had a couple of days ago and imagine you can smell roasting onions drifting up from the kitchen. Then you're born as "the hungry meditator"—a bit like the hungry ghost realm. There's unsatisfactoriness in that birth, which may continue until you walk down the hill, get your plate, and take a few bites as the hunger fades.

We're constantly being born into situations that are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in this setting. You can completely understand rebirth on this level, and all the Buddha's teachings on rebirth fit perfectly within this framework.

One question that often arises about rebirth is: if there's no self, what is it that gets reborn? I don't want to go into great detail, but I'll share what Chögyam Trungpa, that great Tibetan teacher, said about this. He

explained, "Basically what gets reborn are our bad habits." We'll leave it at that.

So one level of understanding karma is that when we act wholesomely, wholesome results and happiness come into our lives. When we act unwholesomely, unwholesome results and unhappiness follow. There's a further understanding of this message of karma that I think is crucial for us as meditators: the entire Eightfold Path is founded on karma. The whole journey to liberation rests on the belief and trust that the actions we take in alignment with the path deliver us to freedom.

Karma thus has both this mundane aspect—that good actions bring happiness—and this transcendent dimension, pointing toward the truth that by following the path to liberation, we act in a way that truly frees the mind completely. The Tibetans express this beautifully when they say:

They say that liberation rests on two accumulations: the accumulation of wisdom or insight and the accumulation of merit.

I love this teaching. I think it's a really profound pointing because what it says is that even if we open our mind and the mind gets strong and can see into the deepest truth of things in a moment that's enlightening and awakening and very, very profound, such a moment on its own may not be enough. For most of us, we have to support moments like that with the accumulation of merit—that is, with the accumulated power of our past wholesome actions.

Many, many, many eons ago, it is said, there was an ascetic named Sumedha who came in contact with the Buddha of his time, whose name was Dipankara. And the ascetic Sumedha was developed to such a degree in mind training that if he had had one word of teaching from the Buddha Dipankara, he would have become fully liberated. But he was so inspired by his first glimpse of this Buddha in an earlier time that he didn't want to become liberated. He decided he would rather be a Buddha.

So he made the aspiration at that moment: "May I myself develop all the wholesome qualities that would be needed to awaken by myself at a time when the teachings of the Dharma have faded away from the face of the earth." And it is said that that Buddha Dipankara saw this wish of Sumedha's, saw it with his psychic vision, and told him, "I hear your wish and your wish will be granted. You have the potential to become a future Buddha."

So Sumedho took that blessing and went off back to his retreat hut and reflected on what were the things that he would need to do in order to develop the strength of mind and the wholesomeness to become a Buddha himself. And the answer that he came up with was the list that's called the Ten Paramis, which we've talked about a lot—qualities like Sylvia talked about the other night: patience and determination, truthfulness, loving kindness, wisdom, renunciation, and so on. The paramis are the list that really detail how the wholesome forces of the mind, when cultivated in meditation practice and in daily life, have that cumulative power that liberates the mind.

So there's the need for insight, deep understanding. There's also the need for this accumulation of

wholesome activities. The Dalai Lama in one book said that the Tibetan word for inspiration actually literally means "force of transformation," meaning that the virtuous qualities of what we're inspired by actually have the power to transform the nature of your mind.

There's a name for this quality among the paramis, this particular pointing. A few years ago, I visited a great Tibetan teacher named Tulku Ergen Rinpoche. He was living at a monastery outside of Kathmandu, and we spent about two weeks going and visiting with him and getting teachings. And at the end of the two weeks, we asked if we could take refuge in his tradition. Of course, we'd taken refuge in the Theravadan tradition, and a number of us had been monks and nuns, but we wanted to take refuge in his teachings as well.

And so he did it, and he gave each of us names. That's one of the things you do in a refuge ceremony typically—you get a new name. To symbolize renunciation, we went up to him, and he pulled our hair up a little bit and cut a little lock off to symbolize the Buddha's shaving of his head when he left the household life, as nuns and monks do today. And he gave us a new name. He gave us the names of paramis, some of us, and my name was Ergen, which was his name, Tsondrul. Ergen Tsondrul. Let me introduce myself.

Tsondrul is the parami that in Sanskrit is called virya. Virya is normally translated as energy or effort. But in Tibetan, they understand it as taking delight in what is wholesome. And I really was glad to get that name because in my practice, I've needed a lot of virya. I've had to have a lot of virya. I started practice with a lot of unhappiness. I had a lot of fear, a lot of bodily tension, a lot of mental unease in the early years of my practice. And I really needed to have a strong determination and a lot of energy to work through that.

So I feel in myself a tremendous appreciation for what is wholesome in this practice. And I feel that if you don't really have that deep love of what's wholesome from Dharma practice, you can't sustain your path because it's a hard path. It's arduous—sitting here hour after hour and walking and being quiet and not having contact. It's a very arduous path. And if you don't love the fruits of it, I don't think you'll sustain your journey. If you don't love the stillness and the wisdom, the clarity and the heartfulness of it. But if you love that, then that will really sustain you on your journey.

So in every moment, really, we make this choice of being with the wholesome or being with the unwholesome. And time and time again, of course, we get dragged away by the unwholesome. I was doing a six-week period of metta practice in the fall and going through all the ups and downs of retreat practice. And there was one situation in my outside life that would come up from time to time that I feel angry about. I'd be doing my metta practice—"may all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful"—and then, "Boy, I'm so angry at this person" would come in too. And it would sort of come in and be dominant for a while.

And one sitting, after I'd been carried away a number of times, this image came up spontaneously of the

direction of anger.

And the image that came spontaneously to mind was being on this deserted road at night. It was dark, and by a tree that was dead and bare, there was a wind howling across the road, and it was very lonely. I was all on my own. That was the image that came to me of where the anger was taking me—a place of real desolation and unhappiness and fear. I thought, do I want to go down that road again?

Just as I was contemplating this, without generating any effort, another image arose on the other side of my field of vision. I simply noticed this vision appearing. When I turned my mind toward it, there was a circle of light filled with yellow radiance. In the middle of the circle, a Buddha was suspended in the air, surrounded by rainbows and circles of light. On the ground below were bodhisattvas and practitioners, and flying through the air were Thai-style devas—those celestial beings you may have seen in paintings, gliding gracefully with their legs tucked beneath them.

I sat there and thought, "Where should I go?" It was such a graphic representation of the wholesome fruits of the path and the unwholesome direction of my anger that it completely sobered me in that moment. I turned my mind back to the metta practice, which became a great support.

In every moment, we're all making that choice: coming back to the present moment, connecting with the breath, with sounds, with sensations, establishing mindfulness and presence with an accepting heart, with this flavor of metta. These moments of wholesomeness are very powerful. We may not feel transformed by one moment, but little by little, they accumulate.

The Buddha expressed this beautifully: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." This is where our mindfulness practice is leading. No moment that you're awake is ever wasted, because each one helps fill this jar. When that jar overflows, that's what liberates the mind—the overflowing into real freedom.

So there's the karma of wholesome and unwholesome actions, and there's the karma of the path that leads to liberation. The Buddha said something remarkable about the end of the path: for one who is fully liberated, there is no more karma. For one who is completely awake, there is no more individual will, no more desire, no more motivation. There is only presence.

Sometimes we can touch into this in our meditation practice—those moments when we feel freest. There's a sense that in that freedom, there's no compulsion in any particular direction. Yet as life's situations present themselves, we can respond spontaneously with wisdom where needed, with compassion where needed, with metta where needed. The actions of the free heart arise without premeditation; the appropriate response emerges naturally.

Rumi expressed this beautifully: "Drink the wine that moves you as a camel moves when he's been untied and is just ambling about."

The Buddha taught that the karma which leads to the ending of all karma is the Noble Eightfold Path—the path of wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditation. We engage in techniques and practices to bring the mind to stillness, so the movements of volition aren't so impactful or powerful, allowing us to feel that natural calm. Once we rest in that calmness, we can simply abide in the stillness—not needing to do anymore, but being with that freedom, that peace, and letting whatever wants to emerge from that moment unfold as it will.

I'll close with another poem from Rilke's Book of Hours:

*I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.
I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for
may for once spring clear
without my contriving.

If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.
May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back—
the way it is with children.*

Thank you for listening.

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