Understanding Karma

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:11:34

Welcome back to all of you who are online. It's wonderful to think of such an enlarged Sangha joining us here.

Tonight I'd like to continue the discussion of how we can apply the depths of the Buddha's teaching in our daily lives, because that really is the challenge. We come here in practice and we have certain levels of insight and understanding, and the challenge is how can we really bring that forward into the busyness of our lives.

The possibility of happiness, both individually and collectively, rests on one basic understanding: that the unfolding of our lives begins in the mind. The Buddha expressed this very clearly in the opening verses of the Dhammapada, which most of you probably know is a famous collection of verses of teachings of the Buddha.

The very opening stanzas are: "Mind is the forerunner of all action. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with an unwholesome mind, suffering follows as the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart. If one speaks or acts with a wholesome mind, happiness flows as surely as one's shadow."

In some way the Buddha just laid it out very clearly in terms of how to create happiness in our lives. So we need to explore and investigate the nature and the workings of this mind. How is it all unfolding? How do the actions or the qualities of our mind manifest in the world?

I want to give a very brief theoretical framework from the Buddhist perspective of what constitutes what we call mind. The most fundamental aspect of what we call mind is consciousness—the simple knowing faculty. Knowing a sight, knowing a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a mind object. It's that which knows. This consciousness is arising and passing in each moment with its own object: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, and so forth.

But consciousness doesn't arise alone. It arises together with what are called mental factors. There's a whole range of mental factors that arise in different combinations in every moment of consciousness. These mental factors color the consciousness; they inform each moment of consciousness in different ways. And it's these mental factors which continually condition and recondition all the patterns of our lives.

As examples of different mental factors that we're very familiar with: love, fear, joy, anger, grief, wisdom, ignorance, mindfulness, concentration, compassion—they are all mental factors. When they arise, they

color or give a flavor or a taste to that moment of consciousness.

Being here on retreat, and also with wise attention in our lives, brings us a very immediate and direct experience of which factors lead to more suffering and which factors make us happy. This is not complicated. We're probably already quite familiar with this. How does it feel when we're angry? How does it feel when we're generous? When we're loving? It doesn't take deep samadhi to really recognize the effect these mental factors are having in our day-to-day experience.

One of the ways the Buddha expressed this wisdom of seeing what causes happiness and what causes suffering is as the law of karma. So tonight I want to explore in some depth the understanding of this most basic teaching.

Before I go on, I want to clarify the term a little bit. Technically, there's a double phrase: karma vipaka, which means action and result. Literally, karma refers to the action. But in popular parlance, we combine those two in "karma," including in our ordinary understanding both the action and the result. It's just worth knowing that there are actually two different aspects: karma vipaka.

The basic understanding of the law of karma is that all volitional activities—volitional activities of body, of speech, of mind—have the power to

bring about results. So that power to bring about results resides in this mental factor of volition. This is the karmic force in our lives.

It's helpful to look a little more carefully at this factor of volition because it plays such a critical role in how our lives unfold. Notice when you're about to do or say something, to perform some action—there is that momentary impulse. It's like a gathering of the energy, the willing of something happening. That's what the volition is. We might think of it as the command moment in the mind.

This is different than just a thought arising of what we might do. It's not just a thought; it's that particular factor which gathers all the energy. As it's described in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, volition gathers all the energy of all the other factors that are present and directs it to the accomplishment of what we want to do.

Sometimes, in terms of the practice and encouraging people to notice these moments of volition or intention, I call it the "about-to" moment. You're walking and you come to the door, about to reach. There's that moment before the reaching happens, but it's impelling—it results in the action. That's the moment of volition.

One of the interesting things about volition, which you can also check out for yourself, is that these volitions—or another synonym for that is intentions—keep arising throughout the action. For example, if you're walking, there's the initial volition to walk, and that's what gets us started. But this volition has to keep flowing throughout the whole movement, because if the volition stops, the movement is going to

stop.

It's something like an electric current. Maybe you're putting a light on—if you stop the current, the light goes out. So if the volition stops in the midst of an action, the action is going to stop. This is something we generally don't notice at all. It's just kind of fun to check it out for yourself because it's not hard to see as you're walking.

So although these volitions are very quick, arising just in the moment, and they're very small, hardly noticeable, they contain a huge power. That's why the Buddha gave so much emphasis to understanding volition. The power they have, contained right within that volition, is the power to bring about future results. You could think of it almost like the power in a seed. A seed can be very small, and yet it has the power to produce a tree. That's the power that volition has—it will bring about future results.

This is why volition is the linchpin of understanding the law of karma. We really have to deeply understand this if we want to understand the unfolding of our lives. Our lives are unfolding in a lawful way, and one of the laws is the law of karma. So if we want to understand how our lives are unfolding, we have to appreciate the power that resides in these volitions, in these intentions. Volitional actions bear fruit. We cannot fully understand the Buddha's teachings without understanding to some extent this basic law of cause and effect—that intention, volition, brings results.

What's interesting is that probably most of us on some level can appreciate that our actions will bear some kind of fruit. On just a basic theoretical level, we may understand that. But what I find really interesting, and I see this in myself and I imagine it's true of everybody else, is how often do we consider that truth before we take an action? Do we register that the volition behind this action is going to bear some future result? That's an important piece of information for us to have.

Volition brings about a result not only in the moment—and this is what makes the law of karma so vast and so difficult to understand as well—it has the power to bring about results in the immediate future and in the long-distant future. This gets to be quite mysterious. How does an intention in this moment bring a result five lifetimes from now?

This is why the Buddha said when he was teaching about karma, don't think too much about it because it will drive you crazy. He said really only the mind of a Buddha can understand it in its full complexity. So in talking about it tonight, I'm not going to suggest that we're going to come away understanding the answer to that question of how something we do now will result in something in the distant future. But it will provide a framework, really a framework of guidance in our lives, to emphasize how it's possible that a small moment can have such huge power.

I came across this statement by Albert Einstein. He said, in talking about his equation $E=mc^2$, that the energy contained in a raisin is enough to power all the energy needs of New York City for a day. So you know those raisins you've been having at tea? Do you ever think of that? Well, likewise, we rarely think of

the fact that our volitional actions have an analogous kind of power. But it's hidden. It's not obvious.

Now, these intentions, these volitions, are ethically neutral. The intention, that particular mental factor, is not wholesome and it's not unwholesome. It's just, one might say, the vehicle or the mechanism for karmic unfolding. It contains the power to bring about results, but it is the motivations associated with the intention that determine what the result will be.

So this is important. The volition is kind of the energy impulse, but then what determines the particular results that come have to do with the motivations behind the intention, behind the volition. The Buddha pointed out which motivations lead to suffering and which motivations lead to happiness, to peace, to freedom.

He clarified this in many ways, but the simplest description of understanding how motivations influence outcome is his description of the root of all unwholesome actions as being greed, hatred, and delusion. We could trace any unwholesome action that we do back to one of those three roots. So those are things we can keep an eye out for if we're trying to see what our motivations are in a particular action. Is there greed here? Is there aversion or anger? Is there delusion?

And likewise, the three wholesome roots, obviously, are non-greed, which is generosity; non-hatred, which is loving-kindness; and non-delusion, which is wisdom. I appreciate this because it simplifies our task of trying to understand the motivations behind our actions. Sometimes they can be very subtle, but basically they come down to these three unwholesome roots and three wholesome roots.

What we find, though, is that our motivations can be very subtle and they are often overlooked. We have an intention to do something and we just do it. I would say probably most of the time we don't stop to pay attention to that moment, to that about-to moment, and consider what the motivation is. This is a challenging part of the practice, but it has such consequence in our lives that it would be worth beginning to explore the possibility of paying attention to that.

Just as a few examples of how sometimes it's very difficult to really assess the motivation: maybe there's an impulse, an intention to give. There could be a lot of different motivations behind that. Even though the act of generosity itself is a wholesome act, and there's always a wholesome aspect to it, it could be mixed at times with some unwholesome aspects. Is it mixed with expectation of getting something back? Are we giving out of guilt in some situation? Is the motivation metta or compassion?

I'll give you an example where I completely missed a kind of subtle motivation in an act of generosity. This goes back to my India days. I was in Bodh Gaya, which is really just a small village, but it's where the Buddha was enlightened, so it's a very powerful place. In between retreats, I was just in the local bazaar buying some fruits and vegetables. And as those of you who have been in India know, there are often a lot of beggars around, especially little kids. So I'm buying these oranges, and this little beggar boy comes up with his hand out. Just without thinking, I take one of the oranges I just bought and give it to him. This was

not some great act of generosity—it was just a small thing.

And then something really interesting happened. He just walked away without the slightest acknowledgment. I was not expecting effusive thanks. And I didn't realize I was expecting anything. But when I gave him the orange and he just walked away, it revealed—oh yes, there was a little bit of an expectation of even the slightest acknowledgment, a smile. So that's how subtle it can be, that often there are these motivations mixed in that we don't even recognize, we don't see, unless we're really paying attention.

So discovering what our motivations truly are is really the gift of mindfulness to this understanding. It's only if we're really being mindful in the moment that we even have a chance of seeing and understanding. Mindfulness plays such a key role not only here on retreat, but in our lives.

The writer John Barth, in talking about understanding our own motivations, has this one line which I think will resonate: "Self-knowledge is always bad news." When we really start looking at our minds, it's always bad news. But when we examine our motivations carefully, when we're really watching and trying to see some of the subtleties, we'll see that we're probably less good and also less bad than we think we are. We all are just this mix.

And this mix was expressed in a line by the poet W.H. Auden. Again, this is another one of my favorite lines: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." It's just acknowledging that yes, we all have crooked hearts, and our neighbors have crooked hearts, and we can love. It's appreciating the complexity of our own condition. It's not all one way or all another way—we're a mix. And that's why we need to pay attention. Because in the mix, if we want to create the conditions for happiness, we have to sort out what are the wholesome states and what are the unwholesome states.

This is a powerful investigation, which can be done as well in the world as on retreat. It provides a framework for really connecting with the depth of practice in the midst of our lives. And probably becoming aware of our motivations may be more obvious in the busyness of our lives, our relationships, our work. I would just encourage you to take interest in that because it is so important.

So volition is the force in the mind that initiates the action and contains the power to bring a result. Motivation is the factor or factors which determine what the fruit of that volition will be. See the difference?

One of the challenges in our practice—and in our lives—is integrating this understanding of karma with our growing insight into emptiness, selflessness, the selfless, insubstantial nature of phenomena. Some very common questions arise: If there's no self, who experiences karmic results? I must have heard that question a thousand times. Or: If everything is empty, what does it matter what I do? These are some of the questions that come up when we try to integrate the understanding of the law of karma—that actions produce results—with the profound insight into the empty, selfless nature of everything.

What we come to understand is that although phenomena are insubstantial and empty of self, everything arising and passing, still they are unfolding lawfully. It's not that things are happening chaotically. And the law of karma is one of the laws—not the only one—that governs the unfolding of this empty process.

A few teachers have, in really clever ways, expressed the unity of these two understandings: the understanding of emptiness and the understanding of karma and the law of cause and effect. The Dalai Lama said, "A Buddha perceives the ultimate truth, emptiness, while leaving conventional truth untouched"—which means the conventional truth is working even as we understand the empty nature of it all.

And then Padmasambhava, the great Indian adept who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet and is revered there almost as the second Buddha, said, "His view of emptiness is as vast as the sky, but his attention to the law of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour." The one does not exclude or conflict with the other. Our view or understanding of emptiness can be as vast as the sky, and yet within that, we are paying careful attention to the motivations behind our actions. One phrase that has come up is that everything rests on the tip of motivation in terms of our karmic unfolding.

And there was a Korean Zen master who founded the Providence Zen Center and many branch monasteries, Seung Sahn Sunim. He expressed it this way: "There's no right and no wrong"—the level of emptiness. "But right is right and wrong is wrong"—the law of karma. There is no right, there is no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong.

Can we hold both? Can we really live from both of those perspectives?

The last one I'll mention is from Suzuki Roshi, who founded the San Francisco Zen Center. He said, "Everything is perfect, and there's always room for improvement." On the surface it seems paradoxical, but in living, it's not paradoxical at all. We can hold both levels.

Just as an example, consider a cup. The cup holds water. We can describe its shape and its aesthetics and what it's made of. But if we looked at this cup under an electron microscope—and I've never looked through an electron microscope, so I don't really know what you see—but what I'm imagining is that there's no cup. The cup has completely disappeared. It's a whole different level or order of reality. But it's not that what we see under an electron microscope is here and the cup is over there. It's a unity, and it's just seeing things on different levels. On one level, it's a cup and we take care of it and we wash it—all the ways we relate to a cup. And at the same time, we can at least appreciate the understanding that on the subatomic level, there's no cup.

This could help us learn how to live on the relative level of karma and everything else, our ordinary conventional reality—to live on the conventional level with less attachment. Because we also understand that on another level, there's no cup. It's all empty. It's all insubstantial. Can we hold both? This is really the challenge of our lives.

It's important to understand, in a little more detail, the specific ways that karmic unfolding happens in our lives—how we can actually experience it so it's not just a Buddhist philosophical teaching.

The first aspect is something people probably are not that familiar with, called present karma. We can notice the immediate effects of an action in the present moment, the immediate effects of different mind states. If there's fear, or love, or anger, or joy—the whole range of different emotions and mind states—we can feel the karmic effect of those mind states right in the present moment. What does anger feel like? What does generosity feel like? We can see immediately whether they're the cause of happiness or the cause of suffering for us. That's immediate present karma.

We can also understand present karma by noticing how people react to us as we're experiencing different mind states. When you're with somebody who's very angry, or you yourself are very angry, notice how people respond. It's probably not, unless one is quite advanced, with great open-heartedness. If we have a lot of angry energy coming through or we're projecting that, generally people put up some kind of energetic defense because it's a powerful energy. That's a present karmic result. And if we're loving, if we're generous, how do people relate to us when we're in that state? Generally with a lot of goodwill and deep friendship. This is not mysterious—we've all experienced it—but this is one of the workings of karma, and we can see it right in the present moment.

There's another aspect of present karma which could be very helpful in our lives if we really embody it: the degree to which present qualities of mind affect the outcome of what we want to accomplish. We want to undertake some project. Accomplishing something is usually related to certain factors like energy and perseverance and wisdom that we bring to the action, and that will affect the outcome. If we bring lethargy and disinterest and more unwholesome states, it's less likely that action is going to be successful. Again, immediate present karma, not hard to see. But we often don't pay attention to it and don't give proper import to that understanding.

The next expression of karma is really interesting and becomes manifest a lot on retreat. In some way it's one of the most vivid experiences we can have. That is seeing how our past—how the mind retains the impressions of all our past actions. Have you had the experience of sitting, and all of a sudden memories come that you didn't even know you remembered? What I find so amazing about the mind, and over all these years I've come to appreciate this more and more, is that I just have the feeling that

the mind contains impressions of everything we have ever done. That it's all in there. And at different times, these memories, these impressions are going to surface.

It becomes very clear—and you probably have experienced this—if a memory is coming up from some unwholesome action that we've done in the past, it very often brings a sense of remorse or maybe shame or regret. And if a memory comes up of some wholesome things we've done, it really can bring a sense of joy and delight and appreciation of ourselves in a good way.

So we see that the arising of these past impressions is also a karmic result. Unwholesome actions in the past result in this present moment in some kind of suffering. And the wholesome ones bring about some kind of happiness.

I have so many examples of this. I'll just mention one. Over the years of retreat, some of the memories that came up were of really unskillful things I did as a kid, as a boy. I remember—I wasn't really this kind of person—but I grew up in a very small town with a very small group of friends. It's embarrassing to say this. One day it just got into my mind to round up some of my friends, and we kind of hid behind a mound of dirt. Then this other friend came out, and we just started throwing rocks at him. When I look back, I can't imagine what was going on in my mind at the time, but clearly something was happening. Anyway, his mother ended up chasing me all the way through town.

Years later, maybe about ten years ago, I went to my fiftieth high school reunion. And I met this kid who I'd grown up with—we were in the same class. I said, "Do you remember this?" And he said, "Yes." And I just apologized. It felt so good. It felt so good to acknowledge it, to apologize for it. When there's that opportunity to do that, I think it's a really wholesome thing to do. Sometimes circumstances don't allow it, but we can kind of apologize in our minds, in our hearts.

As I said, there are countless examples of this, but this was just a very vivid memory that would come back periodically—not often, but more than once that memory would surface.

What's interesting is that when we bring awareness and compassion to these surfacing impressions that come from so many of our past actions, it's actually a purifying process. When we first see it—remembering an unwholesome action—for me anyway, sometimes it's just a feeling of being aghast. How could I have done that? And then feeling bad about it. But by seeing it repeatedly, by being connected to it—unlike how my mind was when I committed the action, which was just a lot of delusion—in having it come up, in seeing it, being with it, allowing for it, accepting the fact that yes, this is what happened, it is actually purifying, and it loses its charge. We learn how to be with all of these past actions with equanimity.

You really feel this as a process of purifying the heart. Instead of holding on to our reactivity to it all, we really come to a place of peace with it.

This points to an important distinction—and I don't remember whether I talked about it to the group or not, but I think it would be worth repeating anyway—really understanding the difference between guilt and remorse.

Guilt, when we see things that we've done that were not good, not wholesome, is often a common response. One time—it was about a different situation—I was on retreat and a lot of guilt was coming up about something, and there was a lot of suffering. That suffering piqued my interest. What's going on here that's causing this suffering? And I saw that, surprisingly, guilt is an ego trip, because it's all about self

being bad. "I'm so bad for having done this, this, and this"—with an emphasis on the *I*.

When I saw that this is just a trick of the ego—you know, Mara is the term in Buddhism for the embodiment of delusion. Often in the texts, the Buddha or some other monk or nun would say, "Oh, Mara, I see you." So that's what I did with the guilt.

Mara, I see you.

And then I saw that there was a wholesome side of acknowledging the unwholesome things we've done. Different people may call it different things, but I called it a wise remorse—where we really are acknowledging, yes, I did this, and it was not a wholesome thing. We finally come to understand the unskillfulness of it. We take responsibility. We're not pretending it didn't happen. We're not pushing it down. We're really connecting with what occurred.

But that wise remorse is very different from guilt. Guilt is self-lacerating. Wise remorse is really the space of forgiveness. It's acknowledging, it's seeing, it's taking responsibility. And it can become the cause for our future restraint of those kinds of actions, precisely because we've taken responsibility for them.

So I think there is an appropriate way to be with the revelations that come up in our minds in meditation—very often revelations of the unskillful things we've done—and a way of being with them, holding them in a really skillful way. But I would watch out for the seduction of guilt, because that's just adding suffering to the whole mix. As I say, it's just a trick of Mara. It's a trick of ego.

Another working of the law of karma is simply becoming aware of all these impressions from past actions that are surfacing in the mind and seeing the effect on our minds as that happens.

The next working of karma is very relevant to all meditators: the way our practice unfolds, the way our understanding unfolds, is itself a karmic result of past actions. For some people, progress is very slow—it just takes a long time. For some people, progress is very quick. Dipa Ma, in one or two weeks, had reached high stages of enlightenment. For some people, the predominant experience in practice is pleasant. For other people, the predominant experience in practice is unpleasant. All of these are karmic results—the fruits of things we've done in the past.

The observation I've made in my own practice, and with many others, is that most of us are in this slow, painful alley. We keep going, and we work with a lot of pain in the body and difficulties in the mind. But the point is that how it unfolds is completely impersonal, in the sense that it's just the fruit of past actions. It's just conditions playing themselves out.

I want to read something. This is one of my favorite stories, highlighting the slow, painful path. It's from the Therigatha, which are the songs of the nuns:

It is twenty-five years since I went forth. Not even for the duration of a snap of the fingers have I obtained stilling of mind. Not having obtained peace of mind, drenched with desires for sense pleasures, holding out

my arms, crying out, I entered the vihara, the monastery.

This is her reflection after twenty-five years of practice. But then she entered the monastery, and this is what she said:

Having heard the teachings over all these years, I sat down on one side. And in that moment of sitting down, applying and reflecting on the teachings—now I know that I have lived before. The divine eye has been purified. Supernormal power has been realized by me. I have attained annihilation of the defilements. The Buddhist teaching has been done.

Twenty-five years of struggling, and then everything came together. Conditions were right, and her mind opened to enlightenment.

This is to say that we should hold however our practice is unfolding in the understanding that there are causes and conditions behind the way it's unfolding—and it doesn't matter. To reinforce the notion that it really doesn't matter, that our practice will unfold in one of those four ways—fast or slow, pleasant or unpleasant—this is from Bhikkhu Bodhi. He said:

Liberation is the inevitable fruit of the path and is bound to blossom forth where there is steady and persistent practice. The only requisites for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt the goal will be attained.

I find that very reassuring.

Because it's basically saying our practice will unfold in many different ways depending on our past karma, but it doesn't matter. If we just start and continue, reaching the final goal is inevitable. I think we can really take inspiration from that.

This is summed up beautifully in something my teacher Munindraji said, characterizing the practice: "Time is not a factor." Can we let go of our temporal preoccupations? Just as a culture, we're so time-bound and time-oriented, always measuring things. But in dharma practice, time is not a factor. We just do our practice, we keep on walking, and the practice will bear fruit.

Now I want to turn to one of the expressions of karma which we're probably most familiar with, but one that we probably most misunderstand or are confused about or bring some mistaken impressions to.

In one of the discourses, a young householder comes to the Buddha and inquires why there are so many differences among people—differences in appearance, differences in circumstances, all kinds of differences. The Buddha explained the karmic consequences of different actions. He talked about how generosity, really cultivating generosity, is the karmic cause of abundance. Stinginess, miserliness, or hoarding is the karmic cause of lack of abundance. Kind speech, gentle speech, is the cause of beauty. Harsh speech, angry speech is the cause of lack of beauty. Non-killing, non-harming is the cause of long life; killing living beings is the cause of a short life. Inquiry and investigation are the cause for wisdom to

arise; lack of inquiry, lack of questioning, disinterest is the cause of delusion and ignorance.

The Buddha goes on even further—it's a longer list than I've mentioned—but I wanted to give you an idea of this teaching. However, as we begin to explore this and look into it, really great care is needed because it's very easy to fall into some common misunderstandings. People have brought up these things very often when they hear about karma. So there are a few points I really want to highlight.

First, not everything that happens to us in our lives is a karmic result. There are many laws governing the unfolding of our lives. There are simply laws of nature which determine how things happen that have nothing to do with karma—just the physical laws of nature playing themselves out. But people sometimes think everything that happens to them is a result of their past karma, and the Buddha was very explicit about saying that is not true, that's not accurate. There are many different contributing laws and factors at work.

The second thing that's really important to understand is that karma works out over innumerable lifetimes. It's impossible to understand it in the context of a single life. We can understand aspects, like present karma and these impressions of past experience coming up, but in terms of actions bringing future results, we need a very expansive vision—which the Buddha had.

It's interesting: on the night of his enlightenment, three aspects were revealed to him. He said in the first watch, he saw his innumerable past lives. In the second watch, he saw the innumerable past lives of others, being born and dying according to their karma. And then in the third watch, he understood the law of dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths. I find it fascinating that such a key part of his awakening had to do with his understanding of this law of karma extending over lifetimes.

This is important to realize. In this greater vision, we understand that we have all done everything. We've all accumulated lots of wholesome karma from wholesome actions, lots of unwholesome karma from unwholesome actions. We're all in this together. And when these actions will bring results, we don't know. We could be experiencing something from a hundred lifetimes ago arising now. There's no way for us to understand—that's what the Buddha meant when he said this is too complex for anybody but a Buddha mind to comprehend.

But reflecting on this is really important in a way I'm going to describe in a moment. We realize that we've all done things that have caused harm to others and ourselves, and we've all been benefactors to other beings. All of us have this mix within us.

Even the Buddha, although after his enlightenment he was no longer creating new karma, in his life he was experiencing the results of past karma. Just as an interesting anecdote: you may know from the Buddha's life that he left home and the palace at twenty-nine, and it took six years of ascetic disciplines and torturing the body before he became enlightened.

In the texts, it describes how the fact that it took so long and involved so many painful experiences was

the result of his past karma—something he had done way in the past, and that was the karmic result of how his practice unfolded. There are stories of other Buddhas in the past who became enlightened the very day they went forth. So it's just to say that even for the Buddha, this is how karma unfolds.

We can really see the commonality of this karmic predicament. We're all in this together, as we see the unfolding of our lives—sometimes reaping the fruit of good karma, sometimes reaping the fruit of unwholesome karma.

But here's where the problem comes with understanding this particular teaching of specific actions leading to specific kinds of results. Sometimes we confuse the understanding of this very impersonal process with attitudes of judgment, of resignation, of indifference. If we are experiencing certain difficulties in our lives and just kind of think, "Oh yeah, I must have done some really bad things," we can get caught up in a lot of self-judgment. Or maybe it's just resignation or indifference. Or—and this is perhaps even more unfortunate—as we are viewing the experiences of others, maybe seeing them going through some difficulty, there can be this unfortunate tendency to blame the victim: "Oh well, that was just your karma."

This completely misses the essence of this teaching and how it should be held. We can understand that situations have causes and conditions behind them, one of them being the law of karma—it's not the only one, but it's one of the causes behind our unfolding. We can appreciate that the particular experiences we're having are the result of past causes and conditions, and still respond to present suffering with love, with compassion, with engagement. This attitude of thinking about karma as "it's just their fault" or "it's just my fault" is a completely untrue way of holding this very essential teaching.

For this reason, I find that generally it's much more helpful to contemplate the law of karma going forward rather than trying to understand it looking backwards. Looking backwards, we just don't know. If we did something a hundred lifetimes ago and it's resulting in something now, that doesn't have much meaning for us. But when we understand—and deeply understand—how the law of karma is working in our lives and are looking forward, that can be a tremendous inspiration to pay attention. To pay attention to our motivations, knowing that the actions we do now, at one point or another, will bring results. They're going to have some effect, some result.

The question we should really ask ourselves, as we're about to perform different actions, is: Is the result of this action, based on the motivation, someplace I want to go? If we're about to do something that's very greedy, seduced by desire, and we're mindful enough to reflect before the action—"Oh yes, greed. This is going to lead to an unpleasant, unwholesome result at some point. Maybe immediate, maybe next life, maybe a hundred lifetimes. But it's going to bring about an unwholesome result"—then we can hold the question: Do I want to go there?

We want to consider that before we do the action, because after the action, the karmic seed has been planted. That's why it's really important and subtle. This requires a lot of attention in our lives—to be

watching our minds with interest, just noticing what mental factors are at work in the motivation behind what we want to do.

There's a Tibetan prayer of metta and compassion which I think beautifully expresses a way of holding this understanding in a really wholesome way. The prayer goes: "May you have happiness and the causes of happiness. May you be free of suffering and the causes of suffering."

I like that because it acknowledges that there are causes behind the happiness and the suffering, and our wish—for ourselves and everyone else—is: May you have happiness and the causes of happiness. May you be free of suffering and free of the causes of suffering.

To me that's very embracing. It's a very embracing quality of the heart, acknowledging this karmic situation, the law of karma in all of our lives playing itself out in so many different ways. We can hold it with this beautiful wish for ourselves and for others. And hopefully it can inspire us to really pay attention, because our actions have consequences. We need to deeply understand that, and it will have such a beneficial effect on our lives.

Just some closing thoughts. The reason I wanted to give this talk—and I don't give this talk often, because it's kind of sobering. In general, I like to give inspiring, uplifting talks where people leave feeling happy. And this one is sobering, because it's really addressing some fundamental aspects of understanding how our lives unfold.

And often I see it in myself, and other teachers are sometimes reluctant to talk about those teachings which are a little harder to take in. But the older I get, I feel like that's really a disservice. The Buddhist teachings are so broad and so meaningful and so deep in so many ways that I think it's important to put out as much of his understanding that affects us as possible.

And for me, this understanding and teaching about the law of karma is so powerful because it gives us agency in our lives. Instead of just playing out the patterns of our conditioning, if we understand how it's all working, it really empowers us to make the choices in our lives that will bring about happiness. So it feels like a really essential, important piece of understanding. It's truly a great empowerment of our beings.

I'll close with just these couple of lines from the haiku poet Bashō, who was a wonderful poet:

The temple bell stops,
but the music keeps coming
out of the flowers.

I love that. The temple bell—our actions are over—but the results keep coming out of the flowers, out of everything in our lives. To realize that and to appreciate it brings a lot of confidence and a lot of joy in our lives, because we do feel empowered.

Thank you for listening to this sobering talk.

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