On Karma

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Our theme from last time, where we were looking at sila, ethics. Last time, we talked about how one way of looking at the Buddha's approach to ethics is to see it as a kind of virtue ethics, where his concern is with training ourselves to become a particular kind of person—a person who's characterized by particular virtues like generosity, love, compassion, and so on. The idea here is that ethics is not about following rules. It's about becoming a certain kind of person, and becoming a certain kind of person through a system of training or education.

If you look at the eightfold path, you could see this as a system of training, or an educational curriculum. And the object of the exercise is to become a certain kind of person—most obviously, for example, to become an enlightened person. But the central thing here is that it's not a rules-based ethics.

The precepts, when we take on the five precepts, pancha sila, the five-fold sila, each one of them is a sikapada. This is a word that gets translated as precept, or training precept, but it's actually more accurately translated as "way of training." Now the difference is that a precept is a rule, but a way of training is not a rule. It's something else. It's something that we undertake to do or not do. It's something that if we undertake to do it, we might undertake to do it occasionally or full time, a little bit or a lot, depending on circumstances. So this is the Buddha's approach to ethics seen as a virtue ethics.

We looked in particular at the link between sila and samadhi, between ethics and meditation. And we said how the key point here is that for the Buddha, the purpose of ethical behaviour is to create harmony within one's own heart and mind, and within one's community. If I have harmony—internal, psychological, external, social—then meditation, samadhi, becomes much easier. So there's a very close link for the Buddha between ethics and meditation.

And here we come to the second aspect of the Buddha's approach to ethics, and that is ethics as a form of consequentialism. In other words, the Buddha is concerned with the consequences of our actions. This is another side of his understanding of ethics.

We've said that he's got a system of training. The training is known as a path, the eightfold path. And the point about a path is that it leads to somewhere. So he's got a destination in mind, and the job—what we have to do—is to get from here, wherever we are, to the end of that path, to its destination, which in classical terms is awakening.

If we're going to take on that project, that means we need to work out the difference between those actions which take us in that direction along that path, versus those actions that take us in another

direction. The Buddha expressed this in terms of learning to distinguish between the wholesome and the unwholesome, the skillful and the unskillful, or the way he put it, the kusala and the akusala.

This approach includes a sense of causality. What can I do that will cause me to move toward awakening? What must I avoid because it will cause me to move away from awakening? There's a sense of causation which is built into the Buddha's approach to ethics. And of course this takes us to karma—and that's what we're going to be talking about tonight: karma and vipaka, action and its ripening.

So one approach to ethics is consequentialist. In other words, we have this sense that an action is good if it has a good result. For example, is it ethical to lie? Most people would say no, it's not ethical to lie. The Buddha certainly said it's not ethical to lie. But let's say you're hiding a refugee. Let's say the border force knocks on your door and they ask if you know where this person is. Would it be ethical to tell the truth? "Yes, actually he's under the bed in the spare bedroom. Just go down that hall and turn right." Would that be the ethical thing to do? That's the truth. Or would it be ethical to say, "Oh yeah, him. Yeah, I saw him last week. He was getting on a bus to Adelaide." Would that be the ethical thing?

So it turns out to be more complicated than we might have begun with. There are certain actions which are not inherently ethical or unethical. We can judge them on the basis of their result. And this is included in the way that the Buddha himself frames what he sees as the fundamental ethical question. Remember last time we were talking about how each of us as human beings is faced with a fundamental ethical question or problem. And the question is: How should I live? Each of us is faced with this question. Each of us has come up with an answer.

And the answer is how we are in fact living. So that's our ethics.

The Buddha's version of this question is: What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? What is praiseworthy? What is blameable? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? What, having done it, will bring me harm and suffering over the long term? And what will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term?

Now, to unpack this passage completely would take a lot longer than half an hour, so we're just going to focus on noticing how the Buddha's interest is in the long-term results of our actions. What will bring me welfare and happiness over the long term? What will bring me harm and suffering over the long term?

First of all, when he says "me"—so he's talking about the individual—I think it's important to get a sense of the social context. We, in our culture, are heavily individualist. We have the rights of the individual. We really emphasize that. We have the ideal of individual activity, entrepreneurial economic activity, and so on. And our sense of the individual is someone separated from everybody else. It's a very atomistic view of human nature and of society, coming out especially in economics and anything influenced by economics.

In that sense, somebody commented that the Buddha is not interested in the individual. He's interested in the person. Because a person is always connected. A person is always in relationship. There's no such

thing as a person who is not in a network of relationships. So when the Buddha is saying, "What will bring me happiness and welfare? What will bring me harm and suffering?"—he's assuming that the "me" is at the centre of a network of relationships. Whatever happens at that centre is going to radiate out and influence others. And equally, whatever is happening to others is going to radiate in and influence me. It's the socially embedded person that the Buddha is talking about. He doesn't explicitly say it; he just assumes it. To him it's so obvious that he doesn't actually need to explain it. So we could say it's the person rather than the individual.

This brings us to karma. Karma is a Sanskrit word that simply means "action." In Pali, which is the language of the Buddha, it's kamma. In English, it is karma—because karma is in the English dictionary, therefore it's an English word, very badly defined of course, but it's there. So I'm going to use karma, but it means simply action. And the Buddha classified himself as a teacher of action.

Karma was a concept that he inherited from the Vedic tradition. Originally in the Vedas, karma is the action of the sacrifice—actions that are performed during rituals, and in particular during the sacrifice. The sacrifice was crucial to Vedic religion; it was the centerpiece of the whole activity. In order to perform a successful sacrifice, you had to perform the ritual actions correctly, in the right order. Otherwise you screwed up the sacrifice. So karma, action, is very important because without it, if it's not correct, you mess the sacrifice up and you don't get the result.

The Jains later took this concept and gave it a spin, including a moral consequence to the action. The idea that our actions have a moral consequence—this was developed by the Jains, but they kept the idea that actions are physical.

The Buddha inherits this tradition and he turns it around. He says, actually what's central is the state of the mind with which one does the action—the state of mind that stimulates the action and the state of mind that results from the action. This is where he focused. And again, we've got to be careful with language.

When the Buddha talks about mind, he means more than just what's going on up here in the head. He means the heart as well. So the term often used is *citta*, which could be translated as heart-mind—in some contexts simply heart—but it includes the emotional, the affective, as well as the cognitive, the thinking side. Both.

The Buddha focused on the inner effect of action, and he saw action itself as fundamentally inner. In one very famous passage, he says, "I declare that choice is action. We perform actions of body, speech, or mind after choosing." Choice is my translation of the Pali word *cetanā*, often translated as intention—that's probably a more common translation. But in any event, it's the impulse or the movement within the heart, within the mind, that stimulates the action. And the Buddha says, that's what I mean when I'm talking about karma.

What he's getting at is that it's the choices we make that create our lives. If I want to develop a life in which I live well and happily, and the people around me live well and happily, that means I have to pay attention to the choices that I make, because these choices have consequences. I've got to learn about this. I've got to work out what are the right choices to make that will lead me in the right direction, and what are the choices that lead me in the wrong direction. The latter are the ones I need to drop, and the former are the ones I need to cultivate.

This intersects with virtue ethics. For example, the Buddha says that generosity is a fundamental human virtue. It's so fundamental for him that it's not a Buddhist virtue—for the Buddha, it's a human virtue, universal. And he says, look, it's really important that we become generous people. So again, this is virtue ethics: How do I become a certain kind of person? Well, the way we do that is by practicing generosity. If I practice generosity, I become a generous person. If I practice stinginess, I become a stingy person.

How do I practice generosity? Through *dāna*. *Dāna* means gift or giving—it's an action noun, so it's both the act of giving and what is given. *Dāna* is the practice that cultivates generosity.

If I find myself making choices to be stingy—I could give, but I'm not going to, because I think I'll save the money—then that has an effect on the heart. And the effect on the heart is to make me a less generous person. Equally, of course, I might decide, look, I'm going to give a lot in this instance because I want to become a generous person. But then later on I regret it because I gave too much, actually, for my circumstances. Again, that will make me a less generous person, because my generosity is clashing with my wisdom. So it's not necessarily straightforward. But you get the basic point: it's the impulses from within the heart that lead to action, and these actions lead to forming a human life. This is where the Buddha focuses.

Karma is a very complex and controversial subject, so I want to focus on a few key points. First, one of the major misunderstandings about karma is that it's treated sometimes as a form of fatalism. This is very common in Asia, in Buddhist Asia.

And this understanding, or misunderstanding, is used to justify social injustice. If you've got people who are poor and desperate, well, it's because they did bad things in their previous life and they should just get their act together and they'll be reborn in a better life.

Now, this view of karma as fatalism was explicitly rejected by the Buddha. In one discourse on outsider teachings, he lists three views held by teachers in other traditions about what creates the conditions of our lives. He lists these three views and rejects all of them.

The first is that whatever we experience is caused by what we did in the past. He rejects that. The second is that whatever we experience is caused by the will of God. He rejects that too. And the third is that whatever we experience has no cause but arises spontaneously. This is dead-set fatalism.

Now, the reason why he rejected these views—he didn't say, "I reject these because they're not true." He

said, "I reject these because if you actually believe any of these, then you will give up, because there's nothing you can do." If everything that happens to me is a result of things that happened in the past, well, I can't change the past, can I? So I'm stuck just replaying the old records. If whatever I experience is caused by the will of God, well, I can't change his mind, or her mind, or their mind. And if there's no cause but things just arise spontaneously, everything's out of my control. So the only rational response, if I really believe this, is to give up.

The Buddha was very strong on this point: no, you never give up. There is always something we can do. No matter how bad a situation, there is always something we can do. And it's our job as practitioners to find that something and to do it. In a sense, we're never released from that obligation.

One of the implications of this is that for the Buddha, the teaching of karma is not focused on the past, which is often the way we talk about it. It's always focused on the present.

The example I like to give is this: let's say you're stepping across a busy street in the city. Let's say some crazy drunk driver, speeding, hurls his car around the corner, smashes into you, and drives off. Let's say you're lying in the gutter, broken and bleeding. Let's say a compassionate Buddhist witnesses this and comes up to you and says, "Well, that's your bad karma."

Now, obviously this person is a complete bastard, but apart from that, would he be right from the Buddhist perspective? The answer is, of course, no. It's the driver's bad karma. The driver made some really bad choices that resulted in all this suffering. That's his bad karma.

Your karma, as you're lying in the gutter, is: okay, this happened. Now what? What do I do about it? How do I respond to this? That's your karma. But you notice it's about the present and the response to the present, and how do I shape my future given this present? What choices do I make given this situation right now?

And of course, in the traditional context, karma is seen in terms of life after life after life, which means there's a very big future that we're faced with. And along with that very big future are infinite possibilities that can arise. In other words, for the Buddha, karma is a teaching of opportunity. The future is open. Let's make a good one. That's his focus on it.

Another way of misunderstanding the doctrine of karma is to see it as a system of rewards and punishments. A lot of people make this mistake, including academics who should know better.

Karma vipāka—action and its ripening—is not a system of rewards and punishments. It's a law of nature for the Buddha, like the law of gravity. If I fall down a staircase and injure myself, lying at the bottom looking up, I don't think that the staircase has punished me. That's not what happened. It's just nature: if I trip at the top of the staircase and fall down, I'm likely to be injured. It's just nature. It's got nothing to do with rewards and punishments.

The other reason why it's definitely not a system of rewards and punishments is that in order to have such a system, you have to have a rewarder—someone up there who's handing out the rewards, or alternatively handing out the punishments. And for the Buddha, there isn't anyone. So it's just the law of nature.

Now this leads us to some interesting and rather upsetting conclusions once we see it like this, which is, I think, one of the reasons why we tend not to see it like this. There's one discourse called "A Lump of Salt," where the Buddha explains the system of karma in terms of the law of nature rather than cosmic justice. He says, if you have a lump of salt and you drop it into a mug of water—he's asking students—what happens to the water? And they say, "Oh, it's salty and becomes even undrinkable." He says, if you take the same lump of salt and drop it into the Ganges River, what happens? And they say, "Well, nothing happens. It's too small. It doesn't affect the Ganges."

The Buddha goes on to say that if you have someone whose ethics is poor, whose citta—heart-mind—is narrow and limited, and whose wisdom is undeveloped, they may perform an unwholesome action which has really serious consequences for them. Whereas someone whose ethics is good, whose heart is wide, and whose wisdom is developed performs exactly the same unwholesome action and the result could be so minor that it's barely noticeable. So the same action, coming from the same impulse, the same motivation, can have radically different effects on different people, depending on how developed they are.

The results of action, in other words, do not come about automatically. They do not come about because of some cosmic code. Even in the Buddhist tradition, karma is often presented in this way, in terms of morality tale: you mustn't steal in this life because if you do, you'll be reborn poor in the next life, or you mustn't be violent in this life because if you do, you'll suffer violence in your next life. But it's actually not like that. It's much more complex.

The example that the Buddha gives in this discourse is the results of theft. He says that you can have a person who steals something, is caught, goes before the courts, and is imprisoned for what they've done. You can have another person who steals exactly the same amount and the police are not interested—he does not go to court, he does not go to prison. What's the difference between the two people? The Buddha explains that the person who is imprisoned is one who is poor, while the person who escapes imprisonment is one who is rich.

It's a very interesting example. And of course, he's being brutally honest. He says, look at society—there is one law for the rich and one for the poor, in his day. And if we look at our own society, we realize that actually things haven't changed. Not really. So he gives this example of social injustice to illustrate that it's not a system of codified rewards and punishments. It's much more alive than that. It's got nothing to do with justice. It's simply the natural workings out of cause and effect. That's all.

And one of the lessons that comes out of this, of course, is that clearly we want justice in our society, but there's no way we can shove that job onto some mystical, metaphysical, cosmic system of karma and say

karma will take care of it. Justice is a human product. If we want justice, we have to create it. It's not going to drop from the sky. So this is, I think, part of the Buddha's emphasis on action and its ripening as natural process.

Finally, speaking of time, notice how when the Buddha speaks about the results of action, the term he uses is vipaka, which literally means "ripening." That's an agricultural expression—how the effects of our actions gradually ripen like fruit. Let's say I want a nice orange. I have an orange seed. I hurl it on the ground and I stare at it fiercely, expecting it to hand me an orange. Well, no, that's not going to happen. If I want an orange, I have to have the right soil, a good seed, the right climate, the right amount of care, and I've got to give it the time to ripen.

So it's a gradual process with multiple factors involved, and eventually, over time, the result comes.

When we're talking about meditation practice, one of the terms the Buddha uses is *bhāvanā*, which means cultivation. Again, it's an agricultural term. We are cultivating the *citta*. We are cultivating our heart-mind when we are doing meditation and practicing Dharma. It's purely nature—there's no divine intervention involved. We need the right conditions, and we cultivate those conditions patiently over a period of time, and we get the result.

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