

2008-09-29 Karma and the Economy

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SPEAKERS

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So, in. In the Zen tradition, there's a very famous story they'd like to tell you the story about karma. And that's a topic that I want to talk about a little bit. And the story has to do with an Abbot of the monastery, rural monastery. And every day, whenever he gives a Dharma talk, someone comes and sits in the back, like the people out there. And so he gives a talk most of the monks but in the back of the hall that comes this man, local person comes with one reason no one knows who he is. And after Common good number of times these talks one day at the end of the talk, he stays behind. And he goes up to the abbot and says, you know, maybe you can help me. You see, once upon a time, long ago, I was the abbot of this very monastery. But then someone asked me is an awakened person is a liberated person free of karma. And I said yes. And because of that, my karma was to be reborn 500 times as a fox. And I've come here to you now, maybe you could set me free from this Fox hood. And so I come to ask you isn't enlightened person free of karma? So that's the question. So is whatever you might think karma is your actions, the consequences of your actions. I teach my kids consequences. Sometimes I ask them, what should be the consequence of that? Rather than telling them and sometimes they participate, you know, rather than, you know, punishing them, they have to realize is a cause and effect relationship that they're part of. So we have this we're, we're part of part of a whole sea of cause and effect relationships. In fact, we think Buddhism or people would say is that everything we see, touch, smell, think, feel, or belongs to a big point, big matrix or Nexus or patterns of cause and effect. And it's quite complex. Now those patterns of cause and effect operate And sometimes hard to see what the effect might be. If you throw a rock into a big lake, a copy of the notes is still still surface, you'll see the ripples going outwards. It's pretty clear and simple circles of ripples. But if you throw or 10,000 people all throw a rock in the same Lake, then, you know, all those 10,000 ripples, well, some point run into each other, and then influence each other and change each other. And so it's very hard to see after a while, we how that your ripple how it's actually behaving in the water going out. And so our behavior sets in motion, a field of cause and effect and to some degree or other we'll talk about how it is in Buddhism, but the teaching is that you, you reap what you sow, somehow it comes back to you what your actions how your how what you do in one way or comes back to you. So you should be careful what you do. Otherwise you might reap the results of your karma. So it'd be nice then if some, you know, if your karma is not so good, and there's going to be a lot of things catching up to you sooner or later. It would be nice if you got liberated. And maybe if you were liberated, you wouldn't have to deal with that anymore. And be free every once and for all. So, the answer that he became, he ended up as a Fox was Yes, library person is liberated from karma. So the current Abbot then was asked this question, and the current habits said, Oh, an enlightened person does not ignore karma. Right.

And then they just finished a story than the old guy who was there asking the question said, Oh, thank you so much. Then explain it. Then he says, oh, thank you so much. Tomorrow morning, go behind this hill. Find the monastery, there's a big boulder. And there you'll find a body of a dead Xbox. And please,

go click that fox, bury it like a monk, honors of a monk or whatever. So they add it gathers all the monks together the next morning and announces that they're gonna do a funeral. And he marches them off to find the body of the fox at the end of buying the boulder and conducts the funeral. So that's the story they like to tell in Zen. And in what I'd like to suggest that so the idea that you don't ignore karma suggests that cause and effect karma still operates for someone even you know, Someone who has enlightened some weight operates. And there's a famous, famous story from the early Buddhist tradition of a man who had been a mass murderer, serial murderer at the time of the Buddha, who the Buddha went and intervene before he was going to kill anybody else. And he was going to try to kill the Buddha. But Buddha managed to stop that. And then, in intervening with him, the man decided to become a monk. And as a monk, when the king and his posse came looking for this mass murderer, and found that he might become a monk, the king said, Okay, leave him alone. It's kind of like, you know, in ancient Europe, old Europe, no, a few did some terrible crime and he made it to the church. The church was a sanctuary was somehow becoming a monk. Somehow the civil law was going on. Was it wasn't that you were in a log of civil law did not break somehow there was some deep change in the prison status. But then, at some point, this mass murderer became enlightened. And he went into town together as arms, they go begging for food. And he went into a town where the some of the townspeople recognized him as someone who had murdered someone in their village. So, he started throwing rocks at him. And he came back to the Buddha, you know, bloody and kind of asked him you know, what, you know, how could that be? And the Buddha said, Oh, you are in fact liberated. But even so, you paraphrase with the Buddha said, You set in motion, a chain of cause and effect you set in motion, certain consequences of motion, certain tendencies in the world. And so, you know, you have to bear those, you have to reap those and, and so, being stone Just if you go to that village, that's what you can expect. So, certain things follow us into an enlightened state. You know, we think that enlightened, enlightened retirement. So I'd like to suggest a different answer to the fox's question. Rather than saying an enlightened person does not ignore karma, I would say that a mature practitioner, enlightened or not, mature practitioner. Studies karma, learns from karma. Meaning that when we find ourselves in a field of cause and effect that we look and say, Well, how can I learn from what's happening here? How can I learn? What is useful for me to learn my spiritual growth, my movement towards liberation was useful for me to learn in this situation. What have I done was my contribution to this situation? The question you're working what can we learn here? What can I learn here? I think is a very mature approach. There might be situations you find yourself in that kind of you know you're looking trying to study that you know something's happened. You look at the cause and effect, chain effect effect cause and effect chain and you said Well, I'm not responsible. Someone else's. The example I like to give is when many years ago I was getting off the highway here on Sand Hill Road and page Mill Road. And I was going to teach I used to sit we used to meet in Palo Alto is going to teach Monday night and and

I was I was a little bit in a hurry to get people to get you arrived and tell people to slow down be present. Just a teeny bit. There wasn't much at all. But it was a teeny bit but so I came to that stop sign you get off the freeway. And I there was there's two ways, three, four way stop sign, I guess. And I did my stop. And it was a car coming far away to the left. And I knew where to stop. So you know, he was far away so I'd stopped and so right away so I drove into the intersection. But he didn't stop and he rushed in front of me. And he missed the we missed each other. I couldn't quite tell but it seemed like just a hair. It's pretty close. There was no accident. But I thought about that afterwards. Well, in the court of law, if we had an accident he would have he was responsible. Right? I hope so. I would have I wouldn't have said anything different. But I had been watching a TV but what if it was more than a TV but it was it was a teeny bit more than teeny bit you know, just a little bit more impatient just a teeny bit. So I've been one inch further into the intersection. Crash who's responsible then? Well, probably to the police officer who takes a report. He would do the other guy still responsible for the accident and I would probably

not say anything different. But that's not where the learning is. I don't learn much by assigning the blame to him. So, a mature person studies, the karma studies a situation. So what is it that I could learn in that situation? What did I learn? I learned that this in some way I if we had, if there had been an accident, I would have had my contribution to the accident. The fact that I had been rushing a little bit would have made a difference in that one situation, some difference. Maybe I wouldn't been paying as much attention, maybe just waving further in the intersection and writing things could have couldn't happen. And so I came to that intersection. My contribution to the intersection was I was impatient. I wasn't paying much attention that was motivated by a certain I don't know if it's the right word, but certain greed or you know, to get somewhere to get something in a hurry. So, in the Buddhist analysis, that karma of a situation is not who is legally responsible or what is the physical cause and effect relationship going on there. The karma is that part of the smaller piece of the cause and effect relationship there was that has is related to the intention and the motivation that I brought to the situation. So, if I brought the switch if I brought a little bit of impatience and wanting to get somewhere that's where my karma is found. And that content and there are consequences of acting on intentions are motivated being motivated in different ways. How that those consequences play out in the physical world is a mess to try to figure out because I could have easily maybe have been patient and mindful and slow my driving and come to that same stop sign. Everything was cool. You know, I was doing new my intention was completely pure, the purest driver in California at that moment. And then I can't be rented.

So, in that situation, I didn't contribute karmically. So, there are studies that situation and look at it well. Maybe I should remember to look in my rearview mirror, but karmically There was no motivation that kind of operated there. Within the first situation. If I was literally pushing and impatient, there is this karmic kind of patterns of emotion there. If I had drove, driven, mindful up to the intersection, and seen someone was impatient and thought, Boy, I bet he's having a hard day. Maybe I'll just kind of, you know, back away from the intersection will be make sure that he has lots of space to get by. It's a generous act. That's a motive. That's a motivation of generosity, and then have a different effect. That if I backed up as an act generosity, I still might have been rear ended. We don't know what the physical cause and effect is going to be. But how the teacher karma works is that it is that how you what you what motivates what you do, tends to play out certain ways in the physical world. They in the world. If you if you act in kindness and generosity that tends to play out and come back to you. with similar kind of energy or similar kind of behavior, good things happen, tends to be that way. But there's no guarantee. If you do things that are unskillful unwholesome, if you are greedy and hateful and spiteful and mean to your neighbors chances are that your neighbors are not going to treat you very well. They're not going to you know, help you out next time you need gas because whatever I don't know, you know, they're going to leave you alone. Boy, you're your main one to one time so many. So it does tend to be that way. There's no guarantee that they're always going to be mean and returned and might be someone who's just really generous and kind and they don't care how mean you are But the tendency is that way. So how you behave, will tend to create certain kind of effects in the world. The teachings of karma in the Buddhist tradition is not so much about what happens in the world. But what cause and effect is set in motion in your own mind and your own heart. So if you act with impatience or greed, that tends to produce a habit that tends to produce certain remnants that stays in your mind or your heart, they will play itself out. I've done behavior that I'd rather not tell you about. And basically thought I was getting away with it, you know, no problem fine. Until I sat down to meditate. And if I hadn't meditated maybe the karma wouldn't have caught up to me. Do you think of that, but I sat down to know. I sent out the meditate and it caught up to me. You know, sometimes I remember once in the shop, would I do, I could have done that I felt really bad. So I made made amends. But I could have not meditated do some like that it might have been years before somehow that some have worked through my system. Or maybe it never worked through my system. And theirs was sustained for a lifetime, a certain tension,

somewhere, my body, my heart, my mind, certain kind of maybe you can imagine all kinds of things. Maybe if you tell lies, tell the lie. And you got away with it, so called maybe a little piece of your own mind is more likely to lie in the future, maybe a little piece of your mind. mistrust yourself a little bit, maybe a little piece of your mind, mistrust other people because of that. And so it starts playing out this whole field of mistrust that plays itself out who knows how And play itself out. The teachings of karma say that your intention, the mode, the quality of the motivation, you act on the quality of motivation it goes through you plant seeds that were ripe in return in some way or other and we don't know how it's gonna come back. I don't think it's some mysterious tally sheet in the sky. And it doesn't doesn't mean that everything that happens to you you're responsible for. It's a really oppressive the teachings that karma here is your karma is the cause of your current condition. And

it's been used in, in in countries where karma is a big teaching, that that kind of teaching you have your status in life because of your karma has been used to reinforce social discrimination in a number of Asian countries, Europe belong to a certain kind of underclass of society. And that's the way it is your karma, you know, you did must have done something really bad in your life. And we're just going to let you suffer because we don't want interfere with your karma. You know, and, and here in this country, it plays itself out when someone gets sick. And someone says, oh, what did you know? You get cancer and someone says, Oh, you know, what did you do? What did you know that as if you're responsible. So, so, teaching the karma are not about to explain how you got to here in some kind of absolute way. The Buddhist teachings on karma, as I understand it, are pointing you to learn from the present moment to learn from this. You learn two things you learn so one mature way the approaches of what's Mike is their contribution that I made in here. Even if the world is responsible for most of this, what's my contribution? How did I claim? How did I get angry? How did I get afraid? And how did that How did I act on my fear? What did I do? Even though it's invisible to other people that that was operating? You that it that, you know, what was your contribution? That's where you learn from it. So the question is, do we want to learn or do we want to be right? So, I suggest that if you're a practitioner, you're much more interested in learning than you aren't being right. Be nice if they both operate together. But they're learning as much you know, learning kind of moves you forward. The other thing that teaching karma so you learn a little bit that that involves reflecting, thinking back, remembering what happened Remembering as much as you can. Sometimes it also involves, but teaching karma also really points us right back to the present moment. It's another one of those arrows that Buddhist Buddhism uses signposts that Buddhism uses to encourage us to stay present in the present moment. Because only in the present moment that we can attend, pay attention to our motivations, the quality of those motivations, and then take starting some responsibilities for the motivations that we're going to act on in the future. So one of the reasons why we emphasize so much in Buddhism stay in the present pay attention to the present moment, so we can see what motivates us. And we can start seeing the difference between acting reactively versus responding wisely in situation. Chances are if you react, which is a kind of spin on automatic pilot kind of reactions, then there's the your past conditioning The way you have been influenced by your own decisions and behavior in the past, the way you've been maybe influenced by society that people can act through you. Without anything, you know, without any second thought, if you can be in the present moment and calm in the present moment, then you can kind of back up a little bit and say, What's going on here? Let's study this. How do I want to respond? What's a useful way of responding in this situation is useful to respond mainly to that, though, good son of a or would it be useful to to notice how stressed out he is? And perhaps, you know, give him a shoulder rub or something you know, or be more forgiving or more understanding. So

So in all situations we can look at these two things. What is it that we can learn from here? What's our contribution to this? And how is it that we might behave? act on what kind of motivations can we act on what's the right approach we will act on. They can help set in place, better conditions for our happiness

in the future. We tend to become happier when we set into place, the habit, the conditioning, the support of generosity, of love of kindness, the world 10th respond to us in a nicer way that way. We tend to produce different results. When we learn to practice contentment. Then when we practice covetousness we have different results when we learn to be to repeat myself be content with little Rather than wind, everything they advertisements tell us that we should have. There's different results, different things that happen. So I was thinking about this talk, I think, what can I say today? That might be useful after the stock market goes down to 800 points. And it looks like it's, you know, the American economy might be going down the drain. Who knows? This is a lot of fear about what's meaning. So I imagine some of you who came here tonight kind of afraid, concerned about this big topic. And that too, I couldn't ignore the topic, because it's really big on your minds. And so I thought, I want to talk about karma. And so now, having said all that, if I tell you if I asked you

Was this your car? Would you have a different kind of exploration or that question than if I'd said at first thing we got here? How did you contribute not to the downfall of the American economy? Maybe maybe,

you know, how did you contribute? Let me know. They said that the reason why was it Washington Mutual folded one of the reasons was there was a run, run on the money. There's too many people start taking their money out. I don't know if that's true, but so many individual contributions. So the panic, panic can have a big effect. But, you know, if you find yourself in a in a financially stressed situation, because of what's happening. Of course, we have to look at what's going on externally in the world how to take care of ourselves best what to do, in practical terms, but that's not where the spiritual learning is. Spiritual learning. If it If, you know you might not be any for you there, but what you know, look, what was my motivation that I was acting on? How was I behaving? What were my values what's going on for me that I contribute to found myself in this situation? A lot of people I know 10 years ago got caught up in a wave of greed around here. I was I wish I'd taken pictures of it. I was amazed driving up and down one on one. How long ago now six years ago, there were these amazing billboards about how every I forget exactly what they were but everyone deserves to be wealthy Sonic is very kind of assertive or kind of strange kind of attitude about, you know, if you don't get rich, I don't see those billboards anymore. And so a lot of people I know got caught up in this wave of you know, well, you know, this stuff. keeps going up. Yeah, I think I'll just last my money being a little bit more than I usually would have. And then then find yourself stressed, was the greed operating there was it wisdom and be both, maybe was your best best understanding? So what is your contribution? And it's not meant to be a heavy thing here. But I think that's where the learning is. And then part of the learning is to look and see what are the motivations, what are the values, that and only they want to live on your support and be helpful for me, here and now. But what are the things that one of the motivations way of living that sets up conditions that allows me to be happier and freer into the future? And so, one of the really central values or practices that Buddhism encourages, is a practice of being content with the middle By taught that six years ago, or 10 years ago in Silicon Valley many years about that name is and how long ago is now maybe 12 years ago. It was a woman named her name. We get our names used to come here with us to us. She had a radio program in San Jose Sunday afternoon, I think Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon. And she interviewed people. So I went down there and she interviewed interesting. They interviewed me about Buddhism. And she asked me at some point, what does Buddhism Have you remember, this is back at the boom time, right? And so what does Buddhism have to say about our, you know, life here in Silicon Valley? And I said, Well, you know, okay, to help us know that well, I said, well, it has a lot to teach, I said, but it's probably important to say that a boot camp is also very subversive No, I don't know how that went over over a new audience. And how I met him subversive is in this way. I've been told that in time. So in Buddhism is a long tradition of teaching contentment, contentment with little things like that. And I've been told that Thai government outlawed the monks

giving their teaching in Thailand because they were concerned that that was going to slow down economic growth. So contentment was middle. How is that supportive? To do it as a moral imperative is just a drag. But to do it, with a clear understanding of how being contented level can lead to your happiness. So you know, so busy, you know, produce it you don't put yourself in situations where you're so stressed financially, perhaps. And perhaps Less to take care of. So, I don't know, you know, what any of you have done in the current economic situation in your situation, I certainly feel for you that my many of many people are struggling. And many people are stressed out by this and worried. And

But you came here to IMC, to a Buddhist meditation center. So you're looking towards Buddhism, some kind of resources. And so resources I'm offering you today, is that is that you want to learn more than you want to assign blame. And you want you want to learn what is your contribution to all this? Not all this needs to be what's your contribution to this, even if you're only 1% responsible, maybe you're in a different external point of view. for external worlds point of view, you're not responsible at all. But still you are being motivated in acting on certain impulses. And so what were those in you? Can you understand that? And then can you place yourself in the present moment and take little bit charge to take responsibility for how you choose to x next. And that's the area of responsibility I think Buddhism puts us on, rather than you responsible for what has happened to you. It's more like, given what's happened to you this moment. Take responsibility for what you act on next. And even if you do your best, take responsibility, acting on what's next, and you make a mistake. Buddhist ethics tends to be forward looking Rather than lingering in the past, we look in the past just enough to learn from it. And then we're forward looking to figure out how can I do better in the future. So they're lingering in guilt or lingering blame is not considered very productive, but rather forward looking, how can I do better now? How can I do better now? So was that a relevant enough topic for today? So now you have a chance we have about 10 minutes you can bring up questions or comments or reservations or protests.

So is Is there such a thing as unwinding karma? What do you think it means unwinding?

My present perception is that it's a exploration of tendencies of kind of weight you carry with you. So maybe the answer is yes. I've cut unwinding stuff that's inside. Maybe we say unwinding the momentum and releasing the momentum. You know, if you're greedy once, maybe there's no momentum. But if you just spend the whole day being greedy, you know, if you go shopping, and just you know, just knocking, knocking, knocking knocking no case, do When I was younger, I used to like go into bookstores. And I believe that books are so exhausted. And after a while, why, why am I so exhausted when I'm in the bookstore. And that eventually discovers because I would want almost every Title I saw. One thing one thing, one to one. So this momentum attention stuff was built up from that. So it said it said, Enough motions, not enough of these moments together, momentum gets created, tension gets created. And so sometimes it's hard to stop the momentum. So it has to slow down on wind. And so, you know, stopping you know, going, sitting meditating, can a great value just because we stopped independent, paying attention and developing meditation, to respect we stopped can allow things to unwind. And I would say that the great great majority of attention that we hold in our body is is a wound Up karma. And so if we sit and relax that karma is unwinding. Sorry. Sometimes but doing nothing. I mean, there's a certain amount of tension just unwinds when we do nothing. Especially surface tension. Some of the deeper held tensions deeper mentum deeper ways in which karma is held in you might not get it get to it by simply taking a long vacation and sitting and doing nothing. Sometimes it requires much deeper work. Thank you

Red light should be on,

got it in business or say even if you're running a business and it's, you know, you're involved with lots of people, you know, being a householder or businessman is fairly difficult not to generate karma. You're intensely involved. Your motivations may not be money at all. That may be you know that you may be able to make a contribution to medicine, or you know, a lot of lovely things. But you're still so motivated that you create disharmony in your business. And that's, of course, everybody. If you've ever been in any business that happens. I imagine running RMC is having problems. I mean, you may have to remove people from certain positions because they're not doing that. Well. You know, and how you do that and

mostly, I wonder sometimes if I should be removed.

Taking care of things Well, no. Yeah.

Well, you know, I'm basically, you know, setting this up for comment, but, you know, I, it gets very complicated and

but I think it's helpful. I agree with you. Yeah, I think it's helpful to distinguish two kind of realms. Yeah. Simple realm is looking at being honestly looking at what motivates you in this situation. It is it is the best quality of your heart, fueling the motivation. So for example, you feel by generosity, by love, by kindness by friendliness, by wisdom. And if so, that's good, but then that might be at the base of it, but then we You tried to implement that in the world? Do you mean you maintain that? Would you get caught up in other things? You know, you know, you know, those other people, they better, you know, get onto it right away. You know, they better realize I mean business because I'm important for me to get that friendly letter out to everyone. So the ideas that we're suggesting is that it's, it's relatively relatively easy to track your own motivation in different situations. And if it's not easy for you, then I think it's very important to take to go for a vacation, go for a walk, go do something and really reflect deeply. Do you want to live a life where you're not where you can't track? What motivates you? Because you know, is it Otherwise, that's in the long term is that really how you want to live your life? And then maybe you need to change something real world changes are necessary sometimes. Remember I said Buddhist, Mr. verses. But then so that's one one will is your motivation, how that plays out in the complicated worker, world of business or a community, where there's misunderstandings and people have different needs and agendas and all kinds of stuff and confusions happen and, you know, it gets so complex that, you know, most of us are not wise enough to understand it all. And then and to make the best choices and all this, all that stuff. So, then, and then we'll make mistakes, we'll do the best we can and make mistakes. And then it helps a lot. If you can, if you can, look at your intention, review it. And no, at least my intention was good so I can go face that person who feel held hurt because of my communication. And I say, Well, my intention was good. I'm really sorry that you were hurt. How can we do better in the future? You know, say so and so it's a lot easier to have a conversation if you know your intent. You know, if your intention was bad, then it's hard to have that conversation. But I think the mature thing to do then is to go to it first and say, Look, I blew it. You know, and I apologize that I was motivated by my anger. And I blew it and, you know, try not to do that again. So just makes some sense. Oh, yeah, this is relevant. It's relevant.

And I do a lot of apologizing

or the apologies apologies accepted. Also Do you forgive yourself? Oh, that's would it be useful if you could I have in this life and I actually find that that's very comforting thinking that I'm going to contribute what I'm here to contribute. And it kind of releases me at times from beating myself up for not being as good a person as I'd like to be. And also to forgive myself for some of my misc, great misgivings and

stuff that I just wanted to contribute in that great spirit is beautiful, and I think being able to contribute to the world is, you know, one of the beautiful things meaningful things to do with their life. But yeah, I think gonna be a little bit careful. If we distinguish the, the chain of cause and effect that gets emotion through that has to do with intentionality, the inner life of intentions. which plays out in the physical world. The physical world tends to respond to our intention certain way, there's no guarantee. But the inner world is invariable you know, karma, karma will come back. So I hope that you all become students of your karma. Thank you