

2012-10-07 Karma

Fri, 8/21 10:07AM • 39:22

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

brahmin, action, people, buddha, karma, world, birth, karmic consequences, cultivate, activity, brahmins, person, distinctive, means, buddhism, important, high esteem, cling, kinds, consequences

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

The last few days, I've been thinking about the topic of karma. It's a very important topic in Buddhism. And, in fact, one of the important perspectives that a practitioner Buddhism is supposed to bring along as they practice is a perspective. Sometimes it's described as faith in karma or belief in karma. And so some people because of the metaphysical associations with karma, are a little bit troubled by that kind of idea. Because the way the word karma is entered into English language, it's entered in come to English through all kinds of ways and so come from yoga from Hinduism, from Buddhism, from different schools of Buddhism, and there's many different belief systems connected to karma. And some of them have to do with the people will sometimes use the word karma to mean the results. of your past actions so that your karma means that you got a flat tire or something. And so, you know, so the karma is the result of something you did in the past. And so the so it's important to be very careful when you hear the word karma and in Buddhist context to be interesting. What does karma mean in the context of the teachings of the Buddha, for example. And so I've been thinking about this some today. And, and I'm not going to do a full discussion about that today. But I want to talk about how the Buddha approached the topic of karma in one particular discourse, discourse 98 in this middle length discourses. And so one of the things you should know is the word karma literally means action. And we might stretch that a little bit into English and saved means activity, but it's a particular kind of action or activity that person does. And so it doesn't automatically imply the results of your actions. That's another word for that. It's usually translated into English as fruit. There's the action and the fruit of the action, that consequence. But karma literally means action. And this discourse has an interesting verse, very nice verse, I think, at the end. And, and it's a maybe it's still popular enough. I learned this English expression when I was a child. And I don't think I've heard much since since then, except goes through my head occasionally. You've probably heard it you know that love makes the world go round. These people still say that, or was that only when I was a kid. That worked. So here this is a verse attributed to the Buddha. Action makes the world go around. Action mixed this generation of people turn living beings are tied up in their action, like the chariot wheel by the linchpin. So, action makes the world go round. So the word here is karma. Karma makes the world go around action. So here are the stresses that tremendous important action has, at the, you know, it's called the linchpin of the wheel. So it's like at the heart of what this world that spins around the social world, the human world, actually, somehow is spins around, based on action. In some ways, I thought no more satisfying the word love, love is great. I wish there was true that it made the world go round. But there are unfortunately many other things that gets people spinning around and turned upside down and besides love and, and, and so action kind of speaks to a broader range of how this world works. So it doesn't say much if say action turns the world turns a social world of the human world around. But then you have to say what what's why the moment Why the emphasis on action? Why that why is that important for the Buddhists. So, in this particular discourse, it has to do with to brahmanical students, Brahmin students, who come to ask the question about a dispute they have with each other. So, these to suit these, these are very well learned, Brahmins, Brahmins are the

priestly class in India they still to this day they have this class of people kind of like a caste and an ancient India timer the Buddha they had the Brahmins and they were kind of like the priest class and, and they consider themselves superior to everyone else.

Whereas everyone else was born from other parts of the Great God Brahma, the creator, God, kind of, the Brahmins are born from his mouth, you know, and so like the untouchables that kind of lowest class are born from his feet, which is pretty dirty. We walk around barefoot. So the consideration was very lofty. And probably I think most historians think that the Brahmins are descended from the Eurasian invaders who came down from the steppes of Russia and places and came and invaded into northern India, I don't know, four or 5000 years ago, and kind of conquered much of India and establish themselves as kind of the ruling class. And so supposedly they were more light skinned, as opposed to the native Indians who are darker skin. So there was kind of a racial kind of distinction between the Brahmins and others. And the Brahmins believed that their positions as the priests class was hereditary. It passed down passed down through their family lineage, and that's how you're a Brahmin and you couldn't be a Brahmin unless you had that blood if you were kind of continued that way. So, you know, so they're important class of people in India. And so there were these two students who were used brahminical priests they were very well trained in the, in the lore the teachings of the dead as of the Brahmins, and they had a dispute and their dispute was how is a person a Brahmin? What makes a person that Brahmin and one person one of these students says when one is well Born on both sides, a pure maternal and paternal descent seven generations back, unassailable and impeccable in respect of birth, then one is a Brahmin. So that's pretty, pretty sure you have to know your genealogy and prove it so you can have your card carrying Brahman card and the other students said I had a different opinion and his opinion noise When one is virtuous, and fulfills the observances, then one is a Brahmin. So you're not a Brahmin by birth, but by being virtuous. And then the observances probably means that there were brahminical rituals and rites that had to be performed. So if you are trained to do those properly, then you are a Brahmin. So one set is by birth and other says it's by action. So and they went to the Buddha to resolve their dispute to what he think. And so they come in they explained to him, we possess the knowledge of the triple letters that are sacred texts. We are the students of very famous brahmanical teachers. We've attained full mastery over all the Vedic experts over all that bed Vedic Vedic experts teach. We are skilled in philology, and grammar. We match our teachers in recitation a dispute has arisen between us Concerning the question of birth and class, one of us says, one is a Brahmin by birth, the other by action. Since we can't convince each other, we've come to talk to you and ask you, what do you think? And the Buddha? So one of the interesting things is that the question is literally by action, or by an action means, like virtue and observances, or is it by birth, and the Buddha kind of agrees with one of them, probably imagine which one he agrees with. But he, he does a kind of just good, he's going to do kind of sleight of hand, which is very interesting here as you go, I think it's sleight of hand. So he starts off by saying,

I will teach you in the order as they really are. digit to the order They really are, I think implies you know, since the Romans lived in saw the world through order of castes, there was a highest order the lowest order. He's going to start off with that. And we'll teach you in, in the order as they really are. The Jeanette generic divisions of living beings, for many are the kinds of birth no first the grass and trees, though they lack self awareness, the birth is their distinctive mark, for many are the kinds of birth in other words, how you're born as a plant that tells what you're going to be if you're an oak seedling, you become an oak tree, if you're a redwood, you become a redwood tree. And so there you can distinguish them by the marks what they look like. Next comes the moths and butterflies, and so on through to ants and termites. their birth there's their distinctive mark for many are the kinds of birds that know the kinds of quadruped quadrupeds of various sorts, both small and large. The birth is there, just Did mark for many are the kinds of birth there's lots of four legged animals and so, you can you can distinguish them

by you know by how they look by how their you know their distinctive marks mean how they look their shape their color their you know something or they see the differences between a dog and a mountain lion, for example. No those whose bellies are their feet I think it means snakes. their birth is their distinctive mark for many are the kinds of birth many kinds of foreign made different kinds of shapes and species no to the water dwelling fish, their pasture in the liquid world. their birth is their distinctive Mark are many other kinds of birth. Next know the birds that wing their way as they range in upon the skies. The birth is their distinctive mark. While in these births, the differences of birth make their distinctive Mark with humans, no difference of birth make a distinctive mark in them. That's quite a powerful statement probably in his time, that there's no distinct difference being no distinctive mark, you know, really represents a species difference, you know or generic difference in any important difference for from what the Buddha says, nor in the hairs, nor in the head, nor in the ears, nor in the eyes, nor in the mouth, nor in the nose, nor in the lips, nor in the eyebrows, nor in the shoulders, or the neck, nor in the belly, or the back, nor in the buttocks or the breast. Knowing the genitals are ways of mating, nor in the hands, nor in the feet, nor in the fingers, or the nails, nor in the knees, nor the thighs, nor in the color, or invoice. Here birth makes no distinctive mark. As with the other kinds of birth, and human bodies in themselves. Nothing distinctive can be found. distinction among human beings is purely a verbal designation. So of course, we see differences right between people. But in order to characterize people differently, like a different species are some radically different. There's nothing in physical characteristic that warrants a difference. The differences that we make for each other, our verb have to do with verbal designations as the Buddha. That's a very powerful statement in some circles pulls the rug from some people's worldview. So I'm gonna read it as it says, I often try to change the gender so that it's gender neutral, because these are often said male pronoun stuff, but sometimes it's kind of hard. So this is kind of poetry. You hopefully Forgive me who makes his living among men, by various crafts you should know is called a craftsman. He is not a Brahmin who makes his living among men. Men buy merchandise, you should know is called the merchant. He is not a Brahmin who makes his living among men by serving others you should know is called a servant. He is not a Brahmin, who makes his living among men by stealing is called a robber. He is not a Brahmin, who makes his living among men by archery is called a soldier. He is not a Brahmin who makes his living among men by priestly craft, is called a chaplain. He is not a Brahmin who governs governance among men. The town and realm is called the ruler he is not a Brahmin. So then he's going to say that he's going to say who is a Brahmin or not quite yet, I call I call them not the Brahmin because of his origin or lineage impediments still lurk in him. He's just one who says, sir, meaning a little bit kind of a highfalutin language, but it means who speaks with highfalutin language. One who is unimpeded, unimpeded, and clings no more. He is the one I call a Brahmin. The person who is unimpeded, and clings no more especially it clings no more we can understand. So he Buddha here to find someone who's a Brahmin by the fact that they don't cling. So this is the kind of speaking of sleight of hand, he's saying by your actions or your defined and, and the actions are external, the way your livelihood in which you live in the world in. And then he said, Now he kind of turns in and says something about the inner psychology of the person is what defines a Brahmin. It's not by physical characteristics. It's not even by what profession you do, but rather how your mind is or your heart is. And the first thing he says this think about being without clinging The one who has cut off all fetters who is no more by anguish shaken, who has overcome all attachments. He is the one I call a Brahmin who has cut each strap and thong, the reins and bridal band as well, whose crossbar is lifted the awakened one. He is the one I call a Brahmin who endures without a trace of hate, abuse, violence and bondage to with strength of patience, well arrayed is the one I call a Brahmin who does not flare up with anger, dutiful, virtuous and humble, subdued, baring the final body. He is the one I call a Brahmin who, like the rain on lotus leaves, or mustard seed on the point of an owl, meaning they just washes right off. Things not at all to sensual pleasures is the One I call a Brahmin who knows right here within oneself the destruction of all suffering. With burdened, lowered and detached is the one I call a Brahmin, who with deep understanding wise, can tell the path from the non path and attain the goal Supreme. I call a Brahmin

who is laid aside weapons against all beings frail and bold, who does not kill or have them killed. I call a Brahmin who is unopposed among the opponents, peaceful among those given to violence, who does not cling among those who cling. I call a Brahmin who has dropped all lust and hate, dropped conceit and contempt. Like a mustard seed on the point of an owl. I call a Brahmin who utters speech free from harsh This full of meaning ever truthful, which does not offend anyone I call a Brahmin Who in the world will never take what is not given long or short, small or big or fair or foul. I call a Brahmin who has no inner yearnings regarding this world or the next, who leaves on yearning and detached I call a Brahmin who has no more indulgences, no more perplexity, since he knows who has gained from footing in the deathless, I call a Brahmin who has transcended all ties here have both merit and evil deeds is sorrow less stainless and pure. I call a Brahmin who pure as the Spotless Moon is clear and limpid, and in whom delight, and being have been destroyed. I call a Brahmin who has passed Beyond the swamp, the mire samsara all delusion, was crossed to the further shore and meditates within the jhanas is unperturbed and unprefix attained Nibbana through non clinging. I call a Brahmin who has abandoned craving to, and wonders and wonders here in homelessness.

With craving, destroyed, I call a Brahman whose destination is unknown, to Gods to spirits and to men, and are hot with taints destroyed. I call a Brahmin who, okay for name and clan are assigned as marriage designations in the world. originate originating in conventions. They are assigned here. And there for those who do not know this fact, wrong views have long underlaying their hearts not knowing they declare to us when is a Brahmin by birth. When is not a Brahmin by birth, nor by birth a non Brahmin by action is one a Brahmin by action is one a non Brahmin. So, this is probably a little bit upsetting to some people to hear this, the Brahmins in particular. You know what I was born this way for seven generations. I know who I am. So, the way it was doing here is another sleight of hand is he's saying he's taking a common word, accepting the use of it using it, but redefining it kind of reappropriation for his own purpose. And so kind of pulling the rug underneath there originally, this is a common common trick of the Buddha was rather than opposing what people did He would often take their concepts and say great. Now, let me let me tell you what it really means.

So by action is one of Brahman. So in the action the Buddha keeps, you know, you saw that long list, the action that he's focused on his own is pretty much all psychological. It has all to do with you know state of your mind, free of craving free of hate, free of lust, free of confusion that somehow you when you do the inner work of changing yourself of waking up that that's what qualifies you as a Brahmin.

So that is how with the truly wise see action as it really is. Cesar seers of dependent origination, skilled in action and its results, so skilled in action and its results so this is also very important term. So it isn't just a matter of recognizing that action, especially a psychological action activity of what we do inside is what counts. But that what the Buddha was teaching was a training program for how to take more, to become skilled to become trained in action into psychological action. So we're not don't don't just go along and just continue with our minds and hearts as they were received for as we happen to find them the day we wake up to it, but we can then begin to train ourselves and change the quality the characteristics, the action, the activity of reminding hearts. So it becomes in this language of this text here. So it becomes pure, clean, like clean and bright like the full moon. Action makes the world go round action makes to this generation turn that in beings are bound by action, like the chariot wheel by the linchpin spiritual practice self control and inner training by this one becomes a Brahmin in this Supreme Brahman hood lies.

So, action then becomes very important. And so, part of the reasons why action is important is you become the kind of company become a Brahmin. But I don't think the Buddha was that interested in creating a class of people who walk around calling themselves Brahmins. He was just talking to these

Brahmins and are they kind of, you know, turn the table on them, I guess. But he was interested in helping people suffer less and become people who not only suffer less themselves, but don't cause suffering on others. And this this kind of person is considered a noble person, dignified person, a wise person in the Buddhist tradition, It's held up in high esteem and that a person who has managed to overcome their own suffering and overcome the capacity or the tendency to cause suffering to others. That's there's such people are held up in high esteem and respected a lot. One of the interesting aspects of becoming such a person of high esteem and Buddhism holds these people in high esteem is that if you hold yourself in high esteem, the probably still suffering. So, you know, it doesn't do you much psychological good to be esteemed by others when you don't care anymore. Somebody because, you know, that's the whole idea is to be free of that kind of carrying, that kind of make tied up and self identity issues like that. But still, that tradition holds these people up in high esteem, and but the way to that the path so the Buddha then offers a path, and it's probably appropriate to call it a path of action. So karma is important. What you do is important so the action There's a training program. And that training program involves two kinds of action involves what you do and what you don't do. And sometimes the emphasis is on not doing certain things, restraining oneself or avoiding certain behavior. And sometimes the emphasis is on action, what you do and what you cultivate. Sometimes the non doing has a lot to do with learning how to let go. And, and, and, and it's the non action part. And the action part has a lot to do with what you're cultivating what you develop how you train yourself. And those two go hand in hand. Both are important. If you emphasize one over the other becomes lopsided. Some people all they emphasize too much the cultivation part, the action part, and it becomes a lot of work to do spiritual practice and they're kind of like tying themselves up and it becomes a big engineering project to train themselves and some people emphasize Letting go at the exclusion of cultivation, and it can be nice to let go. But you can't really let go fully and deeply unless you develop some inner strength with some of your different mental faculties become strong and well developed. So I don't know if this is a fair comparison, but I think that there was a time kind of a time in American culture, where maybe 100 years ago or something that is considered valuable for people to toughen themselves up to steal themselves up. And you had to kind of that was kind of the character building and that you've managed to get through the world. Okay. And then by the time I was being raised, it seemed like it was like this pendulum had swung, and that was considered to be kind of pawrents idea that you would steal yourself and toughen yourself up and the idea was to be kind of just relaxed and easygoing and soft and accepting and, you know, kind of like just, you know, and so not making any effort was kind of like valued a lot. And now they've discovered that you need some combination of both. And something as simple as for example, if some people, some people who have back problems, right, resting is not the best thing to do, you know, do you think crystals like like go and rest and recover, sometimes what you need to do is build up your strength. And when the muscles get stronger, they hold the back better, and so it works. So sometimes we need to rest sometimes we need to build up strength, and but we build up the strength for the back, then I think it's easier to let go and relax and deeper away because, you know, if we let go when we're not strong, we might injure ourselves further. So the same way psychologically, spiritually that we need is a combination of both the beginning of the path for a Buddha often when he began it involved particular activities.

And not necessarily just psychological activities, but kind of activities that we do and don't do that I think I believe are relatively easy for people to do, compared to cultivating stronger meditation practice mindfulness of concentration, where you're tracking your mind. Sometimes tracking you what you do with your body is easier than tracking what goes on. That's very fast mind that spins around out of control. And so the beginning of the training is to begin to practice generosity. generosity is an activity you can do, you can plan ahead, you can plan like a month, a month ahead and build yourself and get yourself ready to do an act of generosity. So you don't have to kind of like, have the fortitude to do it in the moment. If you think it's a good idea to practice generosity, you can, you know, anybody can cultivate and develop it if they, you know, it doesn't require, you know, wealth that doesn't require a lot

of things. But it's an action that you can do. You can get it doesn't even require wanting to do it. You know, but it's something you can do. And so the fact that it begins with what you can do that and something begins to shift and change, for many people, when they're their trainings, focus on what you can do, as opposed to trying to change your inner life. First and foremost, you change your inner life, by your doing. I think it's tonight we have the recovery program here. There's a great saying and a, which is, bring your body and your mind will follow. I think it's a really wise expression. So by focusing on what you can do, something begins shifting inside. And then the idea is as you do these things, you can also develop some confidence in yourself. It shifts your kind of relationship to yourself. Because if you're only trying to kind of internally shift your depression or shift your anger or shift your fear, it can be very hard to get ahead. on it. And if that's how you measure your well being by those things, you kind of sunk maybe. But if you're measuring yourself a little bit by your actions of what you do, you can start feeling a little better better about yourself, oh, at least I did some generosity, I get some good things from my community. So often, that's where the Buddha emphasizes the beginning of the path. So that's a doing an action. The next step is non action, which is his way, primarily first way in which he talked about ethics. cultivating moral integrity was mostly defined by what you don't do. You don't kill, you don't lie. You don't steal. You don't engage in sexual misconduct. And you don't intoxicate yourself. So it might be hard to avoid doing those things for some people, but but they're kind of gross activities. You know, it's like, again, it's not, you know, stealing. Stealing is something physical usually that we do. And it's easier to monitor your body what you do sometimes than it is to monitor your what goes on your mind, you might want to steal. And maybe you can't control necessarily what your desires are, but at least try to control what you do with your hands. And so these are grosser activities than the subtlety of the mind. And so the day is to begin training ourselves there. And there are some people for whom it builds a lot of confidence, a lot of self esteem, a lot of strength, and a lot of mindfulness to practice, the practice of restraint. And sometimes that's all people can do is to restrain themselves. So for people who don't need to restrain themselves, maybe it's not a good teaching for them. So well, some of you don't need it, right. You're already well mannered. And, but, but it's worth considering that this these are the starting point for Buddhist practice. Then from there from here, that that is a foundation Then the balance of going back and forth between action and non action, letting go. And cultivation plays itself out in increasingly subtle ways until eventually it comes into the subtlety of how your, your mental activity as well as mental action. And then there are times where it's useful to just let go and not do anything there, the mind starts thinking and you let go. And sometimes it's helpful to cultivate certain qualities like you. This is a time where I'm going to cultivate more loving kindness. And so we cultivate that little bit. And then you come to a point where even cultivating loving kindness is too much. cultivating concentration is too much. And oddly enough, amazingly enough, there comes a time when meditation is quite strong. Mindfulness is quite strong. We're even cultivating mindfulness is too much. And so you have to let go of even mindfulness in order to continue the path. So this ability to let go and to cultivate and the goal for all you're doing all this is to be I'm a person who's if you if you'd like to be this kind of person to be a Brahmin. And so some of you are already already well on your way to being Brahmins, I'm sure and confident.

And I hope that that path is one that serves you and serves the world around you. That's a win that helps you to suffer less, to be less caught up in your cravings and your reactivity in the world and let you be freer. And that it serves the world by by you being someone who does two things, doesn't harm other people, and supports other people so they can become freer as well. so others can become brahmans. So action, the world turns on action, but how it turns depends on what action you do. So choose your action carefully. Set a good We have five minutes set enough for you. Would you like to ask questions or protest or?

Yes, please. Any right? I'll try to repeat the question. So translated as condition.

So you've heard karma being translated as conditioned action or habitual actions are the cause of what was at least one of causes and conditions. So there's something to that in that. The tradition distinguishes between two two kinds of actions. There's one kind of action that's occurring. By intention, and in fact, the connection between two is so close that that the Buddha defined karma, by intention, the quality of your inner intention is what characterizes the quality of the activity and effects the consequences. That's the psychological consequences, the karmic consequences that are can be resulting. So, in the end that is being if intentions are habitual or intentions are part of the conditioning, then yes, karma is conditioned action or habitual action. With cart the word karma has always kind of activity that does lead to consequences, that's, you know that it sets something in momentum in motion that's going to come back somehow or other and affect you. Sometimes immediately in the present. Sometimes in a few minutes. Sometimes a few days, sometimes later. There's another activity and that is that for people who have who are Free who have experienced enlightenment. The tradition says their activity has no karma. So it still has consequences in the world, you know, it still has consequences. No, but the consequences no longer create any, there's no longer any psychological consequences for them. So, enlightened person might be generous and give something to someone, but it's a little bit more spontaneous than intentional, and it doesn't create the conditions. I doesn't condition or shape that person's mind anymore. The mind is kind of like, once the mind is pure, empty or I know what the best word is here. Once once the, the you know, once the mirror has been cleaned totally, then if there's nothing in it, no matter what Activity happens. It doesn't stain the cloth or doesn't feel the bowl or doesn't, you know doesn't affect the mirror anymore. So once you're enlightened, you can do these things. But it has there's no attachment, there's no momentum, there's no ripples that get created. So is each thing that gets done, gets done and it's kind of karmically finished. So, A, so, those are the two different kinds of karma activities, karmic activities, which have momentum and ripples, and non non karmic activities, which are the activities of enlightened person that makes some sense. The reverse the karmic purse of enlightened person is generous to you. There might be consequences, you might feel happy. But those aren't wouldn't be karmic consequences, because karmic consequences are only those that affect us in our well being into the future. So if I'm generous to you I might go home, and I'm having tea in the afternoon. Remember that? That was really nice. That was good thing and people kind of inspired while able to be generous, that's nice. So it's kind of you know, and I feel good about myself and then I'm more likely to do in the future so those are those would be kind of like the karmic consequences for me you know, karmic consequences, karmic consequences for you. You know, I don't know what the consequences are going to be for you. You know, I could I could give you a you know, a ticket for the playoff games tonight. And I feel good I gave generous to you and did a nice things for you and, and that you're kind of jazzed initially when you go to the game, but they lose horribly. Not only that, but know that but the baseball hits you in the nose and you go home with a lost game and a bloody nose and you're just like, I wish that Gil hadn't given me that ticket then just ruin my day. So I don't know what the consequences are going to be for you. But I can still feel good about it I feel sorry for you but like, I feel sorry for you I feel sorry for you but but the car and feel sorry for you but the karmic consequences for me the good karmic consequences of my generosity persists for me. And the fact that later I feel sorry for you and have compassion for you, that just improves my karma even more.

So, so there is a kind of tendency sometimes to get into this whole karmic equation kind of thing. You know, and I don't think that's useful at all. I think what's useful is to is to not to measure and calculate you know, what the karmic consequences are, but to appreciate the tremendous importance that are the intention, the quality of our action, how they arises out of our intention, has important consequences. And if you want to follow a spiritual path to Buddhism, you need to take some care For what intentions, what motivates you what attitudes you walk around in and how they affect your actions.

And without that care about your attitudes, your intentions, your motivations, it's very hard to walk the path. Okay, thank you brahmans