

2015-10-11 Buddhist Teachings On Karma

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SPEAKERS

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So I would like this morning to talk about the teachings, something about the teachings on karma. Karma is considered to be pretty central teaching in Buddhism. So much so that some teachers sometimes say it's more important to understand karma than almost any other Buddhist teachings. And part of that, is that the background of the teachings on karma, is that that there is that the idea that our actions have consequences. And now for most of us, that's pretty, you know, pretty obvious, I think. But in the ancient world, it wasn't so obvious to people, there was a big, big, unseen world of causality that people didn't understand how things happened. And so, you know, if there was an earthquake, you know, Why'd that happen? They didn't know about plate tectonics. And so they try to explain it by maybe the gods did it. And so, but if the crops failed, it's because we didn't supplicate the gods well enough. And so the causality then, humans want causality when understand how things happen. And so without knowing, seeing how things happen, they sometimes often attributed to other forces. Also in a time, but the Buddha there were people who believed that there was no nope, no real consequences to actions. They were as people who went around the countryside teaching that, that you could do whatever you want, you could kill people. And you'd be no no consequences unless you got caught by the king. But there was no you know, there's no karmic consequences. It doesn't affect your future life in any way. And then there were some people who went around to the Buddha and taught that everything is pre determined, completely predetermined. And so you know, what you did or didn't do didn't really matter. If you are going to have blisters on your feet, whether you walked or not, you're going to have them because it was predetermined. So it doesn't really matter if you're Walker Nazi or something like that. So. So in that environment, when the Buddha came and saw it said that actions have consequences, that was a consequential statement in the environment, and what it meant. And what it means is that what it suggests is that if if your actions have consequences, you could start paying attention to the actions you do in light of the consequences they might have. And so, you know, you might want to think ahead a little bit that what you might do if you decide that this would be a good day to yell at you yell at your boss, you know, without any concern for that consequences that might not that might be your last day at that place of work. So the idea is that because there's actions have consequences, and we can choose actions that affect the consequences that we have for us. And so that's kind of the kind of, seat of kind of a lot of Buddhist teachings on karma. Now the word karma means in our in Theravada Buddhism, it's the word is come, it's kind of soften the RM sound. And karma originally meant ritual action actions done in certain ceremonies and back in the ancient Vedic times, kind of sacred ceremonies. And in Buddhism, it still contains that meaning sometimes when when refers to ceremonies and official kind of acts as That happened within the monastic communities. Some people call ecclesiastical acts are called karma. And it has kind of connotations of being special actions, not just any actions at all. Sometimes it's very often it's used that way as well. But it has this resonance, in the word that it's a special action actions that have certain kind of special meaning or, or have extra

value. And the and so, repeatedly, the way the Buddha talked about karma was focusing on the consequences of karma. But karma, the way he talked about it, or the kind of karma kind of actions that he focused about, the kind of actions and consequences he focused on, were when he talked about karma was ethical actions are things that have an ethical quality to them.

So for example, if you kill that's going to have certain bad consequences for you and for others and or stealing or sexual misconduct or lying going through the precepts. They have, they involve, you know, those are the when he talks about karmic consequences. Most often he talks about those particular actions, or the opposites, the opposite of killing was have compassionate concern for others. The opposite opposite of stealing is to be generous. The opposite of sexual misconduct is to be content. The opposite of ill will or ill will also is one of the things that causes karmic consequences. The opposite of ill will is to have loving kindness and care for the world around you. So when the Buddha talked about karma, he seemingly always put the concept Have karma, smack in the middle of our social network or social community. And I think that's often not quite appreciated, how much he was concerned about our relationship to each other in community. That the karmic connections, the karma, we want to kind of avoid in the karma, we want to the actions we want to avoid, the actions we want to engage in, are those that connect us to our community around us. We want to avoid those things that create harm in our community. And we want to do those things that are beneficial for our community. So sometimes, that's overlooked or not seen, because sometimes the way karma is taught, you should have you know, you should avoid killing, stealing, lying and all these things. It just seems like an abstract list of rules, and to kind of align myself with those rules. But instead of looking at them as abstract rules, they're really expressing the quality of our relationship. To the world around us, people around us, the beings around us. And it's the quality of those relationships that we want to care for, that our actions, that how we act in those relationships have a big impact on us. And so there were 10 particular things that the Buddha said, we should avoid if we want to avoid having having bad consequences from our actions, and 10 things we should do that the 10 most common things we talked about. And those are called the 10 skillful actions or the 10 unskillful. Actions, the unsaid so it's kind of nice that they call them unskillful. As opposed to bad. These are the 10 bad things. It's the 10 unskillful things. So it's pretty unskillful to kill. It's unskillful to steal. It's unskillful to be engaged in sexual misconduct unskillful to lie and skill They'd be engaged in, in malicious speech. It's unskillful to engage in harsh speech. And it's unskillful to be involved in gossip. It's unskillful to be involved in having thoughts of lol hostility is unskillful to have thoughts of, of greed. And it's unskillful to have what the Buddha called wrong view. So the first nine clearly have to do with your relationship to other people. And then some people protest in the wrong view. What's wrong with having wrong view? I mean, why should that have this deleterious effect that causes bad karma for somebody to cause bad consequences? When the Buddha defined wrong view, he very much put in the forefront of it. issues having to do with our relationship to other people. The idea apparently there are people may be sick one of the one of the wrong view is that you have no mother no father. And I don't know if there are people in ancient India who went around said there's no no social connections, there's no parents we have to take care of or be concerned with and, and maybe remember what it was a renounced very belong to a group of people who announced the world. So maybe some of those pronounces of the world that dropouts kind of rejected their parents, I don't know. But he said, it's a wrong view to think you have no parents. And he built built into his rules for monastics that they should take care of their parents, they're allowed to go and take care of them, and do a lot to break other rules so they can take care of their parents, then nice. If you're a monk, then and then. And then also wrong view is believing that there's no impact, no effect consequences, in Acts of giving.

So these have to do with our social connections giving has to do with our social connections. So to kind of believe that there's no impact of course there are social connections to each other have no role and

no place you considered kind of wrong view. And it leads to the other wrong views other things, other unskillful actions. So the skillful actions are the opposite of those so compassionate concerned for the lives of others, generosity and care for the property of others. contentment or sexual restraint, proper sexuality. And then speaking the truth, speaking kind and supportive words, speaking gently, sweetly, speaking, not gossiping. What's the opposite of not gossiping? I don't know. I don't know what the opposite is. But speaking, you know, beneficial words, useful words. Oh, I think he talks. I don't know. Maybe it's malicious speech. He talks about speaking words that bring Concord that bring people together rather than splitting people. And so gossip sometimes splits people. And then the opposite. Ill will is loving kindness. And the opposite of greed is generosity. And the opposite of wrong view is right view. So it puts this in our in our social world. And what I'd like to suggest here today is that our connection to each other to our world around us whether we have a lot of big social network, or very small one, or maybe very little, or maybe none, one way or the other. Most human beings, the social connections we have, are paramount are really central to who we are. They're really, really deep. Our connection to it starts off with as young children, right, our connection to our parents, and our immediate family is a pretty important relationship. And if something goes amiss in that relationship, it can affect someone for the rest of their life and kind of kind of create a certain unhealthy spin or suffering or dysfunctionality a wound even better feel that bond bonding with your, you know, with your parents, I've kind of struck I'm very moved a little bit sometimes when I hear of grown people who, like in times of war or something, or accidents, and they're seriously injured and maybe dying, and you know, and they start calling for their mommy, you know, they're maybe a little bit delirious or something Mommy, you know, grown people that's, you know, that kind of long deep connection you know, it's pretty pretty deep. And so we have these you know we've ended early age we kind of bond with parents or hopefully they talk about, you know, it's it's maybe a little bit unfortunate that Buddhists keep talking about being non attached. And psychologists talk about how important it is to have good attachment. I think they're talking about to the using the word of Buddhist and the psychology of using the word attachment in two different ways. So you have to be very careful not to assume they're talking about the same Right. But to have a psychologist say there's healthy attachment to unhealthy healthy attachment, bonding between parents and children. And then depending on how that attachment that bonding happens, if it happens somehow and unhealthy ways people can develop unhealthy attachment disorders that glassed up into adulthood. So what we learn as children, and but how to be in relationship and where we learn to trust life, you know, if someone's there and tells you it's okay and support you and create safety, then some people learn to trust life really deeply. But there are people who grew up with alcoholic parents, someone's always angry and they're afraid of the father coming home because there might be violence. And so there's a lack of trust, you know, they feel like home is not a place to be safe. And so that becomes kind of inculcated in kind of in their system, that lack of trust. So our relationship to others, especially when we're primary family, as youth is really, really deep inside of I don't think we understand how deep it is. And I don't think we understand how deep some of our personal connections can be what's really being touched, you know, when there's marriage, for example, or when two people commit themselves to each other, what brought those people together? And what is it they saw on each other? And what is it that keeps them together and you know, it's a, it's a multi dimensional, all the different forces that come into play to bring people together and keep them together.

And I kind of like to think that marriage, that kind of commitment, a committed relationship like that is kind of is something to be honored really deeply because of the some of the mystery going on some of the depth of what people how people relate to each other and, and trust each other and open to each other and who knows what's going on. So for me, the social world we live in, in their in their closer relationship we have and not so close Where they should we have, are very deep and touch into aspects of our life that we don't even understand maybe our subconscious area of our life. And, and,

and so because we don't understand all the dimensions of our social connection of social, the social part of our heart, our social heart kind of connects to other people. A lot of it's unknown. And it's easy to be dismissive of, it's easy to overlook. It's easy to easy be blinded or be numb to and not really see. And one of the things that happens when people start to meditate some people is it as we begin to relax and soften and open up and kind of really kind of allow what's deeper under the surface of our kind of discursive mind to show itself. It's not uncommon that what bubbles up really big has something to do with our relationship to other people. unresolved issues with others resentments. We have without There's hurts we have with others, all kinds of things begin to bubble and kind of surface up. And what's remarkable is the way especially like on a retreat sometimes when people do a long meditation practice, things that happened decades ago, that they kind of forgotten about explode sometimes. Sometimes, some people literally explode. They're sitting there minding their own business, you know? And then, you know, like, there's a suddenly a memory. Oh, my God, I did that. You know, I didn't Wow, how could I even How could I thought of doing that to me? Now I didn't. I didn't realize when now I realized what a big deal it was. It's buried in the psyche buried in the mind in these deep places. Are these actions we did in the past, there are unresolved issues they've been past, the recorded, they're in a certain kind of way. I don't know exactly how they're recorded there. But it's possible to spend a lifetime living in the surface of the mind and not really see the impact of these deeper conditioning that we have. within us, but as we sit and practice, meditation is one of the great places where this deeper conditioning surfaces, some of the conditioning, some of the deeper things that we've been affected by and memories and all that that continues to kind of fester or influence us can be can be changed can be healed. Some things need to be before they can be healed. Some of the things that we've done that we feel bad about amends may need to be made. Maybe you have to go talk to someone and apologize. Thank you call you call them up 30 years later, 40 years later and say, you know, this is Gil and I need to apologize for something and they say, Who are you? Well, we were in high school together and he said and whatever you know, so so it's surprising sometimes on retreat for people to see how long forgotten things are things that don't seem very important. loom up. One of my stories I like to tell of this is my friend John Travis, who's a teacher. Sometimes this takes the form of something looms big and your person can't get more concentrated, can't get more make any more progress in their meditation. So my friend John Travis, he was in his early years of practicing in India. He was in his 20s. And he came to such an impasse in his practice. And so he went to see Ram Dass, famous Ram Dass India back then, and kind of friend of his, and he told him what was going on. And Ram Dass said, you have to go back to Tennessee to see your dad. Pay your respects to the dad, your dad. Pay your respects. But don't stay long.

And so, he went to a tailor in India and had a corduroy suit made and he cut off his long hair, you know, he was he John was dressed wandering around India back then as a wandering saw Do you know with long hair and almost no clothes barefoot, you know, so it was quite a you know, variation of being a hippie and so he cut off his here and got this corduroy suit and he flew back to I think was Arkansas where he's from, and Arkansas Kentucky, Kentucky and he saw his dad and did some you know, things with his dad and his dad's world. Some some of it had to do with eating bull testicles. Little demographics Sorry about that, but but you know, he went back to enter his dad's world you know, madly We're all in, you know what it was, and, and it paid his respects. And then he came back to India and continued his practice there and then was able to continue. So, you know, it's just a story, you know, it's a big deal to leave India and Cali back to Kentucky back specially back in the 1960s. You know, the whole trip right takes a while. So, something was in there, something was going on deep inside. When I was sitting on retreat in Burma, I was adding to how long I've been sitting in silence on retreat for maybe I don't know how long it was, my guess about four or five months. So pretty deep, pretty quiet very still, you know, hadn't really talked to anyone except my meditation teacher for 10 minutes every day for four or five months and very constant remained very still. And in that's very deep, peaceful stillness. I had one of these sudden explosions in my mind, and, and there was a face vivid

Chris Still clear face right in front of me. And it was my grandmother. Just that. And I said, Well, you know, and I thought this must be something like maybe she just died and she came to tell me or something. I didn't know what to make of it. She hadn't died, but I don't know where it was. But my grandmother's particular grandmother was, you know, I you know, to this day, I you know, she had been dead now for 25 years maybe. And to this day, I still have these very warm feelings for her her care for me, her love for me and everything. still kind of as conditioned my heart condition who I am the kind of I still think of sometimes have you know, it was such a small thing. Seemingly, maybe she didn't think it was big. And you wouldn't think it was big, maybe. But when I would stay at her house, I would be able to sit in her lane this weekend. It was in Norway and we had these comforters, these two really cozy comforters. So there's nice little run by myself. Lots of beautiful like coming in through a window, and I had this warm cozy comforter. And I would read all Donald Duck magazines in bed when I woke up in the morning, very cozy, and she would come into my bedroom with toast with cheese on it. And it would be so cool to eat those toasted cheese. And her doing that turned out I didn't think I didn't probably didn't give it one thought when I was 10 or 11, or whatever it was, didn't occur to me think about wedding special. But now, many years later, 50 years later, I still remembered as one of those little lessons of love and trust and peace and a place in the world that was really had a big impact on me. So here she was, you know, in Burma, you know, you know, what was she doing deep in my mind? You know, I couldn't get more deep where that came from. So many people live their lives make a huge choice. About how they go about their life, based on their interpretation or their ideas of their of their relationship to other people, avoiding people staying home more, looking for people feeling lonely. The whole social relational world is huge, huge, huge for people. And how it really affects us is often unseen, normally, you know, big parts of it. So unseen. So it turns out, as I said earlier, that human beings would like to understand why things happen. And when there's an unseen world that we, we don't kind of content ourselves and say, Well, I don't know. But often they come up with theories. Why are they you know, why is it raining? Because the gods are crying. You know, why, why? Why did you end up with your particular partner, because you were partners for general For lifetimes before, and it's just supposed to be this way. You know, who knows, you know why he if that was true that you were lifetimes before partners, but it's a people want to speak to the unseen world kind of makes sense of it a little bit.

And so they try to explain it in different ways. And the Buddhists do this as well. And maybe it's a little bit disrespectful of Buddhism for me to say it's kind of, they're making up some of these stories, but some of them stories that people make up about karma, it is has to do with what happens to you in your next lifetime. And so if you're a mean to people, of your choice, have harsh language, then in your next life, you you're going to be born ugly. For example, that's not how it works. And nowadays, you know, we realize to some degree or a big degree, things like beauty and ugliness are cultural conditioned, and what's beautiful and what wasn't. Culture is ugly, another Culture culture or vice versa. So, if you think you're ugly, just it's the problems of the people around you. You just decided to be around the wrong people. You go to a different culture and you'll be great you know, you were born at the wrong decade you know, in America America is you know, decades in America in a certain body styles that are like, like, you know, what's in so just happened your body style was in. But it will be in again. Just wait. So decide so so, you know, they make up these stories, you know, if you have harsh speech, then you will, you know, you'll be ugly or kind speech, you'll be beautiful or something. And, you know, I kind of see it as kind of mythology or lore, but I don't know, I never kind of cared much for that kind of language in Buddhism. But I've come to have greater appreciation for it not because it's literally true. Because Because the strong urge to try to explain the unseen world is very deep in us. And the unseen world here, I think we're talking about karma. We're talking about our hearts. We're talking about, you know, our psychology and our psychology that is so deeply involved with our relationship to other people. And I think over and over again, we see the Buddha speaking to that, that our relationship to others. So for

example, he one of the definitions for a wise person was not someone who went off to be a hermit, to realize I don't need people. But a wise person is a person who cares enough to benefit others, benefit oneself and benefit both self and others. And the last one benefits self, other others. I think that means the US as a group, as a community, that English there's you me and then there's us. So to care for all of that. There's a wise person that has to do With our relationships with the world, that becoming awakened and liberate in Buddhism is certainly liberated from our attachments and suffering and pains contractions. But it doesn't mean that then we become a hermit and detached and aloof from the world. I think then it allows our sense of connection to be cleaner, more beautiful, more open, to take in people and have greater empathy and care and interest in people then, but not an interest that comes from fear or greed or lust but an interest that comes from a basic kind of open heartedness and feeling connected to people. And this is certainly what I've seen in myself. In the course of my practice early on my first years of doing practice. I was surprised how much my heart cut opened up, and how much my sense of empathy and sense of connectedness and being able to tune into other people grew. grew and grew, became more known. At the same time, I became a certain kind of less needy for people. And there's a beautiful thing to become less needy. But more tuned in. Isn't that nice? I thought it was nice. And I think my sense is that as this kind of my sense of spiritually mature people is that the more mature people come fish, especially in this Buddhist practice, the less need they have to be loved. But the more need the need is maybe not the right word, the more need they have to love. not investing. I think that's so great. And but the idea, you know, I don't know, but I don't have a need. It's just like what happens, you know that, of course, you're going to care for people and love people. So, when the Buddha talked about karma, he was speaking to this world, this special world, very important robot world. Some people might say sacred world have our connections to each other, and how to care for it. And if you don't care for it, if you don't honor that relationships, those relationships is going to come back and bite you.

You can't kill someone or harm someone without it having a big effect on that part of your heart that has that sense of interconnectedness, that sense of empathy, something shuts down, something goes numb, something difficult happens. My teacher in Burma, love to tell stories. It's probably the most common stories you'd like to tell when he gave his Dharma talks was he was a meditation teacher for many, many people big monastery in Burma. And the very famous monastery and so people would come from all over to meditate there. And in Burma back then still there was fighting between the guerrillas fighting government and the government soldiers, and they'd spent years fighting each other and then when it's time to retire, they would retire from being guerrilla Our soldiers and or something. And so some of these x gorillas and some of these ex government soldiers would end up in the monastery meditating under his under his guidance. And he loved to tell us stories about how they came up to a certain point, they came up to a huge block in their meditation practice, they couldn't make any more progress, because of what they did. And that he but he always, always had a happy ending. So but they had to persevere, that they keep sitting there with that pain, that difficulty until something opened up, they can go beyond it. You know, probably they didn't, you know, maybe when they did that was involved in a fighting, they didn't realize the impact that had on their hearts. And when you come and sit and meditate, you realize what a big impact it has. And so you have to come to terms with it. So the same thing with you know, all kinds of things, you know, stealing sexual misconduct, all the different ways we create, create harm to others. It has a big impact on us ourselves. You don't have to believe in rebirth that you just gonna follow you to the next next lifetime to understand what a big impact that your unethical actions have your unskillful actions have the way you harm people. And it's not like you know, to call it ethical. We don't want to be puritanical or moralistic about it. Ethical means the actions we do that cause harm or cause benefit to our community, to people around us. And so those things have a huge impact on you know, the consequences of those things we carry within us we carry within us as tension. We carry it inside of ourselves habits if you keep doing the same unethical

thing becomes a habit that moves through you. We carry it with us become witnesses coming becoming numb, as memories they get stored for later somehow. And sooner or later, those things that are buried inside will come out. And that's kind of the teaching of karma, that sooner or later it'll Come back and affect you. And if you do unethical things, it'll come back and bite you. If you do ethical things, it'll come back and like you image I have a nice warm dog and happy dog, smiling dog, you know, they'll it'll come back and you know and benefit you and bring you a sense of joy and happiness bring you good things. Good memories since a goodness. And so when the Buddha taught about karma, and the importance to care for karma, how important it is. He was doing two things at once. I believe I like to think see it this way. He was talking about a very important way to care for an essential part of our humanity, for ourselves. And it was and at the same time, care for our community around us to take it take this as being really important part of your life, that your behave Your your actions, your ethical actions are really, really important. And not so I know some people when they, when they hear Buddhist teachings and living by the precepts will kind of say, Oh no, I came to IMC today when they're talking about precepts. So this is like kindergarten Buddhism. I don't think it's gonna garden Buddhism. I think it's really at the heart of what this Buddhist enterprise is about. How to create a society that is not at war with itself, that society doesn't have the kind of conflicts and, and, and, and harm that people create to each other. And the emphasis on karma is a way of safeguarding and caring for our community and for ourselves.

So your actions have consequences. Your ethical actions have consequences for your heart. If you want to care and tend your heart properly You want to be very careful about your ethical actions. If you have unethical things you've done in the past that still fester and unresolved, it's really important to take care of it, to somehow do something about it and, and, and help with it, if you the last thing I'll say is that I think the teachings on karma come together with the Buddhist teachings on being present in the present moment. That as we begin appreciating the karmic consequences of our actions, then in the present moment, we try to choose those actions that are going to have beneficial consequences. And a big part of why Buddhism tries stress is how important it is to be in the present moment to be really mindful and what's going on now. So we can have more choice about what we say and what we do to our community and the people around us. So we can try to do Things which cultivate the good, cultivate the skillfulness cultivate a good heart for us and a good consequences for us and for our community around us. And to avoid those things that create kind of wounds or festers in our hearts. So mindfulness is a big part of this endeavor. The higher the mindfulness is, the more care we can give ethically, the greater that mindfulness is, the more we can kind of clean out some of the unresolved or difficult things that are left over from a lifetime of not understanding how deeply this works. And it's all a way of caring deeply for our community and for each other. And I think that that's one of the really beautiful things about a human heart that somehow biologically, the way that evolution has shaped us. We are social creatures, and our social relationships are real The really big part of who we are. So with that, given that we have five minutes before the end, I would like to suggest that because because we have a tea today, that before you go to tea and before you leave, that you turn to someone next to you and welcome them to IMC. And if you've never done this your first time at IMC, you can still welcome them. Because IMC belongs to whoever is here. So if you're here the first time it belongs to you, and say hello and then please everyone's welcome to stay for the tea and chat and talk and, and create good karma. Thank you