

# 2015-10-12 Karma Skillful And Unskillful Actions

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, actions, karma, unskillful, consequences, skillful, buddha, harm, choice, tires, deep, teachings, intention, buddhism, means, ethical, consequential, buddhist practice, understand, surface

## SPEAKERS

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So, good evening. And can you hear me okay? Let's see there's a little bit reverberation for me. I don't know if you're able to adjust that the volume but maybe the bass or something. So let's see how, how's that any better or everybody can hear Okay. Okay. So I'll share with you a Dharma topic that's been on my mind lately and that is the Buddhist concept of karma. And some people consider it to be one of the central aspects of the Buddha Dharma, the Buddhist teachings. And so much so that some people think that you should study and understand karma before you understand almost any Other teaching of Buddhism, the way that karma the word karma, the concept of karma has come to the west, it's come through a lot of different means from different backgrounds. It's a common word in India and India there are different concepts of karma different ideas of what karma means. And in time of the Buddha, there were controversies about their use of karma. And the Buddha was not necessarily part of the controversy was part it was part of the diversity of ways in which people understood this concept. And it's come into popular English now and people do know will very likely sometimes use the word karma, you know, that's your karma must be my karma. And I suppose, I'm not sure what they mean. When people say that it's your karma. It's my karma. A little bit dangerous because of the kind of colloquial simple way that maybe people use the term. Sometimes it implies that you deserve it, that the I did something I did x, you know, I must have done something to deserve this. It's a there's a cause and effect, and this is the effect. What's happening now I have a flat tire. It's my karma, I must have done something in the past. I must I don't know what what past actions caused, you know, a flat tire but maybe, you know, driving on the same tires for 100,000 miles. Eventually, they were down and air leaks and, and, you know, but it's at your karma. And, you know, you're partly responsible for not changing the tires and letting the wear down. But, but, you know, it's kind of ambiguous. What do people mean? It gets kind of painful sometimes when people kind of imply this idea of karma. When people are sick must be your karma. And like What is that supposed to mean? And is this supposed to mean that I did something terrible in the past and this is just desserts for what happened and my somehow responsible for my illness. Another kind of popular idea of karma is the idea of justice. A lot of people would like to have a just world to reasonable desire to have justice and adjust world or all the good and the bad balance out or at least all the bad gets get somehow gets. I don't know what the right expression is but punished, balanced out. Where you know that when people do bad things to each other, we want to we want to know that somehow there's a moral calculator in the universe, that the people who do immoral things that sooner or later they'll get the just desserts, it'll come back and bite them because you know, you know which kind of feels and just To have someone, you know, be really bad, do terrible things and maybe live a wealthy life and you know, not care of all the harm they've caused around them the wars they've caused or whatever and, and then they have a very sweet, happy, beatific death. You know, it's also you know, and in that scene doesn't seem like that's not justice. And so some people like to have

the teachings of karma, provide the Justice by connecting karma to rebirth. Well, don't get it next lifetime. You know, they didn't get it this lifetime but together next lifetime. And so it's a way of kind of making the world a good place by by saying there is justice.

I myself, I don't know if the universe is required to be adjusts place. I wish it was. And I'd like human beings to Live with a keen sense of justice and supporting that in their lives in a compassionate way. But I think it's a big burden to put on the universe. And it's supposed to be just, you know, does the universe supposed to be what I want it to be what we want it to be? Are we you know, is it up to us to decide what how the universe is supposed to be constructed? I don't know. I mean, I teams looks strange to me, if that's the direction you know, of expectation. But I think often happens that human beings would like to have explanations for all kinds of things, and they want to have to understand the mysterious unknown. And they'd like to have order and make sense out of it. And sometimes that sense that orders projected onto the universe. And because it gives a sense of comfort or you know, it's very uncomfortable to feel there is no justice. So if we look back at the time of the Buddha to see how he talked about karma. The first thing we should become clear about is that the word karma, literally are the word in Pali the word is karma. The literally means action. And in the Buddhist texts, it mostly means it can mean almost any kind of action. But we have to, but it's also means in the, in the texts that preceded Buddhism, the ancient Vedic texts and upanishadic texts, the word karma, tended to mean ritual action, a special kind of action. So it had a special meaning it wasn't just any old action, but it hasn't kind of religious or, or ritual purpose, sacrifices and rituals for the gods. Or some of those kinds of actions were called karma. And that sense of the word karma continued in Buddhist texts, in the monastic regulations, monastic rules for monastics, and some of the ceremonies and some of the procedures of the monastics are called some Karma. Specifically, that's what the word action there means some kind of ecclesiastical actions that they do within the monastic order. So it means action. And then the big question in the time of the Buddha, the different philosophers, different teachers were arguing, discussing was one of the consequences of actions. Do they have any consequences? And do we have any choice in the actions we make? And they were in fact, some people who believe that actions have no consequences? That doesn't matter what you do, that somehow everything's been predetermined, or everything is random, and haphazard and doesn't matter what you do, you can you can kill someone doesn't really matter. It's just all kind of predetermined and, and, you know, if you don't change your tire, find 1000 miles and You know, the tire goes flat. It was predetermined if you can, if you change your tires every 10,000 miles it would have gone flat anyway, because it's predetermined to have flat tire. So this idea so then might as well who cares about change or not why spend all the money changing tires if your flat tire is a predetermined event the and then there were ideas that there was a gods who determined everything and you could supplicate and pray to the gods and maybe they would help make rain or ring prosperous day prosperity to you.

But that, you know, the actions what really happened to you was really contingent upon what the gods wished and they kind of, you know, they were the puppeteers, that that kind of orchestrated what happens in this world. So the Buddha had a very, when he used the word karma, in his teachings, I had a very protective had a very particular meaning for what he meant and what's not Nice that was nice to kind of realize I think is that often when the Buddha taught he was very particular about what he taught and then what happens down through the centuries, because religious people like to generalize like to have, you know, universal truths, they tended to make that more abstract and generalize into something bigger than maybe the particular way in which you thought and so, what is what when the Buddha talked about karma, he talked about it has karma can have consequences, but particular actions are the ones he was concerned about. And the particular the particular kinds of actions have particular kind of consequences. And the particular actions when he talked about karma, the particular actions he was most focused on was something he called the 10 unskillful or the 10 skillful actions and these these 10

things are have to do With our social relationship with each other, how we relate to our community around us. And they have to do about whether we relate or have actions that cause harm to our community, to our friends and people around us. Or whether we do things it's beneficial for them. And so they gave a list of 10. And the first nine make the most sense to most directly. The first is what's unskillful is to kill people. It's skillful to have compassionate concern for the welfare of others. It's not skillful to steal from people. It's much more skillful, to be generous and caring for people respectful of them. It's unskillful, to engage in sexual misconduct, harmful sexual activity, someone gets hurt in the process. It's skillful to respect people's bodies, their commitments, their life that they sexual life, they live. It's unskillful to Lie. It's skillful to tell the truth. It's unskillful. To speak maliciously. It's skillful to speak kindly. It's or, or to speak in ways that create comfort. It's Yeah, so the malicious the opposite of malicious is Concord great harmony and bring people together. It's unskillful to have harsh speech. It's skillful to have kindness speech. It's unskillful to have gossip. It's skillful, again to create speech as Concord that brings people together and makes nice connections. It's unskillful, to have to be greedy. And it's skillful. And it wasn't just greedy. Actually, though, is a very, it's very important to difference. It's covetous, coveted. I can't even say the English word. Whenever you see it written in these books covetousness that right? Thank you. So that means to want other people's things. So you can be greedy for things that other people don't have. You can be greedy too, you know, I don't know, to go, you know, to buy a lot of ice cream, you know, they happily sell it to you, you know. But to want someone else's things it's let's that's unskillful to be generous or skillful to have ill will or hostility is unskillful. And to have the opposite to have good goodwill is skillful. The last of these 10 is called the raw or unskillful action, as to is called a wrong view. And the skillful action is called the right view. And it seems strange that all the others have to do with actions and this one has to do with your own private It, you know, philosophy of use about things in ways that the ethical the same way. But if you look at how the Buddha talked about wrong view, it was very much in the context of our relationship with other people. And he said that it's wrong view to believe there's no generosity, nothing given and no consequence of giving. And there's, it's unskillful to believe that there's no mothers and no mother and father. And so generosity has to do with a relationship to each other. And mother and father, I don't know why he talked about that. But I could well imagine back then, the ancient India, maybe there are people who denied kind of their relationship, their connection to the parents. Remember, there was a big group of people back then, who were world announcers who ascetics, people who kind of dropouts from society, and who left everything behind, and maybe part of their view, which is kind of deny the value or something of parents, whereas the Buddha said no, there are parents and in its monastic regulations, he said the monastics actually should take care of their parents up to a certain point. And certain rules that the monastics had to follow. They could they could break those rules, if they were taking care of their parents, and then nice.

So, it's the social sort of the actions that Buddha was concerned about when he's talking about karma, where the actions that caused harm or cause benefit, the list of these 10 skillful actions, like sounds very much like ethical precepts. And some people when they hear these, see the more in the abstract, or there's just these rules are supposed to follow these Buddhists and their rules and, you know, just like you know, it's kind of oppressive. And in the abstract, maybe, but it's not in the abstract. They're talking about the social connections people have, and in those relationships, what can happen between people And how do we care for those relationships? Because the relationship we have with other human beings are consequential are very meaningful. I think I think most of us I believe, probably don't understand the full depth of what our relationship to other people really means in our hearts, what it really means in our psychology, the connection that we have with our parents, with our grandparents with our relatives with good friends. Okay, you know, when we're growing up, they're very formative. They create a huge impression that stays with us for you know, a lifetime. You know, the I still have very deep memories of goodness and safety and love. That came from simple acts of generosity and care

that came from my grandmother, whether it's state or house, and she would make toast with cheese and bring it to bed and breakfast in bed under the conference. And, you know, and read comic books. And I had no idea at that time that that simple act of my grandmother had any meaning I just kind of like, Oh, thank you. I didn't say thank you. And so then I, but I can still feel from those memories from that time, this tremendous sense of comfort and goodness and love that somehow went into marrows and my bone almost really deep. And so the opposite can happen as well where someone we have, especially when we were young children, we have parents or grandparents or relatives or someone new friends who do something really harmful to us. And then we close down, you know, we feel pain and we carry that with us for years. I had some relative do something to me when I was maybe 12 or 13. And pardon me just close down for you know, I don't know For how long but for a good number of years, I had a good friend when I was about 15, who said something to me, and, and I just closed that part of my myself down for a number of years as well and important show that side to anybody, because it was so painful to have that happen. So what I'm trying to explain with these little examples is that our relationship with each other and how we treat each other how we were treated, have big impacts on each other on the world around us. And I don't think we really understand how deep that impact is, and, or how deep those social connections are. Some people can be you know, very busy and kind of ignore it and push it away. Some people develop selfishness as they grow up, and also kind of create barriers to understand the depth of it. But even with the barriers, something deep inside is still there. That is that's who's waiting for us. So one of the ways That's one of the very powerful ways of understanding what's waiting for us. Which deep inside is to meditate. And one of the one of the strong places is to go into meditation retreats, because this wonderful process where the mind calms down. And that surface discursive mind concerns and worries, everything quiets down. As that begins to happen, then what is underneath the surface in our minds and our hearts began to chance to show itself. And what's under the surface in our hearts, sometimes is quite beautiful, quite wonderful. And sometimes it's painful. And one of the things that stores there is the memories of things we've done. And it seems that for most people, that if they've harmed someone in at the time, they didn't care didn't really matter. They kind of like forgot it, or they forgot about it. It's somehow stored there. Until can be processed, processed, properly, healed properly, kind of somehow come to surface and gone through properly. And so it's not uncommon for people who go into this deep meditation process to come to a layer in their heart where something gets shown, oh, no.

To attend 20 30 40 years ago, oh, no, I did this thing. And you know, I haven't remembered it for all these years. But there it is. It's looms really big. And it's kind of like you can't put it down. It's kind of like, Oh, no, I feel really bad. Now you've now I feel pain, what did I do? And then it's time to make amends, then it's time to do something, to let that to kind of be purified. And it's quite remarkable. That something we've done many many years ago, can live underground in us and then surface at some point and And do its thing kind of be. And it's, you're pretty lucky if you get to do this when you're still sane. Because then you can, you know, bring your wisdom and your resources and kind of process it and be wise with it. But what happens if you start getting Alzheimer's and or senility and there it's an LED also your surface mind kind of begins to disappear. You know, and getting skins get kind of simpler and simpler and, and the usual protections we have kind of disappear, and then guess what's buried underneath. And then finally, this thing that we've been hiding for a long time or avoiding or not even paying doesn't even know it's there. It's a chance to surface but now we don't have the resources, the ability to handle it, and be wise about it. And there's not a few people who get senility who has they get senile become nicer than they were and There's some people who could see now they become meaner than they were. And I don't know how much of it has to do with what's buried deep inside and been unresolved. So these things that happen to us our actions that we do to each other are consequential, really, really, actually a big deal. And the purpose of this ethical teaching in Buddhism is not to be moralistic, but it's to care for our own heart. So we don't have this legacy or this carry this burden of



difficult memories and habits and, and things in our hearts and ways in which we've dumbed down or closed down. And we don't cause harm for the world around us. So it's in that context, those kinds of actions that the Buddha focused on when he talked about karma. So he didn't talk about the karma of you know, of not changing your tires. You know, when they're Tires are there, just because of no one told you you're supposed to change tires. You know, you never occurred to you to look at your tires, you know, there's you know, that's not you know, you might harm someone when they're when they're when the tires explode in the freeway and your car careens into someone else. But that's not the kind of act there's a lot of actions that are not considered under the under this category of ethical karma ethical action. But the ethical actions that you can do have consequences. And the Buddha said they have consequences in three different times. They can have a consequential in this lifetime. They can be consequential in the next lifetime, and they can be consequential in some subsequent lifetime. So sooner or later, it'll come back sooner or later these ethical the impact of these ethical actions whether they're skillful or unskillful will come For you come back to you. I don't know about this rebirth thing and the multiple life thing.

I have no evidence for it. So the way that I like to kind of view this teaching is because I don't want to dismiss these teachings entirely, that I don't understand or have evidence for. But I like to respect them and see when maybe there's something here for me. And the way that I see these teachings that say, well, there's karma in the next lifetime and what you do now will affect your next lifetime, is I like to see that it's a way of saying that we live in an unseen world that much of what happens to us we can't always see the you know, where the plumbing is and where the everything travels, happens kind of behind under the surface under the surface of discursive mind. And so the way that certain things like I couldn't have seen that my grandmother bring me toast when I was a kid, would kind of research Decades later, as a memory that nourishes my body, my body feels kind of warm and soft. When I think of that in a very comforting way. Like, how did that happen? Where did that get stored? Or I've had the situation where I've done things that caused harm to people. And then, you know, many, many years later, boom, there it is. So what did you know? What is what what's going on with? I haven't had I haven't talked to her in 40 years. You know, just because of what I said in high school, I now have to sit here and, you know, review it and have that happen. So I think there's many unseen ways in which the consequences of our ethical action travels in our hearts or minds and travels in society. And so by talking about the unseen world of the next lifetime, for me, I just say yes, it's unseen. It's unknown how it comes back. But I think it's good to respect the tremendous power Have karma. And that's one of the impacts that this Buddhist practice has brought me. That's from kind of first hand experience and also from being a teacher and talking to many people. I now have tremendous respect for the power of karma. It's like a force, you know, this unsee way it kind of travels and works through us and comes through that, if you really want to care for yourself, be really careful with your ethics. Or say it better because you know, we don't want to sound like we're puritanical. If you really want to care for yourself, to be careful with your actions that you do that have an impact on others. Avoid actions that harm other people. Do things that are beneficial and supportive of them. Be really careful with that. And part of the purpose of mindfulness practice, the whole meditation practice in Buddhism is to emphasize Where we have a choice to make a difference one way or the other, that the whole, the whole Buddhist enterprise is based on a premise that we have choice. And you have more choice if you're mindful. The less mindful you are, the less choice you have. If you don't see that you have a choice, you don't have a choice. So if I'm, you know, walking down the street, and the next thing I know assignment ice cream in my hand. There was no choice. This You know, there was, I didn't do it. But if I was walking down the street and I saw the ice cream store, and I saw my desire for ice cream arise, I might be present enough to that. Oh, you know, I have a choice or whether I get an ice cream or not. And if I just had the ice and other ice cream the pot before. Maybe I decide not now Or something right, so I have a choice so. So once a for a harried if we're consumed with our worries or concerns or greed or fears and

everything, if we're lost in the future or lost in the past, then it's very easy not to live in that place where we have a choice, in which case, maybe we don't have a choice. And when we don't see we have choice, then we've lost our free will, there is no free will if we don't see the place of choice. There is free will, if we see the place of choice. And so important, very important part of mindfulness is to be able to be calm enough, settled enough, contented enough at ease enough, it's very important, contented enough to be able to use that place of choice wisely. If we're not content or at ease in some deep way, then we can our choice and to still be pushed by our auditioning and buy our desires by our emotions.

So they kind of find a place to be at ease enough content enough that we can see the place of choice and act accordingly. And so how do we know which actions to choose? We try to understand the consequences that actions might have. And if the consequences don't cause harm, then maybe it's best not to do it. If they're beneficial, then maybe we can do it. If we see that they're going to be harmful to people. Why are you still doing it? And the part of the mindfulness practice would be to answer that question for yourself. Why you want to say something to someone it's mean. And you know, the person deserves it after all right. And so minus Well, you know, do your little gig. But you see that's, that might be harmful for the person. Why? Why do I want to do it? What's going on in me? And you say, well, in my great infinite wisdom, I think that it's beneficial this person for me to tell him her that you stink. Well, maybe that's maybe once in a million years, that's the right intervention. Maybe. But, but the but you know, if you really look what's going on and what's going on inside of you, when you want to do something, you clearly see the consequences are going to be hurtful for someone you think it's going to be. Chances are if you really see why what's going on you, you're probably not very settled on yourself. You're probably not the quality of your inner life is probably not very good. It's probably not a lot of peace. There. He's there, it's probably discontent. If you see the what you're gonna see the consequences, what you're going to do is likely to cause benefit for people. As the same question, why do I want to do it? And there you might see that there's kind of a mixed bag of questions. Sometimes it might be because you really want to support them when to help them. And sometimes you see, well, if I do this good thing for the person, I'll get a raise. Or if I do this good thing for this person, you know, the person will do me favors, all kinds of other reasons, right? So you can look at that. And then you can look at the quality, the quality of what goes on in your heart, on these different motivations for why you want to do these actions. And you can be the caretaker of those inner choices of this quality of your own heart. And in the end, I think or the beginning or something of Buddhist practice. Only you can be the custodian on you can be the gardener of your own heart only you can be the caretaker of the quality of your heart. And it's probably I would argue, I would like to, I believe that the quality of your heart, the interstate that you have, is the most important thing that you you own that you have. It's the most precious resources that you'll ever encounter. It's the most intimate and valuable thing that you have a great jewel that you carry with you that it's more valuable than your bank account, your house, your car, all kinds of things. And it's much more portable. You can take it with you when you go when you become homeless, for example. You can take it with you with the next great depression, you know, I don't mean to be funny. I mean, this is really, you know, who knows what's gonna happen next, any of us right and so to learn Learn how to take care of the quality of her own inner life. So we don't get afraid we don't get angry we don't get contracted, is one of the great tasks of the human life, to be able to keep our heart or mind, open, peaceful and contented in some deep appropriate way. So that we can you know, make those choices that help us, support our community, bring benefit to the world around us, big benefit to ourselves. And I think this is also one of the great tasks of a human life is our social life is so important for all of us. And it's so important for us as individuals as as a community and for all of us to take good care of ourselves in taking care of the quality of our own heart, then we're able to take care the quality of our community as well.

So when the Buddha talked about karma, from what I can tell, he was talking about particular kind of actions. And those particular actions have consequences. And those consequences are worth taking into account. And the particular actions he was most focused on, were they ethical actions, but how we live together with others. And the consequences of those actions are something we need to take into account if we want to kind of live a wise life and follow a path to freedom. So hope that two things, I hope that that made some sense to you. And it was nice for you to hear a little bit about this interpretation of the Buddhist teaching on karma. And I hope I had it right. Enough, otherwise, maybe it's bad karma. So we have a five minutes six minutes or so before the end. If you want to ask any questions or comments. Unless you're welcome to or any protests.

I've often heard that intention is one of the properties of action is that contained in the act of choosing? Yeah, ever kind of a very popular very central teaching and much of Buddhism is that that really what what characterizes action karma with the underlying thing is the intention and you study the intention to understand the ethical quality of the karmic act. But intention means the purpose means the purpose for which you want to consequence for, you want to and so, the intention and consequence are not so far away from each other. So the Buddha himself didn't speak very much about intentionality behind the action, he focused more on the consequences and studying those, but it's a but when we can see the intention, the reason why the purpose for why you want to say or do something, then then we have much closer to the place where you can choose, which I think is your question. If we don't see the intention is probably a little choice or harder to have a choice.

So it's not always easy to say something in between a faulty good consequence and a fully bad consequence right when you're thinking about the car consequences of your actions. There's some limits on what you can see about the consequences, because you can only do the best you can. Right? So that was the question, what do you do when it's kind of in between? And you're not? Sure? Well, so it depends on the situation. Sometimes you might ask, ask around, ask your friend, you know, about that, you know, I'm thinking of something and what do you think? So asking, you know, investigating, considering it. And sometimes it's very hard to know. And that's, that's when the idea of intention, some becomes very big for some people, some people then take refuge in their intention. They'll spend a lot of time studying, why would Why do I want to do this? what's motivating me? And if, if they can find nothing unwholesome unskillful in the motivation, and they say, well, then I'm going to give it my best shot to try this. But if you only focus on the quality of your intention, I mean, they say everything they're saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. So if you only look at your intentions, without looking at the consequences, you might not understand that what you're about to do is not so useful. Helen.

So, what did the Buddha teach about making amends? making amends?

I don't know. I don't think it I think it's a good sometimes to make amends. And as we have to, that's the only way to settle things. I think that's true, but I don't know if he said so much about it. I don't know. I haven't seen it. And what he does with the Buddha does talk about is that if we do something unskillful that causes harm. We should go and tell the wise person about it. So I didn't want to use the English word confession because that's pretty loaded. But, but go find someone who you think is wise, and let them know what happened. And because if we do something unskillful harmful, and we just carry it in our side ourselves, we might not really learn fully from it or really disown it fully or really step away from it or really kind of find our way with it properly. But for a little bit accountable to someone we respect and, and we think is why and so you know, I did this thing and then sometimes this kind of, we can take it's easier to take responsibility or see it more clearly or, or what the Buddha talked about was yesterday, then tell someone who's wise, and have them support you to not do it again. That makes

sense. But so I don't know much about you. In terms of your question. I don't know much about Buddhism, but making amends, teachings like that. But I think it's, I think sometimes it's really necessary.

Thank you.

So as we meditate, self criticism and self judgment are supposed to kind of fall off. How can you then how can you judge your own actions and decide whether you're being skillful or unskillful? If self criticism and self judgment are going away?

Well, this is a apologize to say that this has something to do with semantics and what we mean by judgment and criticism. And so if maybe we can just kind of step back from the how many people in English nowadays, think judgment is you judging someone you're bad You should not judge anyone, right? But we can evaluate people. Why discern we can be discerning right by discernment. But we can't judge people. That's wrong. But, but let's kind of just kind of, but to discern, to judge to evaluate to consider what's going on, to evaluate the situation is what human beings do. And you're here, as you get wiser you're expected to do more of that, actually. But, but it's possible to judge with hostility, to evaluate with hostility, and it's possible to evaluate with generosity with care and compassion. So if you're being self critical, I mean, I found myself that as I matured in Buddhist practice, I became more keenly sensitive to my shortcomings to the ways that I would cause harm to people in the kind of things and my More than I would have had before I'd started doing Buddhist practice. But there was very little condemnation, self condemnation. There was no original self hate about it or, you know, hostility towards myself. In fact, sometimes, but I mean, most of the time, not always. It was like, Oh, great. One more thing to practice with. One more thing to work with, you know, and as opposed to, you know, kill your lousy stinker. So that makes sense what I'm saying. It does. So yes, please don't give up your wonderful capacity to evaluate and make distinctions and see what's going on. But let go over their hostility. That's okay. Thanks.

Okay. So thank you all for coming and practicing here today and I appreciate you all being here.