

Karma / Dharma (2 of 5) Constructing Versus Allowing

September 21, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

stream, volitional, intentional, support, construct, allow, action, reaction, aversion, generosity, tension, compulsion, thinking

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This is the second talk on the karmic stream and the Dharmic stream. These are two major ways that our lives can unfold and move – what moves through us.

We get a very different feeling for the words “karma” and “dharma” when we look at what’s built into them. The literal meaning of karma is action. It has connotations of constructing something. The etymological root of the word “dharma” means to support. So karma implies that we are doing, and dharma suggests support. The Dharmic stream can provide tremendous support for us.

The karmic stream has to do with the nature of our actions. One way of understanding the karmic stream is that it has a lot to do with constructing. When we act in a certain way, we are building, creating, and constructing our responses, our reactions, our character, our personality, our habits, and our disposition. These are ways that we are contributing. We are making something happen, and it takes work. The karmic stream requires effort on our part. We have to engage in creating it. People living in the karmic stream of actions and reactions sometimes become weary from all their constant doing and doing and doing.

The Dharmic stream doesn’t require the same kind of action because it manifests more as support. There might be things we do in a sense – movements we make, things we say – but it doesn’t come from the forcefulness, the impetus, of making something. Maybe it comes more from something that is being expressed. We are being held up rather than holding something up.

The karma stream tends to be much more volitional, intentional. It is like we are disposed to do something or to make something happen. We can see that in our thinking. For example, if you’re thinking about anything that is not in the present moment, your mind is constructing memory, fantasy, the future. In that construction, there is an impetus, maybe even a compulsion, to have something happen: to want something, to not want something, to like something, to not like something. The impetus or force to have something happen creates the nature of the action, and the nature of the action creates what impact it has in the future.

If greed is going on behind our thinking and we act with greed, that creates a very different momentum in our lives than if we act out of generosity. If we act chronically out of aversion, that creates a very different momentum than if we act out of love. So we can think of the karmic stream as something that is always being constructed.

We sometimes think of karma, in English, as the results of our actions. “Result” in Pali is a different word: *vipāka*. The Buddhist emphasis on karma has to do with the act of constructing. In the teachings of the Buddha, we see less interest in understanding why something happens. Something happens and people might say, “It must be my karma in the past.” That is not very interesting for a practitioner of the Dharma. Rather, the action – the reaction – is what is interesting, the way in which we are meeting and responding to whatever is happening.

The Buddhist focus is on what we are doing in the present rather than the reason why the present is happening. Looking at the reasons is valuable at times. But to really get to the heart of the teaching on karma is to learn how to act differently in the present moment, where the choice is to construct things in a different way.

If you’re interested in the Dharmic stream, if you’re interested in freedom, if you’re interested in the phenomenal inner goodness that comes with the Dharma stream – then you want to act accordingly. You want to act and do things that support that possibility – that lead in that direction. So generosity, ethics, kindness, compassion, equanimity, letting go – these actions are constructing a better self, a better disposition, a better stream of

momentum in us that is supportive of the Dharmic stream.

So, to some degree, if we're living in the karmic world, where we're choosing the particular actions we want to live by, we have a sense of those actions that are wholesome, beneficial, and useful. We're also learning to let go of the actions that are not useful. It turns out that all unuseful actions, ones that create a negative impact on us, come with tension, and the tension, the compulsion, has an ongoing momentum in our lives.

When we do beneficial karma, it might have tension and it might not. It might have compulsion and it might not. That is a very important distinction because if beneficial things are done with tension, then the results are mixed. But if we do good things without compulsion, without tension, the results tend to be better. And the results that we're talking about here are not necessarily the results out in the world. It is the impact it has on us inside – the impact on the ongoing momentum and disposition through which we act and respond to the world.

The Dharma stream is mostly something that we allow. We don't construct it. We are mostly getting out of the way. It is clearing the blockage in the stream. In the karma stream, we're learning to turn off the fire hose. In the Dharma stream, we're removing the obstacles that keep the stream from flowing. And then, because the Dharma stream is about learning to relax deeply (not acting with tension or compulsion) and we're letting go, we're not really going to be creating negative karma.

Instead, we allow for the native goodness inside of us: love, generosity, care, and kindness. There are all these wonderful qualities we have, including strong wisdom, strong compassion, and strong adherence and dedication to the truth. This strength is stable partly because it's not agitated or fragile in the way that tension can cause.

When we do Dharmically positive activity, the actions that are part of the construction process, the conditioning process, align with the goodness that's inside. And in time, there is a transition from what we are doing to what we are allowing – what we have to contribute to what we are. So, as we do good for ourselves and in the world, the inner goodness tends to support the awakening, the freedom, the expressivity of the Dharma stream inside of us. The Dharma stream is manifested in many ways: with tremendous confidence and trust, in joy, in tranquility, in happiness, in an ability to be settled and focused, in equanimity, and ultimately, in freedom.

One of the things we learn, which is a very important distinction between the Dharma stream and the karma stream, is that we don't have to always be constructing our responses to the world. We are not the work of reacting and acting and doing and thinking. Thinking is one of the primary constructive activities that people are doing. Thinking is a lot of work. It constructs and manufactures ideas, fantasies, stories, and interpretations of what is here. Thinking is a tremendous burden when done incessantly and compulsively. It's not necessary to do as much of it as most people think.

The authority behind our thinking can be questioned. It can be like a person who lives in a home for years, accumulating a lot of furniture and stuff, and it turns out that there is a wall in the middle of the home, half of which they didn't know was there. One day, someone takes down the wall, and the person realizes, "Wait a minute, there's a whole second half to my home."

So, understanding the distinction between the karmic stream and the Dharmic stream can be like: "Aha! Oh, there's a whole second half of how to live." You'll still live to some degree in the karma stream, but hopefully, you live in it with wisdom and clarity because you understand how it works. Also, there is a whole other room to live in that can give you breathing room, space, and freedom. That other half of how to live is what is often missing for people who live only in the karmic world (which is most people). So, to discover the Dharma world, the Dharma stream, is a great gift.

We'll continue over these next few days with this theme. Hopefully, as we continue, you'll get a better sense of the distinctions between the karmic stream and the Dharmic stream, and how to practice and work with it. Thank you very much.