

# Karma / Dharma (3 of 5) Karma of Thinking

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

stream, feeling, generate, tension, pressure, boulder, squeezing, toothpaste, momentum, Sisyphus, connection, wholeness, ease, freedom, thinking, monkey, disposition, mood

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We are continuing with the theme of the karmic and the Dharmic streams of our lives. For most people, the karmic stream is the primary one in their lives and has the biggest role. But people don't understand what it is, so they don't recognize it as such. It's just business as usual. The karmic stream is what we can experience directly for ourselves, not the abstract ideas about what happens over lifetimes and other grand ideas like that.

We can start becoming sensitive to how the karmic stream works moment by moment, and how it unfolds in our lives. Here are a couple of things about the karmic stream. First, it is like a self-generating, perpetual motion machine. It creates the conditions that prompt more of the same karmic activities. What makes something karmic is that it conditions us. It affects us in such a way that there is a continual motion of one thing after the other, and there's no stop. If there is a stop, the karma is there in the background as an influence that can readily rear up and affect us further.

One of the best places to see that is in our thinking, because there we can really see karma operating up close, moment by moment. We can see our thinking through the classic analogy where thoughts are like monkeys swinging in the trees. As soon as the monkey grabs one branch, it is already moving to grab the next one. When we are with one thought, the next one is already generated, and we are moving on to the next and the next.

If we think in a karmic way, that karmic way of thinking leaves traces. It has an effect. It generates further thinking and creates a disposition or a mood for thinking in the future. Thinking is very seldom just light and empty – a whiff of thought that leaves no traces and has no influence on us. In daily life, our thoughts often leave traces that influence us. Sometimes each individual thought is subtle, but the accumulation of many thoughts over a day, or over months, can be huge.

So thinking can create a kind of disposition or a mood in a person. Sometimes these thoughts influence us in a way that encourages more thinking. We did an exercise a little while ago about noticing what influence thoughts have on us. But you can also look at it the other way. You can ask, what is the mood? What emotion is present for you? How is that influencing your thinking? The relationship goes both ways. It's kind of cyclical. Often the cycle of birth and death can be seen in the cycles of the birth and death of thoughts.

So what comes first? Does an emotion or a mood give birth to thoughts? Or do thoughts give birth to the mood or the emotional state? It can go both ways. Sometimes it is productive to look and see what influence thinking has on us. Other times it's useful to look and see what influence our mood has on our thinking.

When we start seeing this cycle, we see that thinking is not free of any impact. There is a way that thinking generates the very mood which prompts more thinking, or it generates the kind of physical tension that prompts more thinking. There is an analogy I like to use occasionally – maybe you have heard of it. If you take a tube of toothpaste and keep squeezing it, the paste will keep coming out. Even if you want it to stop coming out, and you keep wiping the paste away, it keeps coming out. What you have to do is stop squeezing, then it might stop.

Sometimes our thoughts are that way. If we're squeezing, if there's tension, tightness, and pressure within us, we can let go of thoughts forever, but the pressure to think will just generate more thoughts. So what creates that pressure? Maybe there was a thought, a certain way of thinking that frightened us, so there is tension in the body from that fear or anxiety. And that anxiety then gives birth to more.

There is also positive karma – good, beautiful karma that we create when we have beautiful thoughts – of generosity, of love, of appreciation for other people, of wisdom. Those thoughts have a different kind of impact on our body and our emotional life. Sometimes you can feel their impact in what is left behind. Sometimes the

impact has to be quite strong to really feel it, if you're not tuned in subtly and carefully. Sometimes it is very clear that the residue stays with us – for example, when we have a really strong bout of resentment, and the jaw clenches. That clenching of the jaw is the influence that thinking has on us. Sometimes when I've had beautiful thoughts of appreciation and love for other people, I have felt a warmth that begins to travel through me. That warmth began with thinking about and imagining the people that I love. So good thoughts influence us as well.

One of the qualities of karma, both good karma and so-called bad karma – difficult karma – is that there keeps being the momentum where something is operating and pushing us along. Karma is a momentum that keeps reappearing, recurring, and surfacing in us. If that karmic stream is strong, or if our thinking is strong and active, and there is a lot of pressure to think, that limits the operation of the Dharmic stream – another whole side of who we are. So, even when beautiful karma, good karma, is operating, it is kind of filling the space.

If we can create more space, then there is a whole other way of operating that comes from something I'd call "shy" inside of us – something that is quiet or easily eclipsed. This is the upwelling of our native goodness, or the unfolding of the Dharma within us. Some people raise their eyebrows around the idea of inner or innate goodness. But the Dharmic stream has a lot to do with what is left over when we stop the karmic stream – when it pauses.

The karmic stream is a little bit like Sisyphus pushing a boulder up the mountain. He goes up and up and up – always rolling the boulder up the mountain. What the boulder wants to do is roll down to the bottom. So, when he gets the boulder to the top, it rolls down, and he has to push it up again. The karmic stream is like pushing our boulder, pushing our desires, our wants, our concerns, our wishes, moving ahead – doing things with the wanting mind, the desirous mind, the aversive mind, and all those things that are carrying that thinking along. Even the subtler desires of love and generosity are carrying it along.

Karma is work for the mind. The karmic mind is always working, always constructing. So, when the karmic constructing mind stops, and there is space for something else to happen, there starts to be an unwinding. The boulder rolls downhill. The tensions in the mind and body begin to dissolve. When all these tensions are dissolved, this allows something else to arise. One thing that can arise is a great delight and joy – at relaxing, having breathing room again, having a sense of space, allowing a deeper feeling of connection to ourselves, and the discovery of a feeling of wholeness.

That wholeness is very hard to feel when karma is operating, because karma always limits. The Buddhist description is that karma creates definition and limits to who we are that do not allow us to see things as whole. As we relax those limitations, feelings of wholeness, freedom, and ease begin to happen.

Then the quality of the thinking changes. Thinking can have a quality of being more spontaneous in a certain way, wiser, and more intelligent. Thinking can feel light, and it doesn't leave traces. The thinking is not self-generating. It is not like monkeys grabbing one branch and then another. A thought arises and it's there. It is easy, light, and interesting, but there is no pressure associated with it. The mind has a greater capacity for creativity and wisdom, even kindness and love, but not when the mind is grabbing one thing and the next.

So this is my attempt to try to point you to some new understanding of how the mind can work and how karma and Dharma can work. Perhaps I haven't said it exactly right for you, but I am hoping it works well enough that you can now investigate and do the exploration for yourself, and ask: "What is Gil talking about here? What are these two streams?" Do you know anything about these two streams? Can you recognize the self-generating, perpetual motion machine of thoughts that are pushing, wanting, building, and creating, or the stream that arises without desire, without pushing and pressure, and is a delightful expression of freedom?

Thank you, and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.