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Karma and Freedom

In Buddha-dharma, what we mean by karma is intentional behavior. Intentional behavior is morally psychological, psychologically moral. We can be aware of our intention or not aware, but the good news is, it is possible to become aware, deeply aware, of the intentions that we have. Sometimes we're not aware of our intentions, they are subconscious, but our motivation or intention is still the shape of our consciousness. Cetana is the Sanskrit word referring to the overall pattern of a state of consciousness. This pattern is the given behavior of the moment, the intention, the motivation. It is the definition of behavior, the principle of behavior.

The other important thing about karma is that it has consequence. It is temporal, and it is causal. When the Buddha talks about karma, he asks, "What do we call skillful action?" His definition of skillful action is action that has good results. "And what do we call unskillful action?" Action that has bad results. This may seem circular, but the emphasis is on the effect our behavior has on life, its consequences for the living organism and for the community of organisms.

The mental action, the behavior, has consequences, and the mental action itself is a consequence of past mental action. This relationship is not deterministic. Past mental action does not completely determine present mental action. Past mental action conditions you to think a

certain way. Another translation of cetana is thinking. Thinking is another word for volition, intention, motivation: the overall pattern of thinking which accompanies a moment of cognition.

Past karma conditions your mind to be shaped a certain way, to think a certain way. Your object could be, for example, a dharma teaching that tells you to look at what's going on right now. If your past karma, your past way of thinking, is such that you can't listen to it, then the effect of that teaching might be very small. But it could happen that even though your mind is conditioned by past thoughts to think a certain way, the teaching that is coming to you could allow you to listen to the teaching and let it change the way you're experiencing what you're doing. You could allow teachings about the nature of mind to come into the mind and change the mind.

The Chinese character used to translate the Sanskrit word cetana can be translated into English as intention, but is often translated into English as thinking. It is composed of two characters; the top one looks like a picture of a rice field, and underneath is the character for mind. The character the Chinese built to mean thinking looks like 'thinking is the pattern of the mind.' Cetana is the overall pattern of mind, not each specific little element. It's the pattern of all the things that are going on in a moment.

One important aspect of the pattern is the way the mind is directed toward objects. One of the patterns of consciousness is that mind is directed toward objects as a consequence of past minds being directed toward past objects. Minds that have been going in certain directions have been influenced by past minds going in certain directions, and these produce future minds going in certain directions. The things that were looked at in the past will influence the things that are looked at in the present, which will influence the things that are looked at in the future.

Even though the objects that were looked at in the past are gone, we can see the pattern of the past thinking in the present thinking. If the mind thinks in unskillful ways, it means it thinks about objects in unskillful ways. That tends to produce another mind that thinks about objects in unskillful ways. This shape or pattern is transmitted. It's not exactly the same, because other things are changing. But there is some tendency, because of thinking unwholesomely in the past, to think unwholesomely with what's being presented now. However, new things can be presented. So a person could see, for example, a Buddha. The person may have lots of unwholesome tendencies, but he also has some wholesome tendencies, and now the Buddha, with her presence and skill, might be able to offer him something that would somehow provoke a shift in this unskillful pattern. It's not exactly that the Buddha can shift people's consciousness, but the Buddha can say something to the person to get him to look at what's going on. What she says might not threaten him at first, because it wouldn't necessarily be a big diversion from his main trip, his main pattern. But there's something about that awakened presence that can make him think, "I could look at myself." The Buddha is a person who understands minds, her own and others, and she can send a message which can influence, which can be taken in and can change the pattern. Each person has to do the work of looking inwardly to see what's going on, and there is always the possibility of positive evolution, even in an unwholesome state.

If you don't appreciate life, if you don't appreciate the objects you're seeing, if you think what's happening is no good, if that's the way you think about it, you might say that your mind is being directed toward a negative object, an unbeneficial object. You could say it that way. But rather than saying that the object is unbeneficial, you could say that because of past thinking, your mind is shaped toward being negative about what's happening, your mind is shaped toward thinking about what's happening in an unbeneficial way.

Let's say, because of past karma, I have an unbeneficial way of thinking about the objects I meet. Now, has my past karma brought an unbeneficial object to me? You might say it that way. But the story I'm presenting is that my past karma of thinking unskillfully about things means that in the future I may tend to think things are unbeneficial, unhappy, painful; I may tend to see bondage, and I may tend to think unskillfully about things in the future. In this way of talking about it, the world is not actually out there being mean to me. What's being mean to me is karma. Karma is the bad guy, karma is responsible for the bad things, not the people. The people are the place where karma lives, but that is not to blame it on the people. How can you change people? If you blame it on the karma and then change the karma, change the way of thinking, the world will change.

This is how looking at these states of consciousness, meditating on what composes them and noticing how the composition is the shape of the moment, is itself wholesome. Studying unwholesomeness is wholesome, and studying wholesomeness is also wholesome. Being mindful of a cruel thought, asking what are the consequences, and where did it come from?—this is skillful. Not being mindful of a cruel thought is unskillful, because then the cruel thought just rolls forward, and the future cruelty proves the past cruelty. “They were cruel to me, so I'm going to be cruel to them. That's my thing in the present. It connects past to future. I saw cruelty in the past, I see it in the future, the present connects them.” That's unskillful. To notice, “Oh, I think about the past as being cruel, and now I think about the present in a cruel way. That's going to produce cruelty in the future”—that observation is skillful. The more I realize, “Yes, I did see the past cruelty, and I did see the present cruelty because of past cruelty, and that did produce future cruelty, and now I see that I don't want to do this anymore”—just by watching it, I get to think in a new way. Observation of the old way produces a new way: “This cruelty is

really the problem. It isn't helping anybody, and it's not even hurting the people that I want to hurt. It's just hurting everybody, me most of all." When you see that, you've just had a valid cognition, by studying your karma.

Karma makes the world; it makes the physical world. We are not saying that unskillful karma has the consequence of making an unskillful world, but that our unskillful karma, our unskillful behavior, influences us to think about whatever comes toward us in an unskillful way. And our skillful karma influences us, when things come to meet us, to think about them skillfully. It is not that bad action brings on a bad physical world, but it does bring the physical world. The consequence of my karma and your karma, all of our karma, is the physical world. That world can be thought of in various ways, and the ways we think of it are conditioned by the ways we thought before. If sickness comes, if health comes, or healthy teeth or tooth decay, whatever comes, it is all happening together as the physical world, which has your body in it and my body in it and your good teeth and my tooth decay—all these physical phenomena are in the world, created by karma, which is arising now. But whatever comes, sickness or health, a healthy tooth or a decayed tooth, you can think about that skillfully or unskillfully. If you think about it skillfully, the result will be that you'll think about other teeth skillfully, and other bodies skillfully and other illnesses skillfully, and other health conditions skillfully. You will think about what's happening skillfully, and the more you think about things skillfully, the closer you will get to the point of realizing that karma, which is the source of all our suffering and ignorance, is actually, by its very nature, not karma, and not the source of suffering. In other words, you can become free of karma by understanding how it works.

Thinking, karma, is basically temporal, so the world that appears to you is a temporal world. But the world is not temporal, aside from being a consequence of thinking karmically,

which is temporal. When you understand how the temporal world is created by karma, you can realize that the world is not temporal. When you see how the world of birth and death is created by karma, you see how the situation is not that the world of birth and death is brought to you. The situation is that the world is brought to you, and because of past karma, you interpret it as birth and death.

When you see how it is your interpretation of the world that creates birth and death, then you have what's called freedom from birth and death. So right in karma you realize no karma, and right in birth and death you realize no birth and death, also known as nirvana. However, just as birth and death in itself is not birth and death, and karma in itself is not karma, nirvana in itself is not nirvana. Birth and death is, of course, birth and death. But by its nature it's also not birth and death. And karma is karma, but by its nature, it's also not karma. If you penetrate what karma is, you realize karma is not karma. And when you realize this, you turn, you pivot, you are liberated from the world of karma. Your heart has now turned to the world of no karma. However, the world of no karma itself is the world of karma; therefore your heart turns from the world of no karma back to the world of karma.

When you see that the world of birth and death is the result of the way you've been thinking, the overall pattern of thinking that accompanies all cognitions, when you see how that works, you realize that birth and death itself is not birth and death; it is nirvana. And when you realize nirvana, you realize that nirvana itself is not nirvana, it is birth and death. So you don't stay in karma. The only time you stay in karma is if you don't study it. And even if you study it, you stay in it for a little while, until you study it deeply. And even if you've studied it deeply, you keep studying it deeply, until you study it all the way to the end. At the end of studying karma, studying your thinking, studying the overall shape of your consciousness, at that point

you realize that the shape is fundamentally not the shape, that thinking, intention, and so on, are not themselves.