

Karma / Dharma (5 of 5) Living in the Dharma Stream

September 24, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

attachment, clinging, identity, preoccupation, pleasure, navigate, existing, relax, negotiating, letting go

Gil Fronsdal

The topic for this week has been the karmic stream and the Dharmic stream of our lives. Many people are only swimming in the karmic stream of their life. It is all they know. Because the karmic stream is all they know, they think that is all there is. They are constantly navigating and negotiating the karmic world.

We can do both wonderful and terrible things in the karmic world. The Buddhist tradition divides up karmic activities into two areas – that which is unhealthy or unwholesome, and that which is beautiful. The encouragement is to do the things that are beautiful, healthy, and wholesome. They are for our benefit and the benefit of others. This might involve learning to live without hate, greed, delusion, criticism, animosity,

resentment, or acquisitiveness. Instead, we learn to live with generosity, love, and kindness.

The karmic stream is based on a certain kind of attachment that can be very, very subtle. Perhaps, the easiest way to understand it is attachment to self – some kind of idea of ourselves as being a solid, substantial reference point. Or this subtle attachment may not be to ourselves exactly. Rather, there are three basic attachments that kind of propel the whole karmic world. It is not easy to see, and to tap into it, we have to be very attentive and sensitive at the deeper levels. One is an attachment to sense comfort and sense pleasures. Human beings are sometimes deeply oriented to comfort and pleasantness, which is very closely related to being safe. Another is a very subtle attachment to existing, to being alive, to being. The last is a very subtle attachment to not being, to not existing.

If you are watching your own mind stream and how karma plays out in your mind, you can track what you are thinking about. You can see if your thinking involves comfort or discomfort, making things pleasant or unpleasant. Is the thinking an assertion of identity in some way? Is being someone and having an identity part of your mind stream? Or is there a movement to not have an identity, to not be seen or recognized in a certain way?

In the Buddhist tradition, the movement towards being and non-being and towards sense pleasure is considered deeply, deeply rooted. Even beautiful karma has that attachment as well. Beautiful karma or good karma can only take us so far.

Our thoughts are shaping and conditioning ourselves and our future. As you watch your thoughts, you can see that the thoughts condition the next thought and the next thought. These thoughts keep certain mental preoccupations going in a way that can have a negative or positive influence on you.

That always involves work or mental activity. The months, years, and decades of mental activity can take a toll on us. There can be weariness or tiredness from always navigating and negotiating existing, non-existing, identity, non-identity, pleasure, comfort.

The Dharmic stream is not a dualistic, radically different way of living from ordinary life. We might be doing many of the same things that we do in ordinary life – shopping, cooking, caring for family and friends, going to work. There are all kinds of things we may be doing, but they are done without that attachment, without any attachment. At the deeper level, if the Dharmic stream is really matured, then there is no attachment to sense pleasures, comfort, existence, or even to life. There is also no attachment to non-existence, non-identity, or not

being alive. We live life – it could be fully – unconcerned with attachment, preoccupation, fear, or desire around those three areas.

On the way to being in the Dharma stream, we are learning to let go of coarser attachments while caring for ourselves, friends, and family, and going to work. We are learning to do all the ordinary things of life, but to do them without attachment or clinging to anything, even the subtler ones. Then we find ourselves being able to do things without the layer of work in the mind of navigating and negotiating the self and how to make ourselves comfortable in the middle of it all. That releases a whole level of preoccupation.

The Buddhist reference point for that is freedom. One goes about the world free while continuing to do the ordinary things people do that may be appropriate for them. There is freedom, ease, and peace in doing them. There is an absence of a certain agitation or contraction that always exists in the karmic stream.

To be in the Dharma stream is to begin appreciating how it is possible to live in the world without clinging and attachment. It might begin with letting go of bigger attachments or by meditating. For some people, beginning to meditate is eye-opening. They might realize how much of the ordinary preoccupations of the

mind that translate into bodily tension can be put down, can relax, and become quiet.

It can be a life changer to realize how much of the mind's spinning, churning, and ruminating can be put down and relaxed. So we begin seeing where that is possible. Then the Dharma stream is to see that as an open door. As we relax, let go, and don't act with attachment, the absence of attachment, clinging, craving, or resistance is like an open door. It is inviting us: "Hey, come here. Come take a look at this." The Dharma stream is found by stepping through that door into this new stream.

In the teachings of the Buddha, reality is always inviting and welcoming you into this new stream, into the Dharma stream. There is a wide open door that is ready for you if you can put down your burdens, attachments, and clinging. You get to keep your life, perhaps, because this is not a judgment about what people do in their lives. It is just an invitation to live without clinging.

If what you are doing in your life is completely dependent on clinging – you are doing it because you cling – then how you live your life might change as you let go of clinging. I am pretty confident that it will be for your own good and the people around you to let go of clinging. It is not a good result to live a life and do things in the world that are propelled by attachment, clinging,

and craving – even the fundamental attachment to being alive, to not wanting to be alive, to identity, or to non-identity.

Happiness is not found through identity. Happiness is not found in being preoccupied with life or death. There is a way of setting it down and experiencing a profound peace that will help you live your life peacefully, happily, and wisely.

That is one of the key reasons to put down these attachments. Then we can live wisely in the world, living in a way that is beneficial and maybe even inspiring to others. We can be an example that it is possible to live a life that is not anxious, greedy, resentful, or hating. To give that example is a wonderful gift to the world.

One of the clear ways to see that is in raising children. If children see a model of hate, greed, and fear, then that is what they think is needed to live this life. If they have a different model, what a gift it is to children. It is also a gift to yourself to live without these fundamental attachments. If you enter into the Dharma stream and really trust it, then when it is your turn to die, and if you die in a conscious way, chances are you won't be afraid. Chances are it won't be a difficult thing to do because you are not attached either way.

So the Dharma stream and the karma stream. If you are going to live in the karma stream, do it well. Do it beautifully. Bring beauty to the world, a spiritual beauty. Walk in beauty. One of the ways to walk in beauty is to realize that beautiful karma is a precursor or support to point the way to the Dharmic stream. The beautiful stuff that we do just gets done better when it is done from the Dharmic stream.

Hopefully, these are interesting distinctions to explore and bring understanding to your life. One of the primary reference points for really studying these two streams is in the moment-to-moment tracking of your thought streams (what you are thinking about). Right there, you will learn all you need to know about the karma and the Dharma streams.

May your thoughts flow in a stream where there is no attachment. Thank you very much.