

Karma / Dharma (1 of 5) Introduction to Karmic and Dharmic Streams

September 20, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, thinking, thoughts, mind, rumination, rebirth, reinforce, habit, momentum, holding, aversion, greed, generosity

Gil Fronsdal

The topic this week is about two streams of our lives: the karmic stream and the Dharmic stream. The Dharmic stream is Buddhist language for what unfolds and can develop when we free ourselves from the karmic stream. We free ourselves respectfully, respectful of the karmic stream – in particular, the way the stream of karma contributes to our own ongoing suffering. One of the reasons why Buddhists focus on karma is because of how much suffering it perpetuates. It's like being caught in a constant renewal of suffering, pain, despair, and challenges.

There is a whole other stream that is not karmic. It can be called the Dharmic stream. Words like “karma” and “dharma” can evoke all kinds of complicated ideas.

People have a lot of associations about what karma means. I'll talk about karma in a particular way this week – hopefully, in a way that normalizes it as something we can see operating in the day-to-day activity of our life, and puts aside ideas of karma being something influencing us over lifetimes.

If a person went through life with their fists clenched, never opening up their hands, it would influence their life in all kinds of ways. The influence would be very different if someone went through life with their hands open, relaxed, soft, and ready to operate their fingers in all the ways that they can to move and hold on to things. The life of a person whose hands are free to open and be used will unfold very differently from a person whose fists are always clenched. It's best not to stretch this analogy too far, but just keep it simple.

Similarly, if a person's heart has been closed and clenched for decades, that life unfolds differently than when the heart is open. If the mind is closed in some way – constricted, narrow – that life unfolds very differently than the life of a person whose mind is open (open-minded).

The way we live, day by day in the present moment, can influence our life. If we live a life with recurring, chronic hostility or aversion, it puts together certain conditions that are very different than if we go through life with

generosity and love. If we go through life with greed and lust, and that is the predominant mind stream we keep flowing in, then our life opens up or moves ahead very differently than the life of someone generous, kind, and concerned about the welfare of others.

Those very broad strokes are pointing to the different directions that life can go. Certainly, the different directions are ways that we influence ourselves. All the conscious and unconscious ways in which we operate have an impact and influence on us. If we are chronically aversive, there is an ongoing impact – traces, lingerings, feelings – on ourselves because of that. If we're loving, it has a very different impact.

One of the powerful ways to see the operation of karma is in our thought streams. Probably the single most effective way to understand karma is to see its influences and how it operates moment-by-moment, day-by-day in our lives – rather than the more metaphysical ideas of karma. We can see that *thinking* has a big influence on us.

It is said that rumination is one of the leading causes of depression. If we're ruminating in such a way that the thoughts are deflating, discouraging, critical, or frightening to listen to – to have that discouragement and fear chronically move through our system – our whole

body, mind, and heart will be influenced by the “ongoingness” of those thoughts.

We can feel the impact that rumination has on us. It is a kind of rebirth, a constant renewal into the karmic stream. As we feel lousy, that is fuel to continue having difficult, undermining thoughts. The undermining thoughts make us feel worse, and so it prompts a certain way of thinking that is cyclical and gives birth to itself over and over again.

Sometimes the ruminating is so chronic it becomes almost invisible to people. This is like fish that don't see the water they swim in. Similarly, we sometimes don't see the mood and attitude that we move through because it's being reinforced and so is ongoing.

Sometimes karma is described as ongoing habits. Some karmic habits are healthy. We can create habits of love and generosity. That creates very different conditioning and influence on our body and mind. But it is a stream we enter into and participate in. Part of that stream is momentum from the past that continues into the present. There are also ways in which we keep adding to the momentum in the present moment.

What Dharma practice is trying to do is free us from continuing to reinforce and add momentum to the stream. We are respectful of how much the stream is

flowing, and we step back on dry ground, watching the stream go by without adding to it.

That stepping back is like a fist, which has been closed for a long time, opening and things begin to happen. There is an unfolding that has an influence on us. It influences the hand; it influences us. It inspires us and gives us ideas of what we can do. It starts setting in motion a goodness inside of us, a movement towards freedom. We get a sense: “Oh, the hand can be released. That’s nice. I bet now my shoulders can relax. Maybe this clenched stomach has a possibility of relaxing.”

There is a path that begins opening up, and some of that path is the natural unfolding of what can be called the Dharma, the Dharma stream. The Dharma stream is the stream of releasing ourselves from our contractions, tightness, and holdings, and then experiencing the goodness, joy, well-being, and tranquility that comes flowing from that – and leads to deep insights and a deep understanding of the world.

So every day, every moment, both streams are available. A lot of what people spend their time doing is living in the karmic stream. A very easy way to see it, I believe, is to notice what you’re thinking as you go about your day. If you are thinking about something which is not in the present moment, that is the karmic stream.

You might as you're sitting in the karmic stream – thinking about the future, the past, fantasy – take time to observe what influence that thinking has on you. Is the influence beneficial? Is the influence not beneficial? Is it neutral? What is the influence of that thinking on you?

To stop and take that kind of look also begins to stop reinforcing the karmic stream. If we just let our minds flow along, happily thinking about resentments in the past or the desires we want in the future, then we're adding momentum to the karmic stream and keeping it flowing. Some people like that; they want it and justify it. But the cost of keeping the karmic stream going is that we don't allow the other whole stream to unfold: the Dharma stream.

So that is the topic for this week. Today was an introduction. This topic is considered to be very important in Buddhism, and perhaps, not talked about that much. We'll try to talk about it this week. Thank you.