

Karma / Dharma (4 of 5) Ouch, Ahh, Let Go, Know

September 23, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

stream, karmic, Dharmic, clarity, compulsion, thoughts, greed, actions

Gil Fronsdal

We continue on this theme of the karmic stream and the Dharmic stream. The karmic momentum of our lives, how karma is shaped, how action shapes our ongoing experience – I keep wanting to refer you back to how you can know that for yourself directly so that it's not a metaphysical or abstract idea about imaginary futures or pasts. You can actually watch it work in your mind, in your body, here and now if you pay careful attention.

In the teachings on karma, our actions have ongoing repercussions in our lives. Our actions condition or influence us ongoingly in a way that sometimes we don't understand why we are so compelled to act and be certain ways. The way that our actions condition us, influence us, leave traces, and imprint things within us is

based on a very simple principle. To make this very simple, I'll describe it in two steps.

Firstly, there is the notion that we can know what brings with it an “ouch” and what brings with it an “ahh.” I use those little expressions so that we don't get narrowed down by words that might express that. So, for example, we have the idea of good karma and bad karma. As soon as we say it that way, which is a common expression, it narrows it. It can be confusing. It can imply morality. All kinds of things come along with that. But maybe it's very simple just to recognize experientially that some things we do have an “ouch” and some things we do have an “ahh.”

Secondly, those things that are propelled by, conditioned by, or come along with an “ouch” tend to produce more “ouches.” Those things that are compelled by or pushed along by an “ahh” produce more “ahhs.” “Ouch” and “ahh” are not the same as comfort and discomfort but something deeper; a sense of what Buddhists like to call suffering and happiness. But the key thing here is, what propels it? What is the motivating force? What's the atmosphere or the conditions from which something is done? If we say, do, or even think something, what's propelling it is some feeling or motivation inside. If we're really careful and pay attention to it, we can feel: “Oh, that hurts. That's

ouch. Or we can feel: “That’s ahh. That’s good. That feels right.”

When things are acted on from that kind of compulsion or propulsion, then they tend to produce more. You can watch that in your mind with your thoughts. If there are thoughts that are being propelled by your anger, hostility, attachment, or greed, then the thought of greed or anger tends to produce more of the same. This is not necessarily more anger or more greed, but the very movement of anger or greed is another “ouch.” So, if what propels it is an “ouch,” then the thing itself is an “ouch” and it creates more propulsion, more influence, more conditionality for further thinking that way.

If, for example, there is greed for something because you are feeling very self-critical and want relief, then the movement for relief through greed is being propelled by an “ouch” (that self-criticism). The greed itself is an “ouch,” and that whole movement then brings along more self-criticism. “Now I’m greedy and I’m bad.” It creates more conditions to be greedy or to think that’s the answer. If there is a little relief from greed because it’s fulfilled and you get what you want, then that reinforces this is the way to get more relief. And so, you end up in a cycle.

Classically, they say that what creates the momentum of karma, the karmic repercussions, is the intention for

what we do. But I think it's not just intention. It's more than that. It's what propels it. Intention seems kind of narrow and almost philosophical, an agenda, or a very clear idea. What creates the momentum of karma is more like the mood behind it.

In mindfulness practice, when we are caught in a lot of intense thoughts, we notice the emotionality, mood, and conditions out of which the thoughts are coming. As we develop mindfulness more and more, we start seeing that underlying the surface expressions of our thoughts and actions, there are layers and layers of conditioning, attachments, clinging, and motivations that are the real issue. They shape and influence the karmic stream.

Now some of the karmic stream can be positive. It can have “ahh” in it. But it still involves a propulsion, a movement that keeps us active. It promotes agitation. Even though it can do a lot of good for ourselves and the world, when there's a propulsion compulsion to do positive things, it might feel pleasant, but there is agitation. It is not ultimately the best for us.

There's a whole other stream we can take which is the Dharmic stream. The positive, the “ahh” karmic stream supports the Dharmic stream. It creates conditions that lead us to be in a good place to enter the Dharmic stream.

There are two primary ways we can enter the Dharmic stream. One is to let go and the other is to know. The core practices of the Buddha can be put into these two categories. Some practices are more focused on deep letting go and relaxation, and some of them focus more on knowing. The practices that have to do with letting go tend to produce the most happiness. The ones that have to do with knowing produce the most clarity.

This happiness and clarity are not something we're willing or intending. It's not something that we're creating. It's not coming from a constructed action of what we're doing. It's not part of the karmic stream. It's almost like we're getting out of the way. We're not interfering. We're not pushing. There's no compulsion to act and to do. Letting go has a lot to do with getting out of the way and allowing something to move through us that is not a compulsion but an inspiration. We're not pushing something, but rather something is flowing.

Then we're not caught up in our agendas and reactivities. We're not caught in what we want to have and what we are looking for, as we try to understand the way forward to fix things. We're just knowing in a very simple way, and that produces clarity. And clarity has space for things.

The Dharmic stream involves a whole paradigm shift about how we live, what motivates us, and where we

center our life. It's not a life based on the wanting that characterizes the karmic stream, which includes wanting what's good, wanting the "ahh." Why not want what's good and healthy? Sure, that's fine to do. It can be very beneficial, but it's only half the story of what's possible for us. Most people only live in the karmic world. That's what they're navigating, negotiating, and always moving around. It's a little bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

The Dharma stream involves a whole different paradigm. It's like learning how to float or swim so that we don't have to move all the deck chairs around as the ship goes down. How we float or swim is we learn how to let go of the reactivity, clinging, wanting, and compulsion of the karmic stream. We learn a very clear and simple kind of knowing that brings clarity; a clarity that is not agitated by the wanting mind.

In that letting go, getting out of the way, and clarity, something supports us. Something begins moving through us. Something gets awakened. There is wisdom. Clarity and letting go make available a lot of wisdom and clarity about what's happening here with ourselves and the world around us. It gives room in the heart for love, care, and compassion in a way that has a very different feeling for it than the kind of compassion that may be genuine but has wanting or self-concern as part of it. Clarity and letting go are radically selfless.

Because of that, it's not exhausting. It's not tiring in the way that the karmic stream is when so much of it is motivated by me, myself, and mine.

You might see as you go about the day what's going on with your thought stream. Is there an "ouch" or an "ahh" in how you think? If you notice an "ouch," look more deeply and see if there's a deeper mood or place that those thoughts are coming out of. See if that also has an "ouch." Probably, it will. If there's an "ahh" in those thought streams, then look below that and see if there's some deeper mood or way of being that also feels like it comes from an "ahh." Stay close to the "ahh" and see if staying close to it supports you to let go, relax, and know clearly what's here.

Thank you and I hope this exercise today is nice for you to do.