Dharma Assembly: On Karma

Mondo by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi
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This morning I have been asked to talk about karma. This is a very complex topic and so we can look at it and deal with it in many different ways, but we will only have time to glance on a few highlights. Perhaps the first thing that should be dealt with is to clarify the difference between many of the romantic views of what karma might be and what karma actually is on a practical level, and what it means for our practice.

There are many different misconceptions of karma that see it as a mystical force that controls and shapes our lives. This cosmological view then allows us to say when something happens, "Well it's just karma." If someone drowns, it's "just karma."

This seems a bit shallow. It is a way of not really looking at circumstances, a way of labelling things which do not really seem relevant or sensible to us in the first place. Events such as accidents, earthquakes, tragic misfortunes, death, taxes and so on, seem beyond comprehension to us because they intrude into our daily round of assumptions, seemingly from nowhere. Needing to explain such events to ourselves but reluctant to really take a look at them, we speak of fate, the will of God, a cosmic plan, or karma. We say, "Oh! I guess it was supposed to happen somehow." And then turn away.

Then, there is the whole matter of "good karma" and "bad karma."

The word "karma" means "cause and effect," or "causality." We can discuss this from two angles. First, the psychological aspects of karma which are the sorts of things that we call "good karma" and "bad karma," birth and death, ethics, responsibility.

The other is a very simple yet complex view of karma, in which we are talking about how things are. Are things separate or interconnected? How does one thing relate to another? How can one event influence the next event? Spring comes, summer comes, fall, winter … things of that nature.

First of all, I'll talk about that aspect of karma which is a description of our psychology. And that begins with ignorance or avidya, with a concept of self and other based on not really looking at what circumstances are.

I have spoken before about self-image, the gesture of self-image, and the various styles of self-image. These styles are all rooted in the fact that self-image basically knows that it doesn't exist. Self-image is something that is imposed upon and super-imposed over experience as a set of images and preconceptions. This basic ignorance limits perception and cognition and knowing, but is itself derived from a way of creating distinctions which can originally or basically be useful in terms of getting from here to there, because we can't get there if we don't know what here is. This can be quite functional, but it can be applied to circumstances where it isn't applicable, and that's how self-image begins to grow, and how it tries to maintain itself. The starting point of karma then, is that basic ignorance, that basic blindness; that blindness in the face of the light of knowing, in the face of the light of intelligence. This light seems too bright, so it is scaled down.

It is quite obvious that if we act in a certain way, this creates pre-dispositions for that mode of action to occur again. If you steal once, it is easier to steal a second time, and a third time, and a fourth time, and your

karma will be that of a thief. Karma is basically an habituation.

The main point then is that karma is not something that you "have," it is not something that you suffer through. Karma is who and what you are as a personality; all your pre-dispositions and tendencies, your basic intelligence, and the choices that you make, due to previous choices. This is what karma means, this is what karma is. Karma is you, right now, because you are the product of everything you have done and everything you have thought.

You might sometimes notice how, in practice, trivial memories and circumstances can play themselves out. You could be sitting there feeling the breath, working with whatever practice you have been assigned, and all of a sudden you have a complete and perfect memory of being three years old, playing with a stuffed teddy bear in the corner and you haven't cleaned up the rest of your toys. Your mother came into your room, but she didn't say anything, and for a moment, you were afraid that she was going to make you clean all your stuff up; but she just walked out. You remember the sound of her footsteps, you remember the look on her face, the colour of the dress she was wearing. All of these things are remembered very clearly, they are very precisely encoded in your memory.

This memory, then, is part of who and what you are. If something as trivial as that can stay so precisely and so clearly within your memory, then other things are there too. In fact, everything is in there somewhere, which means that any action, any thought that occurs, has its effect and lives on in memory. These thoughts, attitudes and actions that you have given rise to and condition future actions and events. It seems important that we take a look into what sort of actions, thoughts and events we participate in, and give rise to, now.

If something as trivial as that little memory, which is basically harmless, can be so present and vivid, then what about the times when we alienate others? The times that we have taken out our depressions and anger out on them. The times we wasted. The times when we have been bored. The times caught in passion, aggression, or stupidity. Our little arguments and fights with people; creating fights simply because we have a lot of energy, and we just don't know what to do with it. Or we are bored and depressed, so we try to perk ourselves up, using all the various methods we have – going out shopping, listening to Broadway tunes, whatever.

The events of our lives are not just trivial circumstances that we glide our way through. These shape who and what we are, and since we have some element of choice, it might be wise to pay attention to what we are doing, to exercise intelligent choice towards wholesome actions, events and thoughts. That's basically what this "good karma" and "bad karma" thing has to show us, in terms of practice, in terms of attending.

Then there is a description of karma as simply cause and effect, of the moment to moment interplay and exchange of energy between actions and events. Each mind moment influences the next mind moment, and is influenced by the previous mind moment. When things arise, dwell and decay, they are there and then they are gone. Then the next thing arises, and it is the next thing, and then it is gone; and then the next thing arises. These things simply arise, dwell and decay, quite naturally, quite freely, quite spontaneously; yet we tend to try to attach ourselves to these things and, once they are gone, we try to make them live on, with all of the strategies that are involved in that. The pain, the pettiness, the hope and fear of trying to maintain cherished memories. Or simply just being in a good mood, and being afraid that it won't last.

This is basically all that I want to say at this point. We can have a discussion.

Q: I have heard that all the people that are starving and diseased are working out their karma; maybe they had bad karma before; maybe they did something they had not worked through. They say some people are born with easy happy lives; maybe they already cleared some stuff so, maybe they may rest for a while. Do you have any comments on that?

Roshi: Well, that sort of stuff is quite common, not only in the pockets of Western "spiritual" culture, but a lot of that stuff is also present in traditional cultural versions of Buddhism. I think that this can be extremely dangerous, because it leads one to begin to posit an ethical universe, as if the actual flow of things is conditioned by our social mores. This seems a bit fishy since social mores vary from culture to culture. It seems to just serve a certain social role in terms of telling people that "one might be suffering now, but not to worry; next time one might be born as a king." This keeps people happy, but also locked in. It can be rather dangerous in that way. Beyond that, it can lead to a loss of responsibility towards our own actions. We can say, "Well, that little girl is being run over by a car and I could reach out and grab her, but it is probably her karma so I had better not interfere." This can be a very strange trap.

However, we are not so much concerned about what the traditional Buddhist trips about karma might be, because they are not our problem. What we need to see is what karma might mean to our practice; how looking at cause and effect can help us wake up, to take responsibility for our lives. This is a matter of being willing to look at the assumptions and habits that typically drive us, and see if it is necessary to be driven by them and to see to what extent it is possible to wake up from them. To stop harming ourselves and to stop harming others. If we don't pay attention to cause and effect, we tend to live very randomly, like a child picking the wings off flies, having no conception of the fact that what we do is important because it's in relationship to what other people do. And not only to what other people do, but to what time does and space and nature do.

The main thing about cause and effect is that it points to the vast inter-relationship of all events and actions. For example, the clothes you are wearing are made from something, by something, and you can trace it all back, all the fibres and so forth. This is actually quite a complex thing. A lot of time, energy, labour, intelligence, natural products and so on, went into making this blouse that you are wearing. It is not just this thing that you pull out of a closet and put on without thinking about it. It is something that has meaning. It is related. Whether it is a blouse, paper, or pollution, all of these things influence everything else.

This is also true of our thoughts and interactions. You can get really abstract, and say that if you wave your hand it moves the air molecules in a certain way, everything is being moved and so there is a slight ripple being felt at the other end of the universe. That might be true, but it is just a little vague. Instead, it is much better to get to a kitchen sink level with this sort of thing and see how our actions influence not only future actions we might make, but the actions other people might make coming into contact with us. All of these things actually take place and it is important for us to attend to them, rather than having a very limited, self-absorbed and claustrophobic view of "I'm just trying to make it through the day." You squash a spider in your bathtub just because you think it should not be there. Meanwhile, the spider is doing whatever it is doing. It woke up and did whatever it was doing. Being willing to take a look at that for a little time, you will see that there might be a bit more to what's going on, other than the petty, abstract, vague and random sort of rumours that we are right now allowing for. Any other questions or comments? … [pause] …. So, what's karma?

Q: I still find it very complicated. It's just everything.

Roshi: This is true. It is hard to just carve things up into “cause” and “effect.” It is hard to actually see what the “cause” is and what the “effect” is, because the cause is the effect of the previous cause. It is this effect that is the cause, because it is affecting something else, that would be the cause of something else. So it is, of course, everything.

Q: And not trying to balance it out as to “good” or “bad”.

Roshi: Although we do have to pay attention to wholesome and unwholesome states of mind and action and to take responsibility for our lives, which is what living is all about. However, to develop a concept of a moral universe on the basis of that, is a mistake, mainly because it is so comfortable for us. It consoles us but it also numbs us.

Q: Is that why teaching and compassion are so stressed then… because…

Roshi: … taking responsibility?

Dai-an:Yes, because if you perceive that there is not an ethical universe as taught in a Christian sort of way, you then have to have another force to bring things into balance, and to keep from becoming…

Roshi: … self-absorbed …

Dai-an: Q. Yeah!

Roshi: Yes, very true. In many traditional Buddhist cultures, karma played this sort of role. As we were saying, “the poor are poor for a reason.” This sort of thing was often used as a social ethos as to what karma actually means, without trying to posit a moral universe. There is compassion inherent in it because we are human beings. If we realize how interrelated everybody and everything is, all our thoughts and actions, then we realize that there is no ground for separateness. There is no valid basis for self-absorption. There is no sense in being justified closing yourself off from others and enjoying your own little trip. Just in the recognition of karma itself, there can be the basis for compassion.

In the Genjokoan, Dogen zenji says that each thing stands and covers its own ground. This means that every creature and every event is valid on its own terms. At the same time, because all things influence each other and are interdependent with each other, while each thing is valid it is also part of everything else, not because of some vague cosmological “oneness,” but just as a simple fact. In the recognition of this fact, there is the ground of compassion. You are valid on your own terms and everything else is valid on their own terms. There is no sense of one thing being more valid than anything else.

As you stand in the line of the grocery check-out, everyone else in that line has a right to be there too. There might be fifteen people in front of you but, they have as much right to be there as you do. At the very least, just that recognition can provide some sort of space from the claustrophobic of “I’ve got to do this, get out and go and do this … so get out of my way.” At the same time, when you see a need, you just instantly reach out.

Perhaps compassion does need to be stressed, because it is not an ethical universe. It would be much nicer and much more comfortable if it were. The universe might be ethical in some ways that we don’t know of, but the very simple social self that karma has been made into is just not all that positive. Once we recognize that, well … then that sense of ethics might be loosened.

Pay attention to how things do influence each other, rather than suppose that they might on the basis of past lives that you don't really remember. I am not saying they are not there; I'm just saying that for you to make assumptions about them is a bit silly. If you pay attention, moment to moment, to what karma is and how it actually functions, then the natural sense of ethics that arises from this is embodied in the Precepts. Would you like to say something?

Q: Well, is it true that everybody is working towards realizing themselves? And what life is all about, is doing whatever you need to do, to get there, like realizing certain things, or experiencing certain things, so that you can get to that point. Is that like an ethical universe? Like, in that respect? Otherwise, what's the point?

Roshi: There are several points here that should be looked into. It seems a bit presumptuous to think that life is about anything other than living, just the process … moment to moment. Life isn't about anything. Life is not a vague shadow of something else, life is not an example of something, it is not a multiple choice question, it has no moral to tell and no point to make. It is just life. Because of who and what we are, in order for us to live fully, we have to take into account the dimension of meaning. How we live has to have meaning, but to give up meaning for unquestioned truths is mistaken. To view life as being about something other than life is a bit fishy.

When we talk about Buddha-nature, about the fact that it is possible for everyone to wake up, we mean that it is just so because Buddha-nature is inherent in how the body and mind are. People have all sorts of opportunities to wake up, which are sometimes used and sometimes not. People encounter activities and events and, as they arise within those events and experiences, they are further conditioned by the basic choices they make from moment to moment. Your basic ways of experiencing can influence whether you are going to wake up or not.

If you are just riding through life, trying to use things as tools for your own comfort, then you are not really going to see very much but, if you are open to learning from your experiences, then you will learn something. However, to say that these events are given to you for you to learn from them is a bit fishy. While it gives a certain sense of meaning, the concepts behind it are not examined. These concepts are somewhat fishy, because they place human strategies, human value systems, and human modes of being and human concepts onto something that is much more vast, something which does not quite operate in this way.

It is not like "your mission, should you choose to accept it…" This is something one human being tells another human being. In the same way, we can ask, "What is the meaning of life?" That is an abstraction which is meaningful to us and can be stated in language, but that statement arises from our experiences, our emotions and our need to find some meaning. It can be stated in terse terms and there is an answer to it, but it is a mistake to believe that the answer is going to be in the same terms as the question.

It is often said, "Well, before you were born you figured out what sort of birth would be best for you to learn your lesson," which can give you a glimpse on how to use your life. However, it is a mistake to think that it actually happened in those terms. This description points out something, but it doesn't happen in those terms. It would be a lot more comfortable, a lot simpler if things were like that. It is very easy to understand things when all the reference points have been worked out. It is like a video game, a very simple world in which once you learn the rules, which are quite simple, you can manipulate its reality in whatever way you want. It would be great if life came with a user's manual. If you knew the right thing to do at the right time, everything would work out as part of this great, vast cosmic plan. But there is no great, vast cosmic plan,

only this great, vast cosmos. So, what is it? We are born and we are going to die. What does that mean? What are you going to do about that?

Q: It's like what you were saying. If you come to do practice, it is not because you have good karma and therefore you deserve some sort of reward. Surely karma is every action you do. Every action you think determines the next ones, and so, through life, you will pick out certain roads for yourself.

Roshi: … and choices …

Q: That is what I mean. Is that really all that karma is?

Roshi: Yes, cause and effect are always going on, but in terms of how we live we are conditioned by all the choices that we have made. We are being conditioned right now, but we are not completely bound by it. We can make choices, and many of those choices are conditioned choices. However there is enough intelligence inherent in who and what we are to begin to look at that conditioning, to look at those assumptions, in order to wake up.