

Intentions: The Road to Where?

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My wife Mary left yesterday on a pilgrimage to India. When I made a similar trip in 2007 to visit the sacred sites in the life of the historical Buddha, she was not interested in joining me. Mary will tell you that it was never her intention to visit India. It was not on her bucket list, even as an adventure travel destination, much less a Buddhist pilgrimage. What caused this change? She had listened to the stories, looked at the photos, and talked to other pilgrims without ever saying, "I want to do that." After she retired in 2011, she began to come more often to Thursday nights at Sacramento Insight Meditation (SIM) to meditate and listen to dharma talks. After I retired last year, she began to join me more often in the morning for daily meditation. She still does not consider herself a "Buddhist." Yet when the opportunity arose and Dennis Warren of SIM announced he was leading a second pilgrimage to India, Mary was one of the first to sign up. This decision was the effect resulting from some unfathomable combination of causes, conditions, and subtle intentions. It is this link between intentions, causes, and effects that I would like to explore with you this morning.

Let's look at an example from climate science. Writer Alan Marshall tells us, "Most principles of physics are beyond question because both cause and effect are well understood. A relationship between cause and effect is proved by repeatable experiments. This is the essence of the scientific method, and the source of knowledge on which we have built our technological civilization." For example, we know it takes a lot of time to heat up water (think of waiting for water to boil on your stove before you add the pasta). We also know that most of the planet consists of oceans. Scientists call this combination of factors the "thermal inertia of the oceans." We are finally waking up to the fact that increased greenhouse gas emissions have resulted in increased temperatures of both the atmosphere and the oceans. As a result of all these seemingly unrelated scientific facts coming together, there is a delayed response known as "climate lag" between cause (increased greenhouse gas emissions) and effect (increased temperatures). Environmental scientist Dana Nuccitelli, who spoke here on climate change in September, told me, "Right now we're committed to about another half degree Celsius global surface warming based on the greenhouse gases we've emitted so far." Furthermore, scientists tell us that this will occur even if CO₂ was stabilized at its current level [of 395 ppm]. As Alan Marshall says, "With 40 years between cause and effect, it means that average temperatures of the last decade are a result of what we were thoughtlessly putting into the air in the 1960's." "Thoughtlessly" is a key word here. It reveals our intentions. They were clearly not conscious, but they have lead inevitably to unexpected causes and unwanted effects.

An old cliché has it: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Is that possible? In the UU tradition of honoring your free and responsible search for truth, I am not going to try to define what “hell” means here: for you it may be a long time in a very hot place, an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of your stomach, or an hour listening to talk radio. But let’s look at these supposedly “good intentions.”

The first question we might ask ourselves is, “Are they really good?” In my experience, looking closely at intentions reveals that on the surface is often an intention that reinforces our view of who we think we are: “I will give some of my spare change to this person because I am a generous person.” “I will tolerate that loud music on the light rail train because I am very open-minded.” If we stay with the experience in the present moment, something deeper may emerge: “This person makes me uncomfortable. I wonder if they will use this money for drugs?” or maybe “When are they going to turn that music off? The words really offend me and besides it’s against the rules to be playing it on light rail.” In other words, it is not unusual for our thoughts, words, and actions to be driven by mixed intentions. Notice that these intentions are based around the concepts of I, me, and mine. They depend on how others view us (or how we think others will view us) in the context of some external moral code of “right” and “wrong.” What if we shift our focus from this self-based, externally imposed idea of “good” to a simpler idea: will this intention and the thoughts, words, and actions that follow it cause harm or prevent it? Will my thoughts, words and actions lead to arguments, dissatisfaction, and discontent – in other words, some version of hell? Or will they lead to harmony, satisfaction, and contentedness – in other words, peace? Learning the difference through direct experience of the consequences of our actions is one key to lasting happiness.

Looking back at the supposedly good intentions that supposedly pave the road to hell, we can legitimately ask: are they really intentions? Or are they just wishful thinking? How about self-deception? Intention precedes every action – scratching an itch, voicing an opinion, even thinking a thought. As in the examples above, the intention can be subtle. So, we may set an intention to watch our diet more closely, but when faced with a lunch menu featuring cherry pie a la mode, that “intention” may just fade away under a barrage of competing rationale: “I’ve been working so hard I deserve this;” “I walked two miles this morning so it’s no big deal;” “I’ll eat less for dinner tonight.” The intention is not strong enough on its own to stand up to long-standing thought patterns and habits. Chances are that “intention” to eat less for dinner won’t survive either!

Now that we are about half way through the talk, let me reveal a secret. When Roger asked me several months ago to preach on this day, I presented him with several subjects I had been pondering and exploring. The topic we agreed on for this sermon was Karma. I had just finished teaching a four-week class on the subject, giving a talk at SIM’s Thursday night meeting [March 20, 2014], and writing an article for the SIM newsletter. But I was concerned that because pop culture has developed such a skewed idea of “karma” you might come in with too strong a filter

to allow you to hear what I presented, or might not come in at all! After all, we all know the bumper stickers: “My karma ran over your dogma;” “I hope karma slaps you in the face before I do;” “Dear Karma, I have a list of a few people you missed.” Then there’s the Dilbert cartoon: Dogbert the evil HR director tells Dilbert, “I believe in Karma. That means I can do bad things to people all day long and I assume they deserve it.” Not a very uplifting subject.

So, where did our pop culture get its inaccurate view of Karma?

Karma in pre-Buddhist India was mechanistic. David Loy, Introduction to “Karma: Fate or Freedom?” *Buddhadharma*, Fall 2013, page 36: “performing a Vedic ceremony correctly would sooner or later lead to the desired consequences.” There was also an element of reincarnation – actions in this present life generate “good” or “bad” karma, resulting in being born in a favorable or unfavorable realm in the next life. These ideas influenced the view we have of karma as either fate or retribution.

However, the historical Buddha focused on karma as “volitions or motivations.” This is illustrated in the first two verses of perhaps the best-known Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*:

All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
And suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind,
And happiness follows
Like a never-departing shadow.
[translated by Gil Fronsdal]

As David Loy says, “What we intentionally do is what makes us what we are.” In other words, we create our habits and live with the consequences. But not in a mechanistic way driven by fate. All of our actions are like watering seeds. If we pay attention to our intentions and learn to feel the results of our actions, we can even choose which seeds to water. This element of choice is what takes karma out of the realm of fate and into the realm of freedom. So, the Buddhist view of karma is neither fate nor retribution. In a sense, the roads to everywhere in our lives are paved with our deepest intentions. So, we might want to pay a bit more attention to how we speak, act, and maybe even think! There is even a separate word for the results that come from the intentional actions of karma: *vipaka*, which means fruit.

Another analogy often used is that our habits are like a wheel repeatedly falling into the same rut. As we repeat an unhealthy habit over and over again, it becomes harder to act in a new way. This momentum of behavior is karma at work – each action influences the next moment; each repetition performed on auto pilot conditions the next action we are likely to take the next time similar circumstances arise. However, there is another way, illustrated in a poem by Portia Nelson titled:

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE CHAPTERS

Chapter I

I walk down the street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I fall in
 I am lost. . . . I am helpless
 It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I pretend I don't see it.
 I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
 but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I see it is there.
 I still fall in. . . it's a habit.
 my eyes are open.
 I know where I am.
 It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

How would we find another street in real life? If my habitual reaction to being criticized is to launch a defensive counter-attack, I would start by learning to be aware of how it feels inside when I am criticized. Is it pleasant or unpleasant? What happens in my breath and in my body when I hear criticism? Perhaps my breath becomes rapid and shallow and a flush of warmth comes to my face and a tightness grips my chest. Is that OK? Can I tolerate rapid breathing and a warm face and tight chest? If so, bringing awareness to this felt sense of our direct experience allows us to take a pause before speaking and acting in ways we might later regret. If not, keep practicing! Once we become familiar with our patterns of reactivity, we can develop the ability to notice the sensations in the body and breath at an earlier point in the interaction, allowing us even more space to respond consciously with awareness and kindness, rather than react from old habits. This is the first step to turning a corner to the next street.

Just a quick note on the past and future lives aspect of karma. Most modern teachers of Buddhism focus on the present life consequences of our actions. There is no need to believe in past or future lives to understand that effects can act over time. Think of the light from a distant galaxy. We “see” the galaxy, but it could have died centuries ago. Anyway, if we act as if this life is all we have, what harm would it do if future lives turned out to exist? Wouldn't the choices we make to be happy in this life also make us happy in that hypothetical future life? So we win either way.

Many Buddhists remind themselves of what's important each day with five recollections. By reflecting on old age, sickness, and death, the events of the day are put in perspective. These are the same three reflections that moved the historical Buddha to set out on his spiritual journey and eventually find the way to freedom. The last two reflections remind us of impermanence and of Karma:

All that I hold dear, beloved and pleasing, will
someday change and vanish. I accept this loss.

All that I have are my actions. I am the owner of my
actions and the heir of my actions, whether good or
evil. I accept this karma.

I recommend this practice to you. Many versions of these five recollections or remembrances are available on that other repository of Buddhist wisdom: the internet. Search for “five recollections” and you'll get 6.8 million results; find one that resonates for you and then develop your own wording.

Moving back out from the personal application of Karma to a wider view, scholar Andrew Olendzki tells us: “Contemporary Buddhism is facing the global challenge of

dealing with the past karma of our species.” Indeed, all species on earth are facing the global challenge created by the ripples from humanity’s past actions. So just as we can use a deeper understanding of karma to transform our own lives and change our habitual patterns, we can use an understanding of karma to engage this world with responsible action. The inaccurate view of karma tells us, “That’s just the way it is. It’s fate. There’s nothing I can do about it.” The view of karma I’m describing this morning tells us, “My actions matter. I may not understand every effect they cause, but I am responsible for making choices to heal the earth.” May your choices bring you happiness and may your thoughts, words, and actions bring healing to an earth that needs our compassion and wisdom so much.