Karma and the Consequences of Our Actions
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A recap of the previous talks; quote from the Dhammapada; conditioned co-production and the law of karma; skilful and unskilful mental states

We come to the third of the mind-turning reflections. Just to re-cap: we've already heard about and reflected on the precious human birth, which has its emphasis on the opportunity we have in this lifetime to practise the Dharma and all the favourable conditions that have given rise to that possibility. And we've heard in the second reflection, the reflection on impermanence and death, which stimulates the sense of conviction and urgency and purity of practice. Those two talks, those two reflections, very much go together. Now we come to the third and fourth of the mind-turning reflections, which again go together. You could have the one on karma and rebirth first, or the one on the faults of conditioned existence first. It doesn't really matter. They go together.

I'm going to be talking about karma and rebirth, mainly in fact about karma and karma-vipāka. Probably the best-known formulation of the law of karma is the one that we all know from the *Dhammapada*. I'm just going to remind us of some of those verses from the first chapter of the *Dhammapada*. This is Bhante's translation. The *Dhammapada* must be one of the earliest Buddhist texts. It must be pretty close to what the Buddha actually taught.

The Buddha says:

> *Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cartwheel follows the hoof of the ox (drawing the cart).*
>
> *Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.*
>
> *Those who entertain such thoughts as 'He abused me, he beat me, he conquered me, he robbed me,' will not still their hatred.*
>
> *Those who do not entertain such thoughts as 'He abused me, he beat me, he conquered me, he robbed me,' will still their hatred.*
>
> *Not by hatred are hatreds ever pacified here (in the world). They are pacified by love. This is the eternal law.*

Others do not realize that we are all heading for death. Those who do realize it will compose their quarrels.

The evildoer grieves in both worlds; he grieves 'here' and he grieves 'there'. He suffers and torments himself seeing his own foul deeds

The doer of good rejoices in both (worlds); he rejoices 'here' and he rejoices

'there'. He rejoices and is glad seeing his own pure deeds.
The evildoer burns in both (worlds); he burns 'here' and he burns 'there'. He burns (with remorse) thinking he has done evil, and he burns (with suffering) having gone (after death) to an evil state.

The doer of good delights in both (worlds); he delights 'here' and he delights 'there'. He delights (in this life) thinking he has done good and he delights (after death) having gone to a state of happiness."

I think probably those verses would be enough to reflect on in terms of the law of karma. It's all in those verses. They are well worth reflecting on.

The most essential formulation of the Buddha's Enlightenment experience, the formulation that we know of as conditioned co-arising, or dependent origination, is the most essential way of expressing the experience of the Buddha at his Enlightenment. It was the realization, the actual experience he had, that transformed his life and answered the questions that he had set out with on his noble quest. One of the simplest ways of expressing that is that all things arise dependent upon conditions, and they cease when those conditions no longer hold. It sounds very basic and it sounds quite easy, but it is so far-reaching and so hard to grasp. It's an understanding that wasn't in this world until the Buddha saw it and realized it for himself.

That most essential formulation is given shape, is given application in many different ways. It can be applied to everything. There are many ways in which we're familiar with it: the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Nidānas, are some of the most familiar. But it's the same thing when we come to look at karma. The law of karma is usually expressed as: '*Skilful actions lead to happiness or desirable outcomes. Unskilful actions lead to suffering, or undesirable outcomes*'. It's a particular set of actions, and we're going to look at what those actions are. Some particular actions have particular outcomes, and other actions have the opposite outcome.

Karma literally means action, though it's got many, many associations. Action in this case refers to actions of body, speech and mind. It's not just overt actions and their outcomes: it's primarily our mental states. The distinction that is being made in the formulation of karma is between skilful or unskilful actions. I'm sure you all know this already, but skilful actions are those that are performed on the basis of positive mental states, that is, the opposite of unskilful mental states. Unskilful mental states are usually

referred to as mental states based in greed, hatred and delusion or ignorance. Anything we do when we're in a mental state that is tinged with craving, or anger, or hatred, or ignorance is going to have a painful outcome. Anything that we do when we're in a positive mental state based on the opposite of those is going to have a 'good' outcome. That is the law of karma.

One of the first things that needs saying is that it doesn't work the other way round. It's very important to make this point quite early on. If we're having a painful experience, an experience of suffering, it does not necessarily mean that it is as a result of an unskilful action.

The 5 niyamas and the karma niyama; karma-vipaka - pleasureable and painful

The teaching that makes sense of that is the teaching of the *Five Niyamas*, which I hope you're all familiar with. The five niyamas explain different modes in which conditionality can be enacted, in which it takes place. There's the physical inorganic, the *utta-niyama*. There's the biological, which is the *bija-niyama*. Then there's what's referred to as the non-volitional mental, which could be seen as psychological, but the distinguishing feature of it is that it's non-volitional, which is *citta-niyama* or *mano-niyama*. Then there's the ethical mental events. That's volitional aspects of conditionality which is *karma-niyama*, which is what we're going to be particularly looking at. Then there's a fifth category, which is *spiritual or Dharmic niyama*. It's a bit harder to say exactly what that is, but it could be seen as other power, something coming from outside normal conditionality coming into play. It could be seen in our experience as the spiral path, so it's a sense of a different kind of conditionality, a different experience of conditionality.

We're going to look more closely at karma-niyama. This is conditionality which takes effect on the basis of volitional mental states, volitional activity. Maybe one of the first things to say is that there is karma and there is karma-vipāka. As a result of our karma, or our volitional activity, there is an effect which is pleasurable or painful, which is the consequences we reap as it were of our states of mind, which is our karma-vipāka. There's not much we can do about karma-vipāka. In fact there's not much we can do about pleasure and pain generally. Pleasure and pain can be caused by other niyamas, or it can be the effect of karmic activity of our own. But either way, once we're into the effects of something, it's non-karmic at that point. There's nothing good or bad about it. It's just pleasurable or painful. Life is pleasurable or painful. It just is. We can't do much about that and actually it can be quite a relief to know that. It can encourage us to let go of the past and not to angst too much about the past.

We can choose how we respond to pleasure and pain, and this is something that is key to our understanding of how the world works, because the alternative model would be either that everything is just random, so it's just luck and there's no reason why some people should have more pleasurable experiences in life and other people should have more suffering, it's just random. The extreme opposite of that is that somewhere it's just fate,

whether it's to do with God or not. It's just written in stone and there's nothing that we can do about it. In between those two extremes is the possibility of change and the possibility of choice, or in Bhante's terms the possibility of a creative rather than a reactive response, and the possibility of transformation.

This is where the whole question of free will comes in, and this is something that we can maybe reflect on and talk about further. Our actions have consequences, but it's not fore-ordained what kind of actions we'll carry out. We experience pleasure or pain, and there is the potential to have a choice at that point. It's the famous gap on the wheel that we're used to. The fact that there is this possibility of change is obviously very, very significant. I asked Bhante once (I remember being very confused) – how can we change if our experience is rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, how can we ever think ourselves outside that box? I remember him saying, "There's nothing wrong with our experience: it's the interpretation of our experience that's the problem."

Our experience is just is how things are, but we habitually misinterpret it. We have our experience; we have the raw material that is showing us how things are all the time. It's not as though we have to go and find how things are. They're staring us in the face the whole time. We just have to see them. In order to see them we need a Dharmic framework. We need some way to shift our habitual way of seeing things. We don't need very much of a Dharmic framework. We probably all have everything we need in terms of a Dharmic framework. It's interesting to reflect that we have our experience, and we have a Dharmic framework, and actually that's all we need. We just have to do the work.

It's the same message that's in the first of the two mind-turning reflections. We have the precious human birth and opportunity, and we have come across the Dharma. And we have the faculties to make sense of it and the ability to make sense of it, and we have our raw experience of impermanence and death. It's around us all the time. We just have to practise.

The distinction between skilful and unskilful; re-becoming or rebirth

To go back to karma, and the skilful or unskilful, it's also interesting to reflect on how do we tell whether something is skilful or unskilful. Again, it's remarkably easy. It's not as though we have to sit down, and look at our mental states, or look in a book to work out whether it's based in craving or hatred. It's so simple. There's an instinctive sense once we're reasonably adult. All of us have the potential for making that distinction. It's inbuilt. We're born with it. Maybe as very small children, where the universe is an extension of us, it's a little bit harder to start to make that distinction, but it doesn't take much. You can see that children have the ability to understand that once it's spelt out, in terms of, "If you hit him he'll probably hit you back, and you won't like it, and it would hurt, so don't hit him."

We have this natural inbuilt ability to distinguish. We just know whether something is

skilful or unskilful. It is something we need to work on, and we need to refine. The more we practise, the more sensitised and clear we become about the distinction. It's interesting that it's a law of the universe that activity based on greed, hate and delusion will eventually result in suffering. It begs the question why. Why should that be the case? You hear terms like, "We live in an ethical universe," which seems very strange. Why should we live in an ethical universe as opposed to an unethical universe?

A little further on, I'm going to go a bit more into why that might be the case, and how it actually happens, how it works, but for the moment we'll just take it on trust, that it is how it seems to work.

In terms of karma, the teaching of karma is obviously very bound up in the idea of re-becoming, or rebirth. The two are quite embedded in fact, but you don't have to necessarily embrace both. The Buddha's Enlightenment experience did arise very clearly – or how it's come down to us – out of a reflection that he saw his past, and he saw his past lives unfolding. He could see the past lives of all other beings, and he could see them stretching into the future. You get a very strong sense that the significance of this was that he could see how they unfolded. He could see the law that governed their progression. On the basis of that was his understanding of Enlightenment. So karma seems to be very bound up with the understanding of conditioned co-production.

The Buddha's explanation behind re-becoming: we don't have to take it on. It's foreign to our culture. It may take a bit of time to see whether it fits for us and makes sense for us. But it hasn't been contradicted by any of the schools of Buddhism down the ages, so it's worth giving it considerable weight. But we can see the workings of karma and karmavipāka, simply as they operate in this lifetime. It's very clear from the verses in the *Dhammapada* that karma has an effect in this lifetime as well, as it's postulated, in future lifetimes.

Immediate and continual applications of karma; weighty karma, death-proximate karma, habitual karma, residual karma

They're not separate, but it's two ways to look at the workings of karma. There's the immediate application of karma, in the immediate aftermath of an event, and action, What happens when we do something that is either skilful or unskilful? Is there an immediate response? What the *Dhammapada* is saying would imply that there is an immediate sense of remorse, or clear conscience, rejoicing, delight. We can look at whether we experience that. It is asking whether, if we have been unskilful, we have an immediate, natural response of *hri* or *apatrapya*. In the opposite case, when we have been skilful, do we having a response of clarity, delight, gladness, clear conscience?

Then there is looking further into the future in terms of how our actions play themselves out. Traditionally it would be seen as a 'future becoming'. But we tend to see it more as a continual process that is happening, that is unfolding. The model we can use is as though

we're a bundle of *saṁskaras*. Bhante said that we're a bundle of habits and a lot of them are bad habits. We can see ourselves essentially as having a momentum and it's been gathering steam for a long time, and it's got lots and lots of threads to it. It's as though we're this collection of multi-coloured threads, and some are thicker than others. If you cut through this rope, that is made of all these threads, at any one point, you'd see a particular slice of what we are at that time. Effectively that's what happens when we die. Whatever our collection of saṁskāras is at that point, is still what's driving on into the future. It's an on-going process. It's not just something that just happens at death. It's not something that just takes shape in a future birth. We're always re-creating ourselves. We're always re-becoming.

Is this our experience? Is this what actually happens, if we look at our experience, that these two aspects of karma and karma-vipāka actually unfold like this? How do we feel if something painful has happened, and we've responded with anger? Or how do we feel if something has happened and we've responded with empathy? How do we feel if we've responded with generosity, or how do we feel if we've responded with a tighter, more self-oriented response? How do we feel when we've been mindful and sensitive, and when we've not? These are like the immediate experience of skilfulness or unskilfulness.

In terms of looking a bit longer into the future, we can look back and think how we have changed over the years, and whether we get a sense of our practice having influenced that change. Sometimes it's easier to look at other people and think how they have changed, and how are they changing. It can be quite hard to see our own process of change. Five or six years ago we had a couple of retreats for women who had been ordained ten years or more. One of the first things we did was ask ourselves whether we thought we were any nearer to stream entry than we had been when we were ordained, and everybody said yes. It was very marked. It was as though ten years' practice was a long enough time to have that kind of perspective, and see the effect of our practice. It felt very affirming, because you can doubt it in the short term and sometimes despair that you've made any progress, but actually if you look back and have that kind of perspective, hopefully you can see that your practice has had some kind of effect and that we have changed..

We're going to see whether our experience bears out the law of karma. Sometimes it can be hard to understand how karma works because sometimes it can seem as though people get away with it, or they're lucky. One of the explanations of how the law of karma works is that your vipāka will always take effect, but you don't know when. But it's there, as though a seed has been sown. Every time we act it's as if another seed has been added on one side or the other. The theory is that different vipākas will kick in to effect at different times. There's a whole theory behind the relative priority of karma taking effect. Apparently, what's most likely to happen is that weighty karma, something of big karmic consequence, is likely to have priority. And then if we've just died, or the most recent karma, what's very fresh, will be having an effect. And then there's habitual karma, which is worth bearing in mind which is that all those little things that we do, that seem so insignificant, but which add up over time, habitual karma has an effect. Finally there's the catch-all of residual karma. So we don't know exactly when things are going to have

an effect.

Putting the theory into action; reflection and application; a starting place for practice; inaction

And then, how do we actually put our understanding of karma and karma-vipāka into practice? Because hopefully you know already everything that I've just said. But despite the theory, the Dharmic framework, and hopefully our practice which is reflecting us back all the time, we seem to not act as though we believe it. In fact we often seem to act as though we believe the opposite. We tend to go about life as though a favourable outcome is most likely to happen if we have rather than if we give and if we win rather than if we understand. That's worth reflecting on, in terms of what we seem to go about trying to create. It's as though we think a favourable outcome will be if we can have more and more things, rather than give, and if we can win, for example rather than understand. I'm sure we all know this. There's a desire to get things and hold on to them, and a desire to prove ourselves right, although if we think about the feeling associated with those different actions, we can probably get a sense of it being a more pleasant experience when we give. It's actually completely topsy-turvy, completely upside down. It's very strange.

It's as though the spiritual life is a whole re-learning and a turning upside down of some of our most basic assumptions. So for example sometimes we've had an impulse to give, but have second thoughts because it means parting with something. Our worry is that we're going to have less, so we'll be smaller somehow. But if we can manage to do it and we give, we tend to feel bigger and more expansive and connected. We just have to reflect on this and let it sink in more and more deeply; we'll be happier if we can give.

We tend to just dig a hole. On the basis of past assumptions we tend to just reinforce them rather than learn the lessons and start to create something new which is more pleasant for us and others. So we need to reflect on karma, because even though it's a very simple teaching and we believe it in theory, we don't always practise it. We need to reflect on it in order to bring it alive in our lives. The good thing about it is that, as well as reflecting on it, it's a very practical teaching that needs putting into action. It's something that needs to be not just thought about and reflected on, but also translated into action. Karma is action.

It gives us somewhere to start. Sometimes we feel that we just don't know where to start with our spiritual lives. That's something that Bhante made very clear: that we can always choose to act skilfully rather than unskilfully. We always have that option, regardless of circumstances. So it gives us somewhere to start.

But we have to put it into practice. That may well mean that we need to translate it into bite-sized chunks. For example, we have karma and the law of conditionality in the ethical sense, and we have the five and ten precepts, so we have these guidelines as to

how we can practise. But even then we probably need to translate the precepts into something personally particularly applicable. It's worth bearing in mind from time to time we probably will need to make personal precepts for ourselves. We need to not only dwell in the theoretical realm, but also make things tangible and concrete.

We also need to understand that there's no such thing as inaction in terms of karma. We like to think that if we're just rather vague and we don't do anything very much, then nothing very much will happen. It's extraordinary how vague we can be around it. But Bhante has said that there's no standing still in the spiritual life. If you're not moving forward, you're slipping backwards – that's one of his aphorisms. So we not only need to be not doing unskilful things: we need to be doing skilful things. Not doing is actually perpetuating a state of craving and ignorance as much as doing unskilful things is.

Again in terms of personal precepts, this is something that Vajradarshini has drawn out and maybe something that we can draw out in our groups. She said that it's quite useful to have a sense of the theory and the concrete, and what we're moving away from and what we're moving towards. We can use those axes to help us formulate personal precepts.

The practice of karma gives us somewhere to start, a way of practising that we can always use. Sometimes we can feel a bit stuck. Either we don't know what to do next, or we can have these leaps of enthusiasm where we think we'll try to be enlightened, we'll try and have insight, we'll try to transform ourselves in that kind of way. Actually, somewhere in the middle, although we'd like change to be fast, sometimes we feel (speaking personally) that we'd do almost anything if we could make it happen fast. It's actually a gradual process, but with profound implications. Spiritual change is something we need to be prepared to work on for lifetimes.

Putting the theory into action; reflection and application; a starting place for practice; inaction

Going back to the nature of the mind-turning reflections, this particular reflection on karma and karma-vipāka is traditionally seen as two things. The first is reminding ourselves of the danger of rebirth in lower realms, waking us up to the fact that if we commit unskilful actions we're building up painful experience in the lower realms. We can also understand this as building up painful existence for ourselves: confusion, doubt, painful experience, suffering.

The other side of the wake-up call is that there is massive potential benefit to us acting skilfully. Traditionally we often reflect on the benefits of a practice, of skilful actions. It is the way we change ourselves: by acting skilfully. We change others' experience of us, and we change our experience of the world. There are these three connected ways in which we bring about transformation by choosing to act skilfully. I'm going to go into each of these headings a little bit.

First of all, in terms of changing our self. You've probably got a sense that changing our self prompts the question, What are we? We're trying to change our being, we're trying to change our consciousness, we're trying to change our essence, our nature. There's a danger of misunderstanding the nature of change, and thinking that we'll still be who we are, but we'll just understand things differently. There's a danger in the spiritual life of thinking we'll be able to hold on to who we essentially are, but just have understood something. We'll have read enough books, have enough grasp of Dharmic formulations and somehow that will mean that everything's different. But, as I was saying earlier, the nature of change has to be very gradual. We have to lay the foundations. We have to prepare the foundations. The whole thing about the path of gradual steps is that we do the work, we do the gradual steps, and then radical transformation, real transformation will arise, but we can't force it. We can't make it happen. We can't choose to make it happen. We have to keep preparing the ground.

For example, in meditation we understand that the importance of dhyānic mental states, for example, is not that they are an end in themselves, but that if we have some experience of dhyāna, it has an effect on our consciousness. When we're in dhyāna, we're in a very different state of consciousness, and with a bit of familiarity with that and a bit of that having a longer lasting effect, apparently our consciousness becomes more pliable and more amenable to being able to actually absorb and make use of an experience of insight. We'll all have had moments of insight, and they will have had an effect on us, but for them to really have a long-lasting transformative effect on us, we need to have loosened up our consciousness, we need to have prepared it, it needs to be habitually more positive and more receptive, and less identified and less fixed.

And the practice of ethics too. Speaking as somebody who doesn't experience a lot of dhyāna I find it very reassuring that the practice of ethics is working on the same ground. The practice of ethics, of karma in terms of skilful actions, is not just about becoming more skilful and the consequences will be that we're happier. This is something that we meet again and again in our spiritual lives. It is so easy to end up with the view that we're practising in order to just make saṁsāra more acceptable. I'm sure this is something Maitreyi will be going into.

Ultimately the motivation for practising spiritually and for practising ethically is that we're trying to transcend karma altogether. It's quite hard to get our heads around, but the Buddha had gone beyond being skilful or being unskilful. There comes a point where although karma-vipāka may still be playing itself out, we no longer need to act to be making that choice to act skilfully or unskilfully, because our whole consciousness is so different that we just naturally are responding from a basis of understanding reality. That is of a different order to being skilful or unskilful. Being skilful is by definition a duality. It's the opposite of being unskilful. While we've got that choice, we're still having to make the effort, the choice to be skilful. There comes a time when it just would be our nature to be compassionate and wise, because that's how we would be. We have to begin by transforming ourselves and one way in which we do that is ethically. We're changing from a narrow, tight, self-interested view of the world to something that is broader, more

flexible, more empathic. We can get a sense of that shift in quality.

This is what we need to do. One way of looking at ethics is that it is how an enlightened being would naturally be. Although we're practising on a different level and in a rather different way, the fact that we're making the effort to practise skilfully gradually changes our being. It's as though we have two scales. Scales are very useful in explaining how change comes about. It's as though we're just dropping seeds of skilfulness on one side of the scales, or unskilfulness on the other side of the scales, and at some point out of all those little drops something shifts. This happens at different points in our spiritual lives, this shift. It happens at stream entry. It happens at Enlightenment, where qualitatively there's a whole shift in the process. We need to be adding these little drops in order for that shift to come about.

There's a very deep-seated change we're trying to bring about. We're trying to root out ignorance, craving and hatred, but we can't really get at it head on, immediately. We have to work at it from the point of skilfulness until such time as we are in a different kind of relationship with the world, and then something happens. The Yogācāra has a model for this, which I'm going to manage not to go into in too much detail. It says that at the heart of our delusion and the root of our craving is the fact that we have four delusions about self. These are the four □*tma-kle*□*as*. These are self-view, or □*tma-dṛṣṭi*; self delusion or □*tma-moha*; self conceit or □*tma-mana*; and attachment to self, which is □*tma-sneha*.

Self view is the collection of views that we have about our self. We think that we are substantial; we think that we're something we can rely on and get hold of, and the other side of that is that it is a delusion; actually there is no fixed self.

Another side of this is self conceit: we *are*, we are the centre of the universe.
Our experience is very deeply that we are where everything is.

Attachment to self, which goes with that, is that we are wonderful. We're very deeply attached to ourselves. This can take a perverted form of the opposite of that, but essentially we're very, very important to ourselves.

The usefulness of the Yogācāra model is that we're hard wired. This is just how we are. The way our consciousness is, we can only make sense of things in time and space, but actually they're not absolute things, they are part of our relative reality. However, we can't experience outside of them. It's the nature of human beings to have experience in a particular way. The nature of our experience is to have this deluded understanding of ourselves. That is the problem. That is what we are trying to root out. That is what we are trying to transform. But we can't get at it head on, so although it's really important we do get down to these views, we shouldn't give ourselves a hard time for having these wrong views. They are not an ethical matter as such. We can't immediately do anything about them. They're just how we are. In fact we need to approach them quite differently.

We approach them sideways; we approach them gradually. We approach them by practising ethically and practising skilfully until such time as our experience is a much more positive one. Our relationship between self and other becomes much more positive. What happens as a basis of a much more skilful and 'in line with reality' experience is that one of these shifts then take place. We can't make it take place, but we prepare the ground, and at some point some fundamental shift happens. It's called the 'turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness' and that's when wisdom really arises. It's when ignorance is really transformed.

So the practice of ethics does actually go a very long way. Karma and the practice of ethics is about self and other, and fundamentally that is the root of all our delusion and our craving. So our practice of ethics is a gradual process, with enormous potential and implications which, if you follow its logical conclusion, is a path which takes us all the way to Enlightenment. It's not separate from the practice of meditation and the arising of wisdom. It's a continual process. We start with the practice of ethics, and that is where we need to start.

Our effect on others; our effect on the world; quote from Ryokan - the moon and flowers

It's not just about transforming ourselves. It is about transforming ourselves into enlightened beings, but there's a danger maybe of getting a little self-absorbed, in which case we won't get anywhere. So we also need to be aware that the practice of ethics and of being aware of karma and karma-vipāka are an understanding of the fact that we have an effect on other beings. It's about the relationship between ourselves and others. If we act unskilfully, we don't just harm ourselves; we cause pain to others. We need to be awake to that and take in the reality of other beings. It can be very painful, very salutary to understand the effect we've had on someone else. Sometimes we need that. We need to hear how our actions have landed to really be motivated to change them in the future. We have a responsibility. We can't just fall back on inaction and think we're not doing anything terribly bad, so we'll just get by and not cause too much of a ripple in the world. There's a huge responsibility which goes with the understanding of karma and karma-vipāka. We have an effect, and we have an effect by our inaction as well. There's a huge potential, and with potential comes responsibility. We can just reflect on the responsibility we have in terms of our effect on other beings. We have an effect not only immediately on the beings we actually impact on immediately, but we have an effect on the world. Bhante's talked about a cloud of skilfulness or unskilfulness. The Buddha's teaching on conditionality is massive. When you look at it more deeply, you start to see how deeply conditioned we and all beings are. The causes of any experience are so myriad that you can start to see the all-embracing web of conditionality and how each of us condition and affect it. The drop of skilful or unskilful actions onto the scales that I referred to earlier doesn't just affect ourselves. It has a cumulative effect in the world and we affect it one way or the other. However, it's not a weight that lands just on our

shoulders. As a fixed self we're not going to be able to transform the world by ourselves. But if we take responsibility for our part in the world, we are sharing in the Bodhisattva Ideal. We are sharing in that responsibility that we and others have an effect in the world. The knock-on effect of our actions is so much bigger than we sometimes realise. One act of mettā, for example, affects the next person. They are then feeling more positive, so their actions are more likely to be positive. The ripple effect is enormous. It's the model of a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world and you have a hurricane on the other.

We don't just transform ourselves and affect others, both immediately and more broadly. We do affect the world but, depending on how we choose to act, whether skilfully or unskilfully, strangely and miraculously our experience of the world will be affected. However the world is, we can completely transform our experience of it. For example, sometimes you can come out of a meeting, and someone draws up minutes, but you read them and think, That isn't how I remember the meeting. Or worse still, no-one draws up minutes and everyone has a different memory of what happened at the meeting. Our experience of events is very different. If we experience something as painful, we can't just rest in blaming the outside agent, and think it's all happening out there and they should have been more skilful because then that would have been nicer for us. That may be true, but we can't affect that. What we can affect is our response.

Going back to the very beginning of my talk, we have a huge repertoire of responses that we can make. The fact that this is so gives us huge freedom. Whatever our circumstances, we have enormous freedom. It may not be something we can do over night, but over time we can create a different world for ourselves. We have some very dramatic accounts of this. We have accounts all the way through the Buddhist scriptures, but we have some very striking modern accounts. For example, I always remember Nelson Mandela's autobiography, and his account of freedom at the end.

I'll just end with another quote [from a poem by Ryokan]:

> *The rain has stopped.*
> *The clouds have drifted away and the weather is clear again.*
> *If your heart is pure, then all things are pure.*
> *Abandon this fleeting world,*
> *Abandon yourself.*
> *Then the moon and flowers will guide you along the way.*