

# The Law of KARMA: Cause and Effect



Karma, the action of body, speech, and mind, affects every aspect of our life. Actions affect both doers and those around them in unimaginable ways, and the seeds of karma shape our lives and our worlds, though different Buddhist traditions give different weight to whether the action is willed or not. In either case, through mindfulness, we become aware of the nature of these actions and can in fact change our karma, the concept of cause and effect.

The law of karma is one of the most important laws governing our lives. When we understand it, and live our understanding, when we act on what we know, then we experience a sense of wholeness and peace. If we live in a way that is out of harmony, ignoring the nature of things, we then experience dissonance, pain, and confusion. The law of karma is one of the fundamental natural laws through which we create these vastly different realities. It is as though we are all artists, but instead of canvas and paint, or marble or music, as our medium, our very bodies, minds, and life experience are the materials of our creative expression.

A great sense of fulfillment in dharma practice comes from knowing this and from actively creating and fashioning our lives.

Karma is a Sanskrit word (kamma in Pali) that means “action.” The law of karma refers to the law of cause and effect: that every volitional act brings about a certain result. If we act motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion, we are planting the seed of suffering; when our acts are motivated by generosity, love, or wisdom, then we are creating the karmic conditions for abundance and happiness. An analogy from the physical world illustrates this: if we plant an apple seed, the tree that grows will bear apples, not mangoes. And once the apple seed is planted, no amount of manipulation or beseeching or complaining will induce the tree to yield a mango. The only meaningful action that will produce a mango is to plant a mango seed. Karma is just such a law of nature, the law of cause and effect on the psychophysical plane.

The Buddha used the term karma specifically referring to volition, the intention or motive behind an action. He said that karma is volition, because it is the motivation behind the action that determines the karmic fruit. Inherent in each intention in the mind is an energy powerful enough to bring about subsequent results. When we understand that karma is based on volition, we can see the enormous responsibility we have to become conscious of the intentions that precede our actions. If we are unaware of the motives in our minds, when unskillful volitions arise we may unmindfully act on them and thus create the conditions for future suffering.

The law of karma can be understood on two levels, which indicate the vast scope of its implications in our lives. On one level, karma refers to the experience of cause and effect over a period of time. We perform an action, and sometime later we begin to experience its results. We plant a mango seed, and many years later we taste the fruit. The other

level of understanding karma has to do with the quality of mind in the very moment of action. When we experience a mind state of love, there comes naturally, along with it, a feeling of openness and love that is its immediate fruit; similarly, when there are moments of greed or hatred, in addition to whatever future results will come, we also experience the painful energies that arise with those states. Our direct awareness of how the karmic law is working in each moment can be a strong motivation to develop skillful states of mind that create happiness for us in the moment, as well as produce the fruit of well-being in the future.

Another dimension of the law of karma helps in understanding how individual personalities develop. While it is true that there is no enduring entity, no unchanging self that can be called “I,” it is also quite obvious that each of us is a uniquely changing and recognizable pattern of elements. This comes about because each of us has in our own way, both consciously and unconsciously, cultivated different mind states. If we cultivate lovingkindness, we experience its taste in the moment and at the same time are strengthening it as a force in the mind, making it easier for it to arise again. When we are angry, we experience the suffering of that anger as present karma and are also strengthening that particular pattern of mind. Just as we condition our bodies in different ways through exercise or lack of it, so we also condition our minds. Every mind state, thought, or emotion that we experience repeatedly becomes stronger and more habituated. Who we are as personalities is a collection of all the tendencies of mind that have been developed, the particular energy configurations we have cultivated.

We tend not to pay attention to this conditioning factor of our experience, thinking instead that once an experience has passed it is gone without residue or result. That would be like dropping a stone in water without creating any ripples. Each mind state that we experience

further conditions and strengthens it. When we see how this is happening in our own minds, we begin to get an intuitive sense of something the Buddha spoke of often in his teachings, the conditionality of the six realms of existence. These six realms are the manifestations of strongly developed patterns of mind. They refer to the different realities we experience from moment to moment, and also to the actual planes of existence in which beings are reborn according to their karma.

According to the Buddha's teachings there are six realms or planes of existence: the four lower realms of suffering, the human realm, and the higher planes of the various heaven worlds. The lower realms are conditioned by intense anger, hatred, greed, and delusion, and when we cultivate these states, developing them as a pattern of response to situations, they become a strong force in the mind. Not only do we then experience the present karma of the painful feelings in the moment, but we also create the conditions for possible rebirth in realms of terrible suffering.

The human realm is the first of the happy planes of existence. It is said to be the most conducive for developing wisdom and compassion because of its particular mixture of pain and pleasure. In the lower realms the intensity and degree of suffering is too great for most beings to develop wholesome qualities of mind, while in the higher planes of existence everything is so blissful that there is little inspiration to practice. It is precisely the combination of pain and pleasure in the human realm that provides the best circumstances for deep understanding and realization.

We take birth as human beings conditioned by a basic attitude of generosity and nonharming. These mind states create the powerful karmic force that results in birth in this realm, and indeed, these

qualities of mind reflect a true humaneness. When generosity and morality are practiced and developed even further, they condition rebirth in the deva realm, the heavenly planes of existence. In these deva worlds everything is pleasant, beings have refined bodies of light, and there are delightful sense objects on all sides.

The highest planes of conditioned existence are the brahma realms. They are characterized by great bliss, which is a happiness beyond sensual pleasure and is the result of the cultivation of a deep concentration of mind known as absorption.

These six realms are all karmically created. There is no one who judges, condemns, or elevates us to different realms, just as there is nobody who decides which mind states we are to experience in each moment. The great inspiration of the Buddha's teaching is that we must each take ultimate responsibility for the quality of our lives. Given certain volitional actions, certain results will follow. When we understand that our lives are the unfolding of karmic law that we are the heirs to our own deeds, then there grows in us a deepening sense of responsibility for how we live, the choices we make, and the actions we undertake.

People sometimes wonder whether reflecting upon the law of karma will lead to feelings of guilt for past unwholesome actions. Guilt is a manifestation of condemnation or aversion toward oneself, which does not understand the changing transformative quality of mind. It solidifies a sense of self by being nonforgiving. Understanding the law of karma leads us to reflect wisely on the skillfulness or unskillfulness of our actions. In the infinite time of our births, through all the realms of existence, we have done so many different kinds of actions, wholesome and unwholesome. In view of karmic law, guilt is an inappropriate feeling, and a rather useless burden. It simply creates more unwholesome results. Coming to an understanding of karma is the basis

for a very straightforward development of the wisdom to know whether our actions will lead to happiness and freedom, or to further suffering. When we understand this, it allows us to take responsibility for past actions with an attitude of compassion, appreciating that a particular act may have been unwholesome or harmful, and strongly determining not to repeat it. Guilt is a manifestation of condemnation, wisdom an expression of sensitivity and forgiveness. . . .

It is said that on the eve of his enlightenment, the Buddha, with the power of his mind, reviewed the births and deaths of countless beings wandering throughout the cycle of existence in accordance with their karma. His great compassion was awakened when he saw all those beings wanting happiness, striving for happiness, yet performing the very actions that would lead to suffering. When we do not understand the unfolding of karmic law, when we are deluded about the nature of things, then we continually create the conditions for greater suffering for ourselves and others, even when we are wishing and hoping for peace. There are those even today who have developed the power of mind to see karmic unfolding through past and future lifetimes. But it is not necessary to be able to see our past lives in order to understand the principles of karmic law. If we pay attention and carefully observe our own lives, it can become very clear how our actions condition certain results.

The Buddha spoke often about right and wrong view with regard to the effects of one's actions. Right view is the understanding that our actions do bring results, both in the present and in the future, while wrong view denies this cause-and-effect relationship. Our culture is generally geared to the pursuit of immediate gratification of desires, and this reinforces the view that what we do will not have effects, that there is no karmic result from our actions that will come back to us. But when we step back and take a broader perspective, we begin to

understand that we are the heirs of our own motives and deeds and that our lives do not unfold randomly or haphazardly. It is important to see what our motives and volitions are and to understand the results they condition.

Mindfulness plays a critical role in understanding the unfolding of karma. Two aspects of mindfulness that are particularly relevant to this are clear comprehension and suitability of purpose. Clear comprehension means paying attention to what we are doing, being fully aware of what is actually happening. When we stand up, we know we're standing; when we walk, we know we're walking. Clear comprehension of what we are doing in the moment then allows us to consider the suitability of purpose. This means knowing whether the actions are skillful or unskillful, whether or not they will bring the results that we want.

When mindfulness is weak, we have little sense of clear comprehension or suitability of purpose. Not only may we be unaware of our intentions, we often are not even paying attention to the action itself, hence we may be propelled by habitual patterns into actions that bring painful results. The deep understanding that actions condition results creates a compelling interest in what we do. We begin to pay quite meticulous attention; we begin to awaken. Not only does each action, no matter how insignificant it may seem, condition a future result, it also reconditions the mind. If a moment of anger arises in the mind and we get lost in it, we are then actually cultivating anger. If we get lost in greed, we are cultivating greed. It is like a bucket being filled with water, drop by drop. We think each drop is so tiny, so insignificant, that it doesn't matter at all. Yet drop by drop the bucket gets filled. In just this way, the mind is conditioned by each experience in every moment, and moment after moment the mind gets filled. We should have a tremendous respect for the conditioning power of the mind, not only in

terms of our present experience, but also in terms of our future direction. . . .

During a visit to the United States, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave a talk about emptiness of self and the karmic law of cause and effect. In the course of the talk, he said that given a choice between understanding karma and understanding emptiness, one should try to understand karma. To many that was surprising, because the very heart of the wisdom of Buddhism is understanding the empty, selfless, insubstantial nature of phenomena. His point of emphasis, though, is extremely important for us to grasp, because without an understanding of karma, of the effect of our actions, the aspect of the emptiness of phenomena can be used as a rationale for not taking responsibility in our lives. To think that nothing matters, that we can do anything because it's all empty anyway, is a serious misunderstanding of the teaching and a poor justification for unskillful behavior. If we are sensitive to the law of karma and become responsible for our actions and their results, then it will help us come to a genuine understanding of emptiness.

Compassion, as well as insight, arises from understanding karma. When we understand that unfair, harmful, or hateful actions rebound in suffering to the person committing them as well as to the recipient, we can respond to both with compassion rather than with anger or resentment. This in no way means that our response is weak or indecisive. In fact, seeing people act out of ignorance in ways that cause themselves or others great pain can inspire a very strong and direct response to that ignorance, but it is a response of compassion.

In explaining the workings of karma, the Buddha spoke of the potency of different actions. He spoke often of the great power of generosity, explaining that an act of generosity is purified and empowered in three



ways. It is purified by the giver, by the receiver, and by that which is given. The purity of mind of the one giving and of the one receiving, and the purity of the gift itself (that is, the means by which the gift came into one's possession), strengthen the karmic force of each act of generosity.

And many times more powerful than giving a gift even to the Buddha and the whole order of enlightened disciples is one moment in which the mind is fully concentrated on extending thoughts of lovingkindness toward all beings. When we genuinely open our hearts, the deep feeling of our connectedness to all beings is a tremendously effective force, which can then motivate a wide variety of skillful actions.

The Buddha went on to say that even more powerful than that moment of lovingkindness is one moment of deeply seeing the impermanent nature of phenomena. This moment of insight is so profound because it deconditions attachment in the mind and opens up the possibility of true nonattachment. When we deeply see the impermanent, ephemeral nature of the mind and body, how they are in constant flux, we develop detachment and equanimity toward the dreamlike elements of our experience. Sometimes in meditation practice when we are dealing with the pain, restlessness, boredom, and other difficulties that come up, we may lose sight of the larger context of what the practice is about. It is helpful to remember that the karmic energy generated by the repeated observation and awareness of the changing nature of things is a tremendously powerful karmic force that leads to many kinds of happiness and to freedom.

Understanding the law of karma is known as the light of the world because through this understanding we can take responsibility for our destinies and be more truly guided to greater fulfillment in our lives.