

Karma

In the second watch of the night when Buddha attained enlightenment, he gained another kind of knowledge, which complemented his knowledge of rebirth: that of *karma*, the natural law of cause and effect.

“With the heavenly eye, purified and beyond the range of human vision, I saw how beings vanish and come to be again. I saw high and low, brilliant and insignificant, and how each obtained according to his karma a favourable or painful rebirth” (Schumann, H. W. *The Historical Buddha*, 55).

The truth and the driving force behind rebirth is what is called karma. Karma is often totally misunderstood in the West as fate or predestination; it is best thought of as the infallible law of cause and effect that governs the universe. The word *karma* literally means “action”, and karma is both the power latent within actions, and the results our actions bring.

There are many kinds of karma: international karma, national karma, the karma of a city, and individual karma. All are intricately interrelated, and only understood in their full complexity by an enlightened being.

In simple terms, what does karma mean? It means that whatever we do, with our body, speech, or mind, will have a corresponding result. Each action, even the smallest, is pregnant with its consequences. It is said by the masters that even a little poison can cause death and even a tiny seed can become a huge tree.

And as Buddha said: “Do not overlook negative actions merely because they are small; however small a spark may be, it can burn down a haystack as big as a mountain.” Similarly he said: “Do not overlook tiny good actions, thinking they are of no benefit; even tiny drops of water in the end will fill a huge vessel.” Karma does not decay like external things, or ever become inoperative. It cannot be destroyed “by time, fire, or water.” Its power will never disappear, until it is ripened.

Although the results of our actions may not have matured yet, they will inevitably ripen, given the right conditions. Usually we forget what we do, and it is only long afterward that the results catch up with us. By then we are unable to connect them with their causes. Imagine an eagle, says Jikmé Lingpa. It is flying, high in the sky. It casts no shadow. Nothing shows that it is there. Then suddenly it spies its prey, dives, and swoops to the ground. And as it drops, its menacing shadow appears.

The results of our actions are often delayed, even into future lifetimes; we cannot pin down one cause, because any event can be an extremely complicated mixture of many karmas ripening together. So we tend to assume now that things happen to us "by chance," and when everything goes well, we simply call it "good luck".

And yet what else but karma could really begin to explain satisfyingly the extreme and extraordinary differences between each of us? Even though we may be born in the same family or country, or in similar circumstances, we all have different characters, totally different things happen to us, we have different talents, inclinations, and destinies.

As Buddha said, "What you are is what you have been, what you will be is what you do now." Padmasambhava went further: "If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition; if you want to know your future life, look at your present actions."

The Good Heart

The kind of birth we will have in the next life is determined, then, by the nature of our actions in this one. And it is important never to forget that the effect of our actions depends entirely upon the intention or motivation behind them, and not upon their scale . . . So it is our motivation, good or bad, that determines the fruit of our actions. Shantideva said:

Whatever joy there is in this world
All comes from desiring others to be happy,
And whatever suffering there is in this world
All comes from desiring myself to be happy. (Shantideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, translated by Stephen Batchelor, 120.)

Because the law of karma is inevitable and infallible, whenever we harm others, we are directly harming ourselves, and whenever we bring them happiness, we are bringing ourselves future happiness . . .

The belief in reincarnation shows us that there is some kind of ultimate justice or goodness in the universe. It is that goodness that we are all trying to uncover and to free. Whenever we act positively, we move toward it; whenever we act negatively, we obscure and inhibit it. And whenever we cannot express it in our lives and actions, we feel miserable and frustrated.

So if you were to draw one essential message from the fact of reincarnation, it would be: Develop this good heart that longs for other beings to find lasting happiness, and acts to secure that happiness. Nourish and practice kindness. The Dalai Lama has said: "There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; my philosophy is kindness."

Creativity

Karma, then, is not fatalistic or predetermined. Karma means *our* ability to create and to change. It is creative because we *can* determine how and why we act. We *can* change. The future is in our hands, and in the hands of our heart. Buddha said:

Karma creates all, like an artist,
Karma composes, like a dancer.
(*Saddharmapundarika Sutra*, quoted in Tulku Thondrup, *Buddha Mind*, 215)

As everything is impermanent, fluid, and interdependent, how we act and think inevitably changes the future. There is no situation, however seemingly hopeless or terrible, such as a terminal disease, which we cannot use to evolve. And there is no crime or cruelty that sincere regret and real spiritual practice cannot purify . . .

Our present condition, if we use it skillfully and with wisdom, can be an inspiration to free ourselves from the bondage of suffering.

Whatever is happening to us now mirrors our past karma. If we know that, and know it really, whenever suffering and difficulties befall us, we do not view them particularly as a failure or a catastrophe, or see suffering as a punishment in any way. Nor do we blame ourselves or indulge in self-hatred. We see the pain we are going through as the completion of the effects, the fruition, of a past karma . . .

We know that "good fortune," a fruit of good karma, may soon pass if we do not use it well, and "misfortune," the result of negative karma, may in fact be giving us a marvellous opportunity to evolve.

For Tibetan people, karma has a really vivid and practical meaning in their everyday lives. They live out the principle of karma, in the knowledge of its truth, and this is the basis of Buddhist ethics. They understand it to be a natural and just process. So karma inspires in them a sense of personal responsibility in whatever they do.

Is karma really so hard to see in operation? Don't we only have to look back at our own lives to see clearly the consequences of some of our actions? When we upset or hurt someone, didn't it rebound on us? Were we not left with a bitter and dark memory, and the shadows of self-disgust? That memory and those shadows are karma.

Our habits and our fears too are also due to karma, the result of actions, words, or thoughts we have done in the past. If we examine our actions, and become really mindful of them, we will see there is a pattern that repeats itself in our actions. *Whenever we act negatively, it leads to pain and suffering; whenever we act positively, it eventually results in happiness.*

Responsibility

I have been very moved by how the near-death experience reports confirm, in a very precise and startling way, the truth about karma. One of the common elements of the near-death experience, an element that has occasioned a great deal of thought, is the "panoramic life review". It appears that people who undergo this experience not only review in the most vivid detail the events of their past life, but also can witness the fullest possible implications of what they have done. They experience, in fact, the complete range of effects their actions had on others and all the feelings, however disturbing or shocking, they aroused in them. (See David Lorimer, *Whole in One: The Near-Death Experience and the Ethic of Interconnectedness*, London: Arkana, 1990.) . . .

I feel that [the] testimonies should be taken very seriously. They will help all of us to realize the full implications of our actions, words, and thoughts, and impel us to become increasingly responsible. I have noticed that many people feel menaced by the reality of karma, because they are beginning to understand they have no escape from its natural law.

There are some who profess complete contempt for karma, but deep inside they have profound doubts about their own denial. During the daytime they may act with fearless contempt for all morality, an artificial, careless confidence, but alone at night their minds are often dark and troubled.

Both the East and the West have their characteristic ways of evading the responsibilities that come from understanding karma. In the East people use karma as an excuse not to give others a helping hand, saying that, whatever they suffer, it is "their karma."

In the "free-thinking" Western world, we do the opposite. Westerners who believe in karma can be exaggeratedly "sensitive" and "careful," and say that actually to help others would be to interfere with something they have to "work out for themselves." What an evasion and betrayal of our humanity! Perhaps it is just as likely that it is our karma to find a way to help. I know several rich people: Their wealth could be their destruction, in encouraging sloth and selfishness; or they could seize the chance that money offers really to help others, and by doing so help themselves.

We must never forget that it is through our actions, words, and thoughts that we have a choice. And if we choose we can put an end to suffering and the causes of suffering, and help our true potential, our buddha nature, to awaken in us.

Until this buddha nature is completely awakened, and we are freed from our ignorance and merge with the deathless, enlightened mind, there can be no end to the round of life and death. So, the teachings tell us, if we do not assume the fullest possible responsibility for ourselves now in this life, our suffering will go on not only for a few lives but for thousands of lives.

It is this sobering knowledge that makes Buddhists consider that future lives are more important even than this one, because there are many more that await us in the future. This long-term vision governs how they live. They know if we were to sacrifice the whole of eternity for this life, it would be like spending our entire life savings on one drink, madly ignoring the consequences.

But if we do observe the law of karma and awaken in ourselves the good heart of love and compassion, if we purify our mindstream and gradually awaken the wisdom of the nature of our mind, then we can become a truly human being, and ultimately become enlightened.

Source: Rinpoche, Sogyal (2002). *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Edited by Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. (Pages 96-103.)