

Buddhadharma: What is karma?

<1>

Rita/Andy/Larry

It's important that people understand karma isn't fate. It's not punishment.

It really means cause and effect—that what you do has a consequence.

Buddhadharma: In some sense is there a moral quality to the positive or negative causes that lead to future conditions?

Rita/Andy

If somebody has been mean to us, we don't necessarily know why, but how we deal with that difficult situation will have a lot to do with how we feel in the future and how our relationships with other people will work in the future. That's why Thich Nhat Hanh says we shouldn't ever take out our frustrations by punching pillows, because all we're doing is imprinting in our mind that it's okay to react or hit when we are angry.

A moral component is perhaps a subset of karma. There are lots of ways to understand cause and effect in nature, but Buddha was particularly interested in our psychological life, and his great insight was that some of the emotions we have, some of our responses, and some of the actions we undertake are healthy and some of them are unhealthy, or wholesome and unwholesome. Healthy or wholesome was described simply as that which works toward the alleviation or cessation of suffering. Unhealthy or unwholesome thoughts or actions are what lead us toward more suffering and away from wisdom. It's all very practical.

The Buddha is simply saying that your quality of mind is going to be affected by the kind of thoughts, emotions, and actions you put into your mindstream. That's the distinction between healthy or unhealthy; it's not so much moral in terms of what you should or shouldn't do, but rather it's like the law of nature.

Buddhadharma: How does karma really work? We said there are wholesome or unwholesome acts what by some mechanism cause us to suffer or not suffer in the future. What is the specific mechanism, according to Buddhism, by which these causes are carried forward to have their effects in the future? How does that happen?

Andy/Larry/Rita

In classical Buddhist psychology, karma is explained in terms of the relationship between what we might call mental states and mental traits. The state of what is manifest in the mind, the emotion of anger or hatred or love, has an effect on your behavior whether through body, speech, or mind—and that lays down a disposition, character trait. A behavior has been learned, has been reinforced, and so down stream when you are called upon to respond to a situation, if you have watered those seeds with a lot of anger, you're going to be inclined to be an angry person who has angry responses, and the whole thing will just cascade. But if you're able to cultivate states of mind that are kind, you're laying down dispositions – habits, as it were—that are kind, and those will more likely be triggered.

I think the word “habit” is really important here. When we do something over and over, it becomes habitual and therefore much easier to repeat. So the seeds we choose to water – Trungpa Rinpoche used to use the analogy, too – makes a lot of difference. Here's where the role of practice is so important.

Every action nourishes seeds that grow from a depth consciousness up into our mental states and into our traits and behaviors.

What meditation is doing is training us to be aware of what's going on. We can get through the day pretty well without being aware of what's happenig; all of our habits are automatic responses. We don't have to pay attention, but when we do, we have the chance to alter our habits, which is what makes the practice transformational.

And that's what makes it possible to let some seeds wither and others flourish.

Buddhadharma: Is the ability to have awareness of one's havits in effect where the possibility of choice or freedom comes in? Does it allow us to not be controlled completely by our karma?

Rita/Larry/Andy

Yes. There's always a gap-even if it's a very small one-where we have some ability to go left or right, one way or the other, to think, how can I work with this present moment in a way that will bring about the most positive effect in the future.

I see meditation practice as an opportunity to discover my freedom over and over again.

We don't have any say, in this moment, over what hand we're dealt; taht's conditioned by past action. Althought in every mind-moment we're receiving karma from the past, we do have some influence over how skillfully we play that hand, and that's where awareness increases our skill level.

Buddhadharma: Buddhism posits that those seeds carry forward from lifetime to lifetime. What can you say about how that mechanism works?

Rita/Larry/Andy

The fundamental phrase for me is "I don't know". But I do think it's important to separate karma from rebirth to a certain extent. The deeds that I do in this life will not die with me or my body. They will continue into the future, whether or not there is a personal rebirth. Someone will reap the effects of the tings I've done or haven't done in this life, and that to me is motivation enough to do the best I can with the situation I have right now.

One way to understand rebirth is as and existential present moment, in terms of the continuation of wholesome momentum or unwholesome momentum. So rebirth can be understood in the present tense as well as in the long term.

Every single mind-moment is a rebirth, a new beginning, and the questions that comes up in the literature is, are you the same person now that you were ten years ago? Or ten minutes ago? And how is who you are now going to affect who ou are going to become ten minutes or ten years from now? That's very valuable to think about, and it's very helpful to practice with so that you bring the best possible quality of mind to every moment. In this way you do your best to work with whatever you've inherited from the past and also maximize your benefit to the future.

I don't think the question we should concern ourselves with is whether we've totally uprooted karma but rather whether can we see that negative habitual patterns are not as strong as they used to be and that positive patterns are growing.

Buddhadharma: What as Buddhists can we say about how we should evaluate karma in the choices we make and in how we choose to live our lives?

Andy/Rita

Well, Karma is our refuge. We are going to inherit the consequences of what we do with our minds here and now, and if we want to be as safe as possible, then we have to put as much care into the present moment as possible. There will always be something coming out of past karma that throws us a curve, and we'll find ourselves in very challenging circumstances, but the best way to be safe in the future – the Buddha talked about this – is to take care, to act ethically, to act honestly, and to practice diligently. In doing so, you're giving yourself and everyone around you a gift of harmlessness.

I find it's important to think about karma beyond the level of self-interest.

Contemporary Buddhism is facing the global challenge of dealing with the past karma of our species. We need to figure out how best to undo some of the difficulties we've caused collectively and to lay out some pathways, some new ways of approaching things. I think this is where the Mahayana emphasis on altruism and the collective good and helping others is very important. Our selfishness has gotten us into trouble; it's rooted in some primitive instincts that we need to outgrow if we're going to survive collectively.

The default position for us psychologically as human beings is subject=object duality. Most people take it for granted. Most people have not idea what we're talking about when we say that self and other are co-arisen. There's no understanding of what that phrase means. It's really important to educate people that others are not out there independently and objectively, and that we have some agency over our own identities. Subject-object duality will always come up unless we are aware and vigilant and careful.

We have to keep asking the questions, why do you think that about yourself or about others?

Buddhadharma: Presumably as long as there is that subject-object identity, there will always be karma. Isn't that where it comes from?

Rita

Yes, And as a result, there will always be suffering.