



LION'S ROAR

# Deep Dive *into* Karma



LION'S ROAR

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**The Dalai Lama** has said that of all Buddhist concepts, karma is the most difficult to understand. The simplest way to look at it is as cause and effect: Negative actions or mind states like aggression produce suffering for yourself and others, now and in the future. Love, selflessness, and other positive qualities create benefit. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about karma as the seeds we plant in our minds that will bear fruit as suffering or happiness.

It's said that if you want to know your past karma, look at the state of your life now. And if you want to know your future karma, look at the state of your mind now. That's why the Buddhist understanding of karma includes freedom—in every moment we can choose the seeds we plant of our future happiness or suffering. The twist is that the ultimate benefit comes from producing no karma at all, which is one definition of enlightenment. But until then, the safest choice is to concentrate on creating positive karma.

The articles that follow explore the subtle and not-so-subtle meaning of karma and how to work with it in our lives.

—Melvin McLeod | editor-in-chief, Lion's Roar



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## The Law of Karma

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The Buddha taught that because of karma, beings are bound to the ever-turning wheel of rebirth. Only when a person stops believing in the existence of a permanent and real self can he or she become free from karma.

**Bhikkhu Bodhi, Jan Chozen Bays, and Jeffrey Hopkins** discuss what that means.

### *What is karma, according to the Buddhist teachings?*

**Bhikkhu Bodhi:** Perhaps we could begin with the description of the Buddha's enlightenment experience as given in various sutras in the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Pali, *Majjhima Nikaya*). This gives a very concise statement of the early Buddha's understanding of karma.

The Buddha's enlightenment unfolded by way of what are called the Three Higher Knowledges. The first of these is the Buddha's knowledge of his past lives—recollecting his previous lives going back hundreds of thousands of eons. The second is his knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings, which involves

understanding how beings transmigrate according to their karma. Perhaps I could read a passage describing this from the *Bhaya-bherava Sutta*:

When my concentrated mind was purified, bright and so on, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and being reborn, inferior and superior, bare and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions thus:

These beings who are ill-conducted in body, speech and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views, giving effect to wrong view in their actions, with the breakup of the body after death, have reappeared in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower worlds, even in hell.

But these worthy beings who were well conducted in body, speech and mind, not revilers of noble ones, right in their views, giving effect to right view in their actions, on the breakup of the body after death, have been reborn in a good destination, even in the heavenly world.

Thus, with the divine eye I saw beings passing away and being reborn and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.



Finally, the third knowledge is described as the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. But preceding that comes the understanding of the chain of dependent origination (Pali, *patichcha-samuppada*), or dependent arising. This involves understanding the dynamics of how karma, in conjunction with the basic defilements of ignorance and craving, brings about rebirth.

**Jan Chozen Bays:** As a physician, I teach karma from a scientific point of view, because what I love about karma is that it is rational. Karma is like the laws of physics. It's almost mathematically precise, and there is a great relief in that. Because if you understand karma, you really understand who and what you are, and you understand the rest of the universe too, because the laws of karma are universally applicable.

When I teach about rebirth, I ask people to consider what happens to the physical elements of the body after they die. I ask them, if we buried you in the ground with no preservatives and dug you up in a week, would we recognize you? Yes. If we dug you up in a year, would we recognize you? Maybe. If we dug you up in ten years, would we recognize you? No. So what happened to the elements that made up the body? They all dispersed and became other things.

Appreciating this, people begin to understand that on the physical level there is an endless chain of energy that passes through a series of changes. Then if you apply the same principle to our

mental and emotional energy, you can also ask where it goes. That energy is also not destroyed, though the energy that was “you” will transform.



Karma is almost mathematically precise. It's a wonderfully exact force in our lives—JAN CHOZEN BAYS

Karma is a wonderfully exact force in our lives. If you die angry, what happens to that energy of anger? Where does it go? When you walk into a room where people have been angry, you can sense it—the energy is palpable. So is that the kind of energy you would like to pass on, to be picked up by other lives? One can also look back at what energies have been passed down to you—perhaps by your family or the people who influenced you—and that helps you understand that energy doesn't die but rather continues on in some form.

I don't worry too much about questions like, “Am I going to remember that I was Queen Victoria or her servant?” People get caught up in that sort of approach to karma and rebirth, but it's almost irrelevant. The continuity of the energy is what's important. What do you want to pass on—suffering or happiness?

**Bhikkhu Bodhi:** Somebody who is a strict materialist might reply to your argument by saying that of course the mental energy is dependent on the physical basis—the body, the nervous system,



the brain—and so when the body dies whatever mental energy has been generated by that person perishes also. In response to that, I would look at two extreme cases: an extreme case of evil, Adolph Hitler, and on the other hand, somebody like Mother Theresa, who engaged in so much self-sacrificing labor for the good of others. If we take a materialistic viewpoint, then when each of them dies, it is the complete end. Maybe for Hitler there are a few moments of remorse or regret, then it's just blank, it's all over. When Mother Theresa is about to die, there might be a few moments of rejoicing for her altruistic work, then everything is over.

If one takes the materialistic viewpoint, then, it means that the universe has no underlying principle of moral justice. However, if we are going to recognize some kind of moral justice in the universe, there would have to be some continuity beyond death. That could take the form of an eternal afterlife in one realm or another—eternity in hell, eternity in heaven—but that seems difficult to reconcile with the position that any kind of volitional action generates only a finite mental force. What seems more convincing is that our various activities in this life will produce rebirth in a realm where they will expend their force over a finite period of time, to be followed by a new existence somewhere else.

**Jeffrey Hopkins:** The appeal of karma to me is psychological, based on my own experience of attitudes and actions from earlier parts of my life that I have seen play out later. I meet a lot of

people who have an experiential sense of karma. We even see it on television and in the movies. On the last episode of *Seinfeld*, the characters paid for their karma. They all ended up in jail for very specific things they had done that they were reflecting on. The movie *Flatliners* was very successful, and it was all about karma. Things people had done earlier in a lifetime were coming back to haunt them.

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Is it more important to believe in karma or is it more important to believe that the central thing is to be a kind person? —JEFFREY HOPKINS

At another level, understanding emptiness enhances one's understanding of karma. Proper understanding of emptiness should not yield the view that things do not exist, that actions and so forth do not exist. A proper understanding of emptiness requires a proper understanding of dependent arising. Once there is dependent arising, there is cause and effect. Once there is cause and effect, our actions have effect. And since the mind is something that is not physical, it can serve as a repository of the potencies established by actions and can carry them from lifetime to lifetime. If a person's seeming understanding of emptiness undercuts the entire existence of phenomena, the traditions that I know hold this to be wrong. If one thoroughly understands actions and their effects, the very fact that an action can create an effect means that it does not exist in and of itself. So,

understanding dependent arising leads to understanding emptiness. In turn, understanding emptiness leads to greater understanding of the cause and effect of actions.

*What is the medium by which karma is carried from moment to moment, and lifetime to lifetime? What is it that creates this continuity?*

**Bhikkhu Bodhi:** It is a stream of consciousness, a continuum of moments of consciousness. As each moment of consciousness perishes, it passes its entire accumulated storage of impressions, experiences, potentially memories, and karmic deposits on to the succeeding moment of consciousness.

Within a single lifetime, that continuum of consciousness rests on the basis of a physical body. When death takes place, the physical body can no longer serve as the basis for the continuity of consciousness. But as long as latent tendencies of ignorance and craving still exist within that stream of consciousness, it will re-arise after death using some new physical organism as its basis. (There are formless realms where the continuity of consciousness can occur without a physical basis, but we need not discuss those here.)

The underlying latent defilements—in particular the craving for new existence (Pali, *bhava-tanha*) and behind that, ignorance (Pali, *avijja*)—maintain the continuity of consciousness from life to life. When death takes place, ignorance and craving renew the process of conditioned existence. The stream of consciousness

preserves and transmits all the wholesome and unwholesome karmas generated by that being, not only in the immediately terminating lifetime but from beginningless time. All the karmas whose force has yet to be expended will be transmitted.

**Jan Chozen Bays:** What carries karma forward is the energy of the three poisons: clinging, aversion and ignoring. As a pediatrician, I have examined hundreds of newborn babies, and each one of them has these characteristics. Some are born angry and upset at the world. Others are born wanting sense experiences and are upset if they don't get them. Still others just like to go unconscious, and if distressed, they go to sleep. These same energies bond human existence together moment by moment. But if we can experience our life as individual moments, as occurrences within a framework of emptiness, there is no difficulty and in that moment karma is not transmitted.

Someone said that when you sit very deeply, at least you are doing no harm. One of our early precepts in Zen is, "First cease from evil." When you sit in absolute stillness, you stop transmitting the karmic streams that are moving through you all the time. If my parents abused me and therefore I carry aggressive energy that wants to strike out at others, I can nevertheless create a gap through my practice, so that when the impulse to become angry arises, I don't carry it out in speech and action. I have expiated not

only my own karma but also my parents' karma. That is the most wonderful aspect of karma: it spreads out from us in all directions throughout space and time. We are made of emptiness and karma.

**Jeffrey Hopkins:** In the teachings, there are descriptions of a mind basis of all, the *alaya-vijnana*, that serves as a medium for karma. There are also descriptions of a subtle mental consciousness that serves as the medium for the infusion of karma. And then interestingly, there is the description of the person as the medium of karma, which is rather fascinating.

The emptiness of persons doesn't mean that persons don't exist. Persons do exist. We exist as dependent arising. When we say things like, "I finally owned up to what I did," there is the sense of "I did it." I often pause to catch myself seeing the locus of owning the action as "I." That's very provocative. Not much is said about it, but it is widely known that this is another way of talking about the medium of karma.

Then there is another view, which is that the mere ending of the action is in itself a sufficient medium. It is an impermanent phenomenon that goes on and on until it brings about the result of that action. This is perhaps the most mysterious of them all.

Finally, in highest yoga tantra, there is the extremely subtle mind of clear light which serves as the basis and carries the previous positions from lifetime to lifetime.

I should add that the stopping of ignorance and attachment that has been discussed here doesn't necessarily bring about the end of embodiment. But it would put one in a state where one would be called to unleash the energies of all of those karmas and turn them into buddhahood.

*Should one try to convince a Westerner just coming to Buddhism to accept the principles of karma and rebirth fully?*

**Bhikkhu Bodhi:** I wouldn't begin by trying to impose the full weight of classical Buddhist doctrine on a Westerner who has newly come to Buddhism. Yet I wouldn't disguise or camouflage the teachings. I would tell someone exactly what the Buddha teaches.

I would say, though, that if one is coming to Buddhism out of the blue, one should begin by examining those principles of the Buddha's teaching that can be verified within one's life here and now. One can see, for example, that when one observes ethical conduct, the quality of one's life improves. One can see that when systematic development in meditation diminishes greed, anger and ignorance, one becomes more mindful, more aware, and gains greater insight into experience. One will see, as a result, that one experiences greater happiness, peace, and contentment. On that basis, I would say that one can recognize where these teachings are coming from: they are coming from the Buddha, the Enlightened One.





If we examine the implications of the Four Noble Truths deeply enough, we will find they are quite inseparable from the ideas of karma and rebirth.

—BHIKKHU BODHI

Once one gains a working confidence in the Buddha—based on what one can validate and confirm in one’s own experience—then one should be willing to place trust in those teachings of the Buddha which lie beyond the scope of one’s immediate experience. Not out of blind submission to the authority of the Buddha, but because one has gained experiential validation of some aspects of his teachings. Therefore, if one wants to follow that teaching to its full extent, one should be ready to accept on trust those teachings that lie beyond one’s present capacity for confirmation.

**Jeffrey Hopkins:** Certainly, skepticism is still required, at least in the type of scriptures I am used to. Buddha taught, for example, that the earth is flat. This has been contradicted by direct perception. Accepting all of it, then, strikes me as difficult and opposes a basic Buddhist attitude of questioning and skepticism. I think faith and skepticism can fit together in the same person.

Is it more important to believe in karma or is it more important to believe that the central thing I should do is be a kind person? One could believe in karma and not work too hard at being kind. That would mean your belief in karma didn't have much effect on you.

**Jan Chozen Bays:** A wonderful aspect of Buddhist teaching is that each person is asked to be curious, to investigate and confirm from their own experience. I think it helps to ask people to consider examples from their own lives, as Bhikkhu Bodhi was saying. People can understand examples from their own lives and begin to generalize to other people's lives. People see, for example, that if no one interrupts the cycle of child abuse, it can be perpetuated generation after generation. Only if someone can come in and stop this force that moves forward and causes suffering can you free future generations.

It seems to me that karma works like a pendulum, or like one of those little gadgets with the line of balls hanging from strings. You pull one ball out and let it go and it hits the line of four balls and another ball at the other end goes out. There is conservation of energy. Consider a family in which the father is a career military officer. One child in that family may rebel against that as a way to find happiness and end suffering. The child sees the defects, fairly clearly as children often do, and becomes a hippie pacifist. This child grows up and then one of their children, seeing the weaknesses of the pacifist and the rejection of the material

world, rebels and becomes a Wall Street broker. Then the child of the Wall Street broker becomes a Buddhist monk. You get this swing back and forth of action and reaction, until someone says, “I can see that this is going to continue forever, and it is not breaking the cycle of suffering, so I am going to do something about it.” With this kind of very practical explanation, using examples from their own lives, people can begin to see how karma works.

*Many Westerners have trouble accepting the doctrine of karma. Others say it is not essential. How central is the doctrine of karma to Buddhism? Is it possible to call oneself a Buddhist without believing in karma?*

**Jeffrey Hopkins:** The acceptance of the importance of karma in a former and future lifetime is crucial. Personally, it is quite valuable for my own practice. However, someone might be inspired by stories about the Buddha—or about bodhisattvas or arhats who act with compassion—and seek to help others as a result. If they then call themselves Buddhists, despite not believing in rebirth and that karma carries over from one lifetime to another, I have no problem at all.

**Jan Chozen Bays:** It confuses me to call it the “doctrine of karma,” because to me that’s like saying the “doctrine of gravity.” It is a fact, not a doctrine. It is a fact that underlies how the universe

works. Once you understand that fact and also experience it, it is such a relief. It brings happiness because it relieves your anxiety about how things work.

How central is the “doctrine of karma”? Absolutely central, because it is central to our existence. You may call yourself a Buddhist without accepting karma as a fact, just as you may call yourself anything you want to. In fact, many people call themselves Buddhists having only a vague notion of what Buddhism is about. That’s okay. You could be a beginning geologist and not understand all of geology, but you still call yourself a geologist because you are studying it.

A Buddhist studies their buddhanature, their essential nature, or the essential truth of how the universe works. We could think of ourselves as nursery school Buddhists, who are just beginning to understand and experience the truth of Buddhism. If people want to call themselves Buddhists and say they don’t understand or experience karma, that’s okay. Hopefully, they will simply continue to study it.

**Bhikkhu Bodhi:** If one sincerely and deeply goes for refuge to the Triple Gem, then one has to investigate what is implied by that act of taking refuge. When I go for refuge in the Buddha, I place confidence in the Buddha as the fully enlightened one. When I investigate his own account of his enlightenment, I find that it includes recollection of previous lives and realization of karmic laws that govern the process of rebirth.

When I take refuge in the dharma and study the doctrine deeply, I see that karma and rebirth are pillars of the teaching. The ideas of karma and rebirth are included in many of the formulations of right view. So if I really accept the dharma, then I should consent to the ideas of karma and rebirth. When I enter the path, I can begin to observe Buddhist ethics, and I could engage in intensive meditation without believing in karma and rebirth. But if my path is really to become part of the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to final liberation, I will find that right view is defined in some contexts as the acceptance of the principles of karma and rebirth.

From the Theravadin point of view, the goal of one's path is nirvana, the extinction of karma and the release from the round of rebirth. When one takes refuge in the sangha, one understands that the true sangha is the aryan sangha, the community of noble ones. These noble ones are defined precisely by the extent to which they have cut off the root of rebirth.

I would say, then, that the act of taking refuge itself, when it is done sincerely, with clear understanding, will involve consenting to the ideas of karma and rebirth. Some proponents of what I call modernistic Buddhism, or what Stephen Batchelor calls “agnostic Buddhism,” say it is sufficient to base one's life and practice on the Four Noble Truths, without bringing in ancient Indian metaphysics or the cultural baggage of Asian superstitions. However, if we examine the implications of the Four Noble Truths deeply enough, we will find they are quite inseparable from the ideas of karma and rebirth.

For example, the First Noble Truth of dukkha doesn't mean simply experiencing sorrow, anguish, greed, worry and anxiety. At the deepest level, it means the continuity of these five clinging aggregates. Without some notion of karmas and rebirth, the very idea of five clinging aggregates at the basis of one's being becomes incomprehensible. Then from the point of view of the Second Noble Truth, how is craving the origin of suffering? We could look at it psychologically and say that when there is craving, one makes oneself vulnerable to the clinging aggregates. But when one studies the sutras deeply, one finds that craving is the force that brings the renewal of the five aggregates from one life to the next. From this premise, the Third and Fourth Noble Truths follow logically.

The act of taking refuge, then, the act of practicing in accordance with the Four Noble Truths, implies accepting the principles of karma and rebirth.

**Jeffrey Hopkins:** I think Bhikkhu Bodhi makes many good points. Nevertheless, I think that someone can take refuge in the Three Jewels sincerely and not understand many of the points that I too consider very important. There are simply many levels, and I want to try hard not to be exclusivist. I'm not saying that Bhikkhu Bodhi is exclusivist, because he didn't indicate that. He has made a very good case about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the Three Jewels.



Nevertheless, I think one can call oneself a Buddhist because one is inspired by various and sundry aspects of the Buddhist teachings. At some point, I think that one would nevertheless come to see the cause and effect of actions and would eventually see that there were former and future lifetimes.



It is a huge mistake to take the doctrine of karma as being simply deterministic. —JEFFREY HOPKINS

We have to consider that people are brought up to think many things. A young person in China and Tibet today is propagandized to think that Tibet is just one of the provinces of China. To a great many people, it becomes unthinkable that it is anything else. Just so, people who go through the educational system in America are propagandized to think that the mind is the brain, a physical phenomenon, or at best an epi-phenomenon of the brain.

We are also faced with the very difficult psychological fact that few of us remember our former lifetimes. That is a great stumbling block to thinking that we are going to have to undergo the future effects of what we are doing now. We just plain don't remember past lives, so we don't have a sense of continuity from former lifetimes. But we also don't have a sense of continuity of many of our dreams from the night before. You could be lying with somebody in bed and the next morning the other person will say, "You really went through it last night," and you say, "What? I don't remember anything."

*If karma implies that people's situations are the result of their own actions in the past, do we still work to alleviate what we see as injustice?*

**Jeffrey Hopkins:** It is a huge mistake to take the doctrine of karma as being simply deterministic. The mere fact that suffering that I undergo or others undergo is due to former karma doesn't mean that one wouldn't work hard to alleviate it now and in the future. Karma has the dual meaning of past actions that shape the present, and present intentions and actions that will shape the future. Intention is the heart of karma, the very heart. What does intention mean? It means will.

I wouldn't call this justice. In a way, it is indeed just, in the sense that we are getting our just desserts. But justice also has the sense that it is right. Quite simply, I did something and I'm suffering from those earlier actions in this lifetime or former lifetimes. The question to ask is, what can I do to turn this all around for myself and for others? It is an absolute call to work very hard for social betterment and for the betterment of oneself.

One of the great pitfalls for Buddhists is to think there is nothing we can do about the condition we find ourselves in—it is simply karma. That is a pitfall. But pitfalls are somehow built into the system. The system opens up this pit for us to fall into. Maybe another pitfall is saying, "Well, karma says I can direct my future." The pitfall there is to think, "Well, let me change for a couple of days, and I'll be able to change my entire future."

**Bhikkhu Bodhi:** Earlier when I used the phrase “moral justice in the universe,” I was using “justice” in a somewhat metaphorical sense. I didn’t intend to imply that a person’s past karma can justify having them live in poverty under very unbearable circumstances in this present life. The principle of karma implies obligation to alleviate the sufferings of others and try to establish a just and peaceful social order.

Quite independently of the doctrines of karma and rebirth, Buddhism can lay a kind of blueprint for establishing social and political justice, derived from the concept of dharma. Dharma in this case refers not to the Buddha’s formulated teaching but rather to the universal law of righteousness. A number of the sutras speak about the ideal king, the Cakkavatti raja, the universal monarch who rules on the basis of dharma. In one of them from the *Anguttara Nikaya*, it says:

The Universal Monarch, the just and righteous King, relying on the dharma, the law of righteousness, honoring it, regarding it highly and respecting it, with the dharma as his standard, banner and sovereign, provides lawful protection, shelter and safety for his own dependents, for the warrior nobles, for his army, for the Brahmins and householders, for the citizens of town and countryside, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the beasts and birds. He is also obliged to keep the country free of crime and to give wealth to the poor.

These kinds of principles, which were ascribed in earlier times to the ideal Buddhist monarch, can now be transferred to present-day governments, and we can regard it as their obligation to

fulfill these basic principles that flow from the dharma—justice, establishing social harmony, alleviating poverty, providing protection of the people.

**Jan Chozen Bays:** Buddhism is the ultimate action for social justice. To teach people the way of liberation is the most fundamental way to help relieve suffering in the world. If that is not social justice, I don't know what is. According to the laws of karma, everyone is created equal in terms of their ability eventually to become free. If we are made of emptiness and cause and effect, we are all the same. Because we know a path out of suffering, our way of acting in the world as Buddhists and applying social justice is to teach others the path, so that they themselves can use these tools and become free and happy.

You can, of course, relieve suffering in a simple way by giving someone a meal, for example, if that is within your means. Not to do that would be unwholesome karma, for you and for them. I work in the field of child abuse, even though I know that some of the things I do are going to have unintended effects because they get mixed up in the sea of bureaucracy. Nevertheless, I try to do the best I can with the child or the family in front of me. The most nourishing food, however, is the food of the dharma. That's what everybody wants. 🌸



## Is It All My Karma?

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When something bad happens to you, it isn't necessarily the result of your own actions. **Judy Lief** offers a nuanced understanding of karma.

**Question:** A recent issue of *Lion's Roar* said, "If you want to know your past karma, look at the state of your life now. And if you want to know your future karma, look at the state of your mind now." I found it upsetting to read this. I've suffered terrible trauma in my life and I feel like you're blaming it on me. Does Buddhism really teach that I'm responsible for the actions of my abusers?

**Answer:** Karma is both very simple and very complex. Like all Buddhist teachings, it's taught not to discourage students but to inspire them to go forward. At its simplest, its logic is threefold: What's your situation? How did you get here? What are you going to do about it?

The idea of karma is easily distorted. People sometimes use a fatalistic interpretation of karma to justify oppressive hierarchies like the caste system, or they use it as an excuse to blame people for their own misfortunes, rather than trying to help them.

When the idea that one's current situation is the result of one's past actions is joined with a blame–punishment mentality, it's a deadly combination. In the cancer retreats I lead each year, I see the pain this kind of approach causes. Instead of “What can I do to help?” cancer patients report that they hear things like “You must have brought this on yourself. Maybe you repressed your anger and *that* gave you a tumor. Or maybe you drank too much coffee!”



By understanding karma, we can free ourselves from its entrapment.

Karma is actually an intricate web of interconnection among all beings—in fact, all phenomena. It's the impersonal play of cause and effect, which is ongoing, inexorable, and completely dispassionate. The reality of karma cannot be escaped. Each thing we do has consequences. We're responsible for our own actions, and our state of mind definitely matters.

Yet we don't operate in a vacuum, and we find ourselves in situations largely shaped by forces outside ourselves. The causes and conditions that have brought us to our current situation are complex, even unfathomable, and we can't do anything about that; it's our inherited karma. But that inheritance doesn't prevent us from making choices now that can have a positive impact on the future.



So karma isn't based on blame and punishment, and it's not fatalistic. By understanding karma, we can free ourselves from its entrapment. We can find a way forward that's grounded in the reality of our personal situation. ✨



## Karma: The Choice Is Yours

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There are two ways to understand dependent origination, teaches **Ajahn Buddhadasa**. But only one leads to liberation.

IN THE PALI SUTTAS there are two descriptions of what occurred under the Bodhi tree at the time of the Buddha's great awakening. In one version, appearing in various texts, the Buddha realized the three supreme knowledges. In the first true knowing, as it is generally understood, he recollected his former lives. In this account, as traditionally understood, he is able to recall his own previous births far into the distant past. These are invariably described as happening to the same person. In the second true knowing, he reviewed how beings carry on according to their actions (*cut-upapatañana*), how beings pass away and reappear according to the karma they have done. Through the third true knowing, he realized the destruction of the impulses (*asavakkhyañana*). The out-flowing fermentations (*asavas*) are the deepest level of defilement; when they are completely ended, no further defilement, egoism, or suffering is possible. This is the more commonly recounted description of the night of the Buddha's awakening.

Elsewhere, the Pali texts state that the Buddha awakened to dependent co-arising. There also are accounts of the Buddha contemplating dependent co-arising immediately after his awakening, while he was still sitting under the Bodhi tree. Together, these give a second description of the Buddha's great awakening. In the immediate aftermath, during the first four-hour watch one night, the Buddha examined dependent co-arising in the forward order, starting with ignorance, then concoctings, and so on, one after the other. During the second watch of the night, he reviewed dependent co-arising in the reverse order, starting from suffering, then birth, becoming, clinging, and so on all the way back to ignorance. Then for the third watch, he examined dependent co-arising in both forward and reverse orders until dawn.

Between these two versions, the second is more reasonable and acceptable in light of the overall themes and threads of the Pali suttas. In the other account, the first knowledge concerning the recollection of past lives is in the language of eternalism, just as in the pre-Buddhist Upanishads, which speak of a self or an individual being born again and again over many lives. The belief that the same person is repeatedly reborn is eternalism, which Buddhism aims to eliminate. This idea has more in common with popular beliefs and the philosophy of the Upanishads than with the core of the Buddha's message.

The second knowledge is about beings passing away and reappearing according to karma. This is generally understood to mean that the same being disappears from one existence (*bhava*) and

reappears in another according to karmic influences somehow carried over from one existence to the next. However, this is not directly or specifically a Buddhist teaching. At heart, Buddhism teaches the end of karma, living beyond karma, rather than carrying on according to karma. The noble path is for freedom from karma; living under the sway of karma is limiting, distressful, and burdensome. It is not good enough to merely surrender to karma, to die and be reborn according to the fruits of our actions. In Buddhism, liberating insight must go further than that.

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At heart, Buddhism teaches the end of karma, living beyond karma, rather than carrying on according to karma.

Neither of these first two knowledges can be considered truly Buddhist principles. Why, then, are they included in the Pali scriptures? My own view is that perhaps the compilers of the discourses included these passages for the benefit of ordinary people. For those people unable to understand dependent co-arising and the end of karma, these passages were included for the sake of morality. Consequently, this is an account of the Buddha's awakening for the moral benefit of ordinary people.

The second account puts dependent co-arising at the center of the Buddha's awakening. Not only did he express his awakening in these terms but he also described how he pondered and contemplated dependent co-arising both before the awakening

and immediately after. After experiencing the bliss of liberation for a week, he examined and investigated dependent co-arising throughout at least one night, the first watch of which focused on how dependent co-arising occurs. He repeatedly investigated this in the forward order from ignorance to concoctings on through suffering. He spent four full hours thoroughly penetrating this truth. In the next four hours, he investigated the causality of dukkha in careful detail all the way back to ignorance. In the final four hours, he examined dependent co-arising in both directions, forward and backward. This shows the central importance of dependent co-arising. The formula recorded is brief and succinct—the Buddha looked into it forward and backward for twelve hours without a break. He had the most profound spiritual experience of this through each of the watches: forward order, reverse order, and both forward and backward, each for four full hours. Please consider how profound, how difficult, how subtle, and how important this is. This ought to be of great interest to all serious meditators.

The words we have translated as “forward order” and “reverse order,” or “forward” and “backward”—*anuloma* and *patiloma*—can be understood rather broadly. Thus, for clarity’s sake, we can explain *anuloma*, “with the hairs,” as the examining of the arising sequence, that is, dependent co-arising. The reverse, *patiloma*, “against the hairs,” is the quenching of dependent co-arising, that is, dependent quenching. In the first watch, the Buddha investigated and reviewed how dependent co-arising arises. In the

second watch, he investigated and reviewed how it quenches. In the final watch, he investigated and reviewed both. This understanding is eminently reasonable and fully supported by the core themes of the discourses.

Please consider this important question: Have you ever practiced like this? Have you ever investigated dependent co-arising in the way that the Buddha did before, during, and after his awakening? We suggest that you examine and scrutinize dependent co-arising in the same great detail, with the same sincerity and intensity. Then, you might understand it like he did. You will find it worth your while to follow the Buddha's example.

## Two Understandings of Karma

This is a good place to consider karma. After all, it parallels the dependent co-arising teaching, though with less precision and depth. In the first account of the Buddha's awakening, the second knowledge suggests that beings carry on after death according to their karma. The difficulty with this understanding is that we cannot take this as the understanding of karma in line with core Buddhist principles. Rather, this understanding is simply the standard version of karma that existed in India before the Buddha's time. Before the Buddha's awakening, the Upanishads already taught that beings are reborn after death according to the workings of karma. Even Christianity, at least mainstream forms, teaches pretty much the same. If that is not the true Buddhist teaching, then what is?



In Buddhism, the central teaching on karma is about the practice that makes karma meaningless, “the karma that ends karma.” This karma transforms us beyond all the influences of karma, which is the unique, more profound aspect of the Buddha’s karma teaching. The idea that doing good deeds leads to good results and doing bad deeds leads to bad results was a general teaching that existed before the Buddha’s time. The Buddha did not deny or object to such karma doctrines, which were already common before he appeared and are found in some form in all religions. However, such teachings were not sufficient for his purpose: the end of suffering. Therefore, the Buddha went further. His real teaching is about not being trapped by karma, thus transcending karma and its consequences.



To be trapped forever in the prison of karma is not Buddhism. If everything constantly happens to us according to karma, there could never be any liberation.

Allow me to reiterate that most of the books on Buddhism with chapters on “Karma and Rebirth” are not correct, not if they really intend to represent Buddhism. If we are to explain “Karma in Buddhism,” it is not enough to teach that good actions bring good fruits, bad actions bring bad fruits, and we inevitably receive the fruits of our good and bad karma. Properly, a Buddhist

explanation must focus on “the karma that ends all karma.” The practice of the noble eightfold path is that karma that ends all karma. The Buddha’s teaching on karma is to be free of karma, not trapped by it, so that karma has no more power over our lives.

## The Buddha Perfected the Teaching of Karma

To be trapped forever in the prison of karma is not Buddhism. If everything constantly happens to us according to karma, there could never be any liberation. For a teaching and practice to be Buddhism, we must be liberated from the power and oppression of karma. A teaching that merely reiterates the old approach cannot be the true Buddhist teaching. It must be completed to the extent of liberation to be Buddhism. Thus, the Buddha needed to teach the karma that ends karma. He took the kind of karma that does not explain liberation and perfected it so that liberation from karma became the central point.

“Beyond karma” is a teaching above and beyond the world, or a *lokuttara* teaching. The ordinary karma teachings are part and parcel with the world (*lokiya*). *Lokiyadhamma* is for the mind still trapped in worldly conditions. *Lokuttaradhamma* is for the mind free of and beyond worldly conditions. The Buddha accepted a number of the old teachings, perfecting them within his *lokuttaradhamma* system as he did so. The Buddhist teaching on karma—the noble eightfold path that ends karma—is a perfect example of how the Buddha completed the old teachings and traditions.

The Buddha accepted some teachings that existed in India before his awakening, such as non-vengeance (*avera*), non-harming or nonviolence (*avihimsa*), the five sila, various samadhi practices, and the form and formless jhanas. All of these are older teachings and practices that he did not reject. Instead, he further developed, completed, and perfected them. Please be aware that Buddhism contains a certain amount of older teachings and practices that the Buddha included, deepened, and completed for the sake of quenching dukkha. Understanding this fact is important so that we will not confuse the old versions of such teachings with the new, perfected versions.

The Buddha completed the Upanishadic teaching on karma and the like. To do so, he taught the end of karma.

## Two Levels of Teaching

These examples clearly show that there are two levels of teaching, both of which are necessary. One is for the sake of morality, for those who still believe in and hold to self. The moral level of teaching is necessary for those who can only understand things in terms of me and mine, who require moral and therapeutic teachings that operate on a worldly level. It teaches people how to live in the world morally and peacefully, to be less selfish about the selves to which they cling, and thereby suffer less.

For those aiming higher, the Buddha's teaching focuses on letting go of self, that everything is not-self and nothing is worth clinging to as me or mine. This level does not ignore or reject the

moral teachings; it simply goes beyond them. This is the more comprehensive transcendent level of ultimate truth that truly liberates from all suffering. If both levels are understood, there is no conflict between them. They can coexist for the sake of both those who want to live in and of the world (*lokiya*) and those aiming to live above and free of the world (*lokuttara*), in it but not of it.



You can continue rebirthing yourself in a worldly way, but with healthy morality, not harming others and living relatively peacefully.

Each person decides their own preference and way. If you want to travel the paths of the world and have no wish to transcend the world, you can follow the worldly teachings and receive the moralistic explanation of dependent co-arising given by various commentators. You can continue rebirthing yourself in a worldly way, but with healthy morality, not harming others and living relatively peacefully. If you want to be free, to transcend the world and no longer be caught by all its trappings, you must study the transcendent teachings such as “the end of karma” that do not involve self. For this, we have the dependent co-arising of ultimate truth that enables us to see through all the concoctings of self. Dependent co-arising also has these two levels or two models. The choice of which to follow is yours. 🌸

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Adapted from *Under the Bodhi Tree*, from Wisdom Publications, 2017.



## What Is Karma and Why Should It Matter to You?

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Karma is essential to Buddhist psychology, says **Toni Bernhard**, because karma molds our character.

BECAUSE I'VE WRITTEN a book on chronic illness from a Buddhist perspective, many people have written to me, saying they believe their poor health is karmic retribution for some past bad action—that they're sick so they can work off this “bad karma.” With sincere respect for other people's views, I don't believe this is consistent with what the Buddha taught.

In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, one of the collections of the Buddha's teachings, a wanderer asks the Buddha to comment on the widely held view that whatever a person feels is due to his or her former actions or karma. The Buddha replies that what a person feels may be due to the change in the seasons or even just phlegm (yes, phlegm!). (SN 36.21)

Karma has become a controversial subject to Buddhists, with scholars disagreeing about its meaning. Throwing my hat in the ring, I don't believe that karma is related to any kind of external justice system where we are doomed to suffer because of some bad action we can't even remember. Plain and simple, karma is about our intentions—our intentions at this very moment.

The literal translation of karma from Sanskrit is “action,” but the Buddha often said that karma means “intention”:

Intention, I tell you, is karma. Intending, one does karma by way of body, speech, and intellect. (AN 6.63)

Action has two components: 1) your “bare behavior” and 2) your intention accompanying that behavior. It’s important to note that the word “action” here includes physical action, speech, and thoughts—the equivalent of “body, speech, and intellect” in the above quotation from the Buddha. In Buddhist psychology, the key to fulfilling your potential as a human being is not the bare behavioral component of your action but your intention in engaging in that action. And, as the Buddha said: intention is karma.

## The Six Intentions

What does it mean to say that karma lies not in the “bare behavior” that constitutes your action, but in the intention accompanying that action? Consider the physical action of wielding a knife. The bare behavior: wielding a knife. But the intention accompanying the act could be to perform life-saving surgery or it could be to stab someone in anger or to steal from him. The Buddha identified six intentions that underlie action:

1. good-will (or kindness)
2. compassion
3. generosity
4. ill-will (or anger)
5. cruelty
6. greed

The first three intentions are non-harmful; the last three are harmful. Notice how the six intentions mirror each other: good-will/ill-will; compassion/cruelty; generosity/greed. The “test” of whether an action is non-harmful or harmful is whether, in engaging in that action, you intend to alleviate suffering for yourselves and others or to intensify it.

The same analysis that applies to the physical act of wielding a knife applies to speech. If you yell at someone, “Don’t move!” that’s your “bare behavior.” But your intention could be kind (trying to stop the person from stepping in front of a moving car) or it could be based on ill-will (the words “don’t move” being spoken with a gun pressed against the person’s back).

The same analysis applies to thoughts. If you’re thinking about the homeless, that’s the bare content of your thoughts. But your intention accompanying that thought could be compassionate (hoping they find a place to stay warm in the winter) or it could be cruel (hoping they freeze in the cold).

## Planting Behavioral Seeds that Form Our Character

Karma is crucial to our development as wise, loving, and caring human beings because every time we act with a non-harmful intention, we predispose ourselves to act that way again. We plant a behavioral seed. Conversely, every time we act with a harmful intention, we predispose ourselves to act that way again, making it more likely that the next time our behavior will be harmful.

Here is the Buddha on this subject:

Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of his mind...If a person's thinking is frequently imbued with ill-will... his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with ill will... (MN19)

The key word is “inclination.” Each time our intention is one of ill-will, an inclination to respond with ill-will is strengthened. In other words, we're more likely to act out of ill-will in the future. Conversely, each time our intention is to be kind, an inclination to respond with kindness is strengthened. We're, in effect, learning how to be kind and so we're more likely to be kind in the future. The same analysis applies to the other four intentions.

And so, by responding with kindness, compassion, and generosity, we are turning ourselves into a person who is kind, compassionate, and generous. We are forming our character. This, in turn, has a positive effect on the world around us. (And of course, the converse is true, should we respond to the world with ill-will, cruelty, and greed.)

The key to learning to incline ourselves toward non-harmful intentions is to reflect on whether our proposed speech or action will intensify suffering for ourselves and others or will alleviate it. Mindfulness practice helps here because it makes us more aware of our reactive tendencies. Then, instead of acting impulsively, we're able to examine our intentions before we act.



As the Buddha said above, “Intending, one does karma...” Thus, with the intention not to harm, we “do” karma, meaning that the person we become is kind, compassionate, and generous.

Karma is a profound teaching, one worthy of our careful attention.

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Postscript: Speaking personally, I believe I’m sick because I’m in a body and bodies get sick and injured and old. That’s the essence of the Buddha’s first noble truth. 🌸



## The Right View of Rebirth

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**Ajahn Punnadhammo** discusses the necessity of holding the right view of rebirth for Buddhist practice.

THE FIRST FACTOR of the eightfold noble path is right view. While it is true that the eight factors should be developed together, it is also true that there is always a reason for the order of the factors in the lists given by the Buddha. The path factor of right view may be thought of as the foundation stone for the whole edifice of practice.

The Buddha was quite explicit in defining the content of what he called right view. One endowed with right view would understand the world as follows:

He has right view, undistorted vision, thus: “There is that which is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions; there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father; there are beings who are reborn spontaneously; there are good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have themselves realized by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world” (*Majjhima Nikaya* 41.14).

This formula implies that the real existential basis of our being is governed by the laws of karma (“result of good and bad actions”) and rebirth (“there is this world and the other world”), including the possibility of rebirth into the deva realms (“spontaneously born beings”). This is difficult for some Western Buddhists to accept, and there is an active project to formulate a Buddhism that does not include these teachings.

The origins of this project are understandable. Most Western converts to Buddhism have consciously rejected some faith-based tradition. What is initially appealing about Buddhism is its emphasis on personal experiential unfoldment. This is all well and good, but it can become very one-sided. The spiritual faculty of discriminating wisdom must be complemented with that of faith or, in the words of the Buddha, it becomes “cunning, which is as hard to cure as a disease caused by medicine.” If right view, as formulated by the Buddha, is rejected, the practice must instead be resting on the shaky foundation of one wrong view or another, whether this is clearly articulated or not.

In the *Brahmajala Sutta* the Buddha enumerates a table of sixty-two wrong views. All these complicated errors can be simplified into three broad categories: eternalism and annihilationism plus one odd man out. Eternalism is the view that the self is eternal and unchanging. This view usually goes hand in hand with the doctrine of a creator god. The annihilationist view holds that the self is extinguished utterly at death. The contemporary form of this view is materialism or physicalism.

But the Buddha taught that we are neither immortal souls nor human machines. There is no self either to endure or to be destroyed. Consciousness is itself void and conditionally arisen. It is neither created nor destroyed; rather, it arises dependent upon certain causal factors, which include an object, a physical base, karma, and previous moments of consciousness. For consciousness to arise in the womb must imply a previous existence to activate this causal link. Otherwise we would have an arbitrary or random arising, which would violate the dependent origination.

The remaining wrong view is called, in a literal translation, the “eel-wiggler” view. This is one who cannot or will not make up his mind: “It may be this, or it may be the other, or perhaps it’s both or maybe it’s neither.” In modern parlance, it’s called agnosticism. It is significant that the Buddha was quite dismissive of this view, regarding it as the product either of cowardice or stupidity.

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It is sometimes asked if holding the view of karma and rebirth is necessary for practice. I would argue that for significant progress to be made, it is.

It is sometimes asked if holding the view of karma and rebirth is necessary for practice. I would argue that for significant progress to be made, it is. Or rather, more accurately, the one-life-only view is a serious detriment. For liberation to occur, there must be a radical relinquishment in the depths of the psyche. In traditional Buddhist practice, the idea of samsara as an endlessly repeated

wheel of futility makes this possible. On the other hand, if this one existence is all we have, it gives a poignancy and an importance to the mundane reality, making it impossible to renounce at the level required. It is important to bear in mind that we are talking about very subtle movements of the mind at a very profound depth, and at that place the smallest obstacle may be an enormous hindrance.

Although belief in karma and rebirth is often thought of as the distinguishing factor between traditional and redefined Buddhism, it is actually a secondary issue. The real nub is the attitude toward the third noble truth. The goal of Buddhism has always been realization of the unconditioned (*nibbana* or *nirvana*.) There is no place for an unconditioned element in a materialist (or indeed in an eternalist) worldview. If this is missing, Buddhist teaching is completely lacking in its most profound aspect. This is evident if one examines the writings of the “agnostic Buddhists.” The goal is shifted from transcendence of samsaric existence to reconciliation with it—a goal that has been compared to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

As a last note, it could be said that for the *puthujjana* (one who has not yet glimpsed for herself the unconditioned), this is the one place in Buddhist teaching where the faculty of faith (*saddha*) is absolutely indispensable. Because all our language and thought belongs to the conditioned realm, the unconditioned can never be imagined or arrived at by reason. Even for one who has realized it, it cannot be explained. For one who has not, it must be taken on faith. ❀



## Forum: Is Karma Fate or Freedom?

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**Rita Gross, Andrew Olendzki, and Larry Ward** explain what karma is, how it works, and why it's not all bad news.  
**Introduction by David Loy**

MANY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS seem quite modern in their emphasis on such things as impermanence and interdependence (evolution, ecology), insubstantiality (physics), and the deceptions of language (philosophy). Yet the same cannot be said for karma, which points to an inexorable moral law built into the cosmos. This doesn't mean that the doctrine of karma should be dismissed or ignored, but it does encourage us to interrogate those teachings and to ask, what does karma mean for us today?

There are at least two problems with the ways that karma has often been understood. Although the earliest teachings are quite clear that laypeople can become enlightened, the main spiritual role of lay Buddhists, particularly in non-Western societies, has been to support the monastic sangha. In this way non-monastics gain “merit,” and by accumulating merit they can hope to attain a more favorable rebirth. This approach commodifies karma into a form of “spiritual materialism.”

Karma has also been used to rationalize sexism, racism, caste, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and almost everything else. If there is an inevitable cause-and-effect relationship between one's actions and one's fate, social justice is already built into the moral fabric of the universe. So why bother to struggle against injustice?

For these reasons, karma is one of the most important issues for modern Buddhism. Is it a fatalistic doctrine or an empowering one? That is the focus of the conversation that follows.

Karma and rebirth were already widely accepted in pre-Buddhist India, but Brahmanical teachings understood karma mechanistically: performing a Vedic sacrifice correctly would sooner or later lead to the desired consequences. The Buddha transformed this ritualistic approach into a moral principle by focusing on *cetana*, meaning “volitions” or “motivations.” As the *Dhammapada* emphasizes, “If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows just as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox.... If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.”

As Rita Gross points out, the term “karma” literally refers to one’s actions. To focus on the eventual consequences of our actions puts the cart (effect) before the horse (cause) and misses the revolutionary significance of the Buddha’s approach. Karma can be understood as the key to spiritual development, revealing how one’s life situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of one’s actions here and now. Yet karma is not something the self has; rather, it is what the sense of self is, because one’s sense of self is transformed by one’s conscious choices. By choosing to change what motivates me, I change the kind of person I am.

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Karma is not a fatalistic doctrine. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a more empowering teaching. —DAVID LOY

From this perspective, we experience karmic consequences not just for what we have done but also for what we have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. In other words, we are “punished” not for our “sins” but by them. And, as Spinoza put it, happiness is not the reward for virtue; happiness is virtue itself. To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. And when we respond differently to the challenges and opportunities the world presents to us, the world responds differently to us.



This understanding of karma does not necessarily involve rebirth after we physically die, and there is an agnostic “I don’t know” thread in the conversation that follows. The emphasis is on “moment-to-moment” rebirth, as our motivations and actions change right now. Yet that does not mean excluding other, perhaps more mysterious possibilities regarding the consequences of our actions. In either case, karma is not a fatalistic doctrine. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a more empowering teaching. We are not enjoined to accept passively the problematic circumstances of our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to improve our situations by addressing them with generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

**Buddhadharma:** Let’s start with a basic definition of karma. What would you say if someone were to come up to you and ask, what is karma? What would your elevator speech be?

**Rita Gross:** I taught university students this material for about thirty years, and I explained that the word “karma” comes from a Sanskrit verb root that means an action, or to do something. The idea is that our present situation is due to things that have happened in the past, and that what we do with the present situation has a great effect on what the future will be. I often gave the example that if you spend a whole semester not doing your homework and not doing the reading, then you’ll flunk the course—and

that's called karma. On the other hand, if you pay attention and mind your p's and q's, you'll get a better grade than if you didn't—and that's also called karma.

I've always tried to keep it very simple and straightforward. There's nothing about past and future lives in my elevator speech, and nothing mystical or esoteric. I think karma is better explained as something that we all experience all the time. It isn't a particularly Eastern idea; it's just that we're not used to the word karma.

**Larry Ward:** I'd define karma in the classic sense, as activity of our body, speech, and thoughts that leaves traces of habits in our mind and brains.

**Andrew Olendzki:** I would start by emphasizing what it does not mean. Everyone assumes that karma means fate because that's more or less how it's been translated into English. And so, like Rita, I emphasize that it really means cause and effect—that what you do has a consequence. Fate seems to suggest that somebody is up there in the cosmos keeping track of everything. Karma, as used in the earliest Buddhist teachings, largely has to do with your own psychological process. What's pointed to is not why earthquakes happen or why a meteor strikes, but rather that if you act with hatred, you're going to be hated or disliked.

**Rita Gross:** I agree it's very important that people understand karma isn't fate, which is the popular knee-jerk definition.

**Larry Ward:** The other tendency is to interpret karma as retribution, with emphasis on the effect but little on the cause.

**Rita Gross:** Yes, that comes up a lot, too—that it's punishment. But that's not it at all, of course.

**Buddhadharma:** Let's talk about the nature of these causes and why they lead to specific consequences. For example, would you say that in some sense there's a moral quality to the positive or negative causes that lead to future conditions?

**Rita Gross:** After many years thinking about this, I really believe it's better to talk about effect than cause. The present is an effect, and we can't always ascertain exactly why the present is as it is. But how we deal with the present becomes the cause of future effect. So that to me is one of the most important clarifications about what karma is and isn't. You know, 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.

**Andrew Olendzki:** I'd say a moral component is perhaps a subset of karma. There are lots of ways to understand cause and effect in nature, but the 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.

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Every action nourishes seeds that grown from a depth consciousness up into our mental states and into our traits and behaviors. —LARRY WARD

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: you can throw a rock up in the air and stand underneath it if you want, but there will be a consequence. In the same way, you can punch somebody if you want, but the consequence will be that it brings harm to you and others.

**Larry Ward:** It's helpful to understand our actions and the seeds that may be the source of them—what is referred to in the Yogachara tradition as “perfuming”—and how we can condition ourselves psychologically. Our karma can also show up as memories that can impact our intellect and our character. It influences both what we prejudge and how we prejudge, whether in a wholesome or an unwholesome manner. I suppose we could also respond in a neutral manner.

**Buddhadharma:** So how does karma really work? We said there are wholesome or unwholesome acts that 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?

**Andrew Olendzki:** 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, a character trait. A behavior has been learned, has been reinforced, and so downstream 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.

**Buddhadharma:** Does the Mahayana tradition have a more specific analysis of how the seeds are created and manifested in the future?

**Larry Ward:** Yes, the Yogacara tradition talks about our “store-house consciousness,” or depth consciousness, where these seeds or habit energies reside based on our previous actions. Every action nourishes seeds that grow from a depth consciousness up into our mental states and into our traits and behaviors. I find the metaphors from Yogacara very helpful. Thich Nhat Hanh draws upon these images in his teachings as well. My tendency is to stay focused on this experientially and in the present tense, so I want to affirm what's been said already about the immediate psychological impact as well as the subsequent psychological impact of our actions, be they wholesome or unwholesome.

**Rita Gross:** 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 this analogy, too—makes a lot of difference. Here's where the role of practice is so important. Without the ability to see what's going on and catch ourselves, which is an

experience we develop through meditation practice, we tend to be very reactive to our environment. When that happens, we only reinforce the habits we're already familiar with and aren't able to turn our habits in a more positive direction.

**Andrew Olendzki:** I agree. 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 happening; 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.

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

**Buddhadharma:** So if karma isn't fate, it raises the question of free will. Is the ability to have awareness of one's habits in effect where the possibility of choice or freedom comes in? Does it allow us to not be controlled completely by our karma?

**Rita Gross:** Yes. In fact, Buddhist practice makes no sense at all if there isn't that little gap where we can go one way or the other. 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?

**Larry Ward:** I agree, and I really appreciate the comment about karma and freedom. I see meditation practice as an opportunity, for me anyway, to discover my freedom over and over again.

**Andrew Olendzki:** We don't have any say, in this moment, over what hand we're dealt; that's conditioned by past action. Although 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:** Going back to the question of mechanism, or how karma works, we've talked about habit and seeds in a way that's relatively easy to understand within the context of a single lifetime. If I cultivate these habits in my mind now, I'm going to influence who I am, how I act, and how much I suffer in the future. But Buddhism posits more than that; it posits that those seeds carry forward from lifetime to lifetime. What can you say about how that mechanism works?

**Larry Ward:** The only thing I'm really clear about (kind of) is this lifetime. But in terms of the habit energies, one way to describe them is as the momentum of our conscious and unconscious tendencies, be they wholesome or unwholesome. This momentum may continue into our next life and into future lives. Whatever form or fashion they may take, these tendencies—that momentum toward behavior, character, memory, and perception—continue.



**Rita Gross:** I would also say 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 personal rebirth. Someone will reap the effects of the things 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.

**Larry Ward:** My approach to the rebirth question is to come back to the present, to the states and traits that Andy presented earlier. The question for me, from a meditative practice point of view, is if a state of hatred or irritation or anger comes up, is that state going to be reborn—not next year, but in the next moment? One way to understand rebirth is as an 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.



The end of karma altogether really only happens to an awakened person. —ANDREW OLENDZKI

**Andrew Olendzki:** Well said, Larry. I think these days a lot of us are rethinking this very question, given the challenges of explaining rebirth in a literal sense. Many of us are thinking of it more moment to moment—every single mind-moment is a rebirth, a

new beginning, and the question 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 you 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.

**Buddhadharma:** If we were to have what in the Vajrayana tradition we would call a moment of ordinary nonconceptual mind—a gap, as it were—could that simple transition from a sense of a pure openness to a reappearance of our normal discursiveness itself be considered an example of how karma arises again and again?

**Rita Gross:** It could, although 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. Anyone who has practiced seriously for some time has had the experience of habit energy not being as thick and strong as it once was. Otherwise, we wouldn't keep practicing. Of course, the point in the long run is not just building up a lot of positive habits; positive karma still leads to rebirth.

**Buddhadharma:** Yes, that is actually where I was going to take us next in this discussion, because we have discussed karma primarily in the context of being positive and negative, but at the same time there is another, deeper level of karma—you could say the karma of fundamental ignorance, which causes us to posit dualistic existence altogether. And in that context, the issue is not so much whether we create more positive than negative karma but whether we can get to the point where we're not creating karma at all. What about that more basic karma of ignorance, which causes us to perceive reality as we do?

**Larry Ward:** I think all practitioners have experienced moments where we were in a state of neither negative nor positive karma, but rather in a state of suchness (to use the Yogacara term) of direct experience of what is present. The hope for the arhat is that out of this awakened space within comes compassionate and wise action, which is a quality of wisdom and action that transcends the positive and negative dualisms of the relative world.

**Andrew Olendzki:** It's addressing a very subtle transformation of mind. The end of karma altogether really only happens to an awakened person. There's some way in which we're always grasping after something with our mind, even if it's grasping after something healthy when we're already healthy. Then there's a fundamental nongrasping, when the mind is no longer seizing on anything, not imputing causes and effects and setting those into

motion. The idea that the Buddha produced no karma upon his awakening has always struck me as paradoxical, because there's probably no single person in global history who's had more of an effect on everything else that came after. So we're obviously talking about this in a way that we're not familiar with; it's very subtle.

**Buddhadharma:** Can it be said that, according to Buddhism, enlightenment is the state of producing no karma?

**Rita Gross:** That's one classic definition of it.

**Buddhadharma:** So I suppose the other question, which we've hinted at, is why is it that not producing any karma is the greatest positive karma of all, from a relative point of view?

**Rita Gross:** In the most simple classical terms, it's because karma is what fuels the rebirth process, and you want to halt samsaric rebirth. Positive karma only produces a better samsaric rebirth, and we want to halt altogether whatever state perpetuates samsara.

**Larry Ward:** One way of describing enlightenment—meaning no karma—is as a particular presence of body-mind that is not perpetuating the samsaric experience. To encounter that mind, in oneself or in someone else, or even through the stream of history,

is potentially transformational. I like to say enlightenment leaves nothing in its wake, in the sense of positive or negative karma; it's deeper than that. Here we're getting into the difference between ultimate and relative truths.

**Andrew Olendzki:** Yes. Remember that samsara means “flowing on.” It comes from the root meaning “to flow like a river,” whether you're flowing on from one lifetime to another or flowing on from one mind-moment to another. The awakened mind of the Buddha just stops flowing; it's put to rest and becomes at peace.

**Buddhadharma:** What about the relationship between karma and shunyata, or emptiness? In the lingo of Beat Zen, what does karma matter if it's all empty? What is the view of karma in the context of emptiness, and how do we look at it and give it weight—or not?

**Larry Ward:** First of all, it depends on how one defines emptiness. Emptiness has been defined by some as purity of mind, meaning the mind is empty of defilements. Others have talked about emptiness as the realization of no self, or not self. The definition that's most intriguing to me in this context, from the Avatamsaka Sutra, has to do with the interpenetration of all reality. If emptiness is one way of describing how reality interpenetrates with all other things, then for me, my action— wholesome, unwholesome,

or neutral—will have effects way beyond my capacity to perceive them. The effects beyond my lifetime, as well as in my lifetime, are inescapable.

**Rita Gross:** Emptiness doesn't mean things aren't there. So if things are “empty,” from a very simple point of view, that doesn't mean karma doesn't happen, but from another point of view, the only way to undo or alter karma is to truly understand emptiness and to not reify or substantialize everything we encounter all the time, but to let things be in a much less fixated way.

**Andrew Olendzki:** In the early teachings, emptiness is usually discussed in the sense of non-self. And a lot of that language is there simply to emphasize that it's not you doing your karma, it's not you inheriting your karma; the whole concept of “you” and “yours” is really called into question. You know, things happen, things occur, and the less you see yourself as the one doing them, the closer you are to seeing things as they are.

**Rita Gross:** And the less karma affects one.

**Andrew Olendzki:** Yes. There is no agent producing the karma. And there is no victim or recipient of the karma. The whole karmic stream is impersonal; the more you can recognize that, the more

natural it is to abandon or not construct those things that cause harm, and instead cultivate altruism and compassion, kindness, honesty, generosity, and so on.

**Rita Gross:** And the less one will resent the present, and whoever made the present the way it is, and just work with it.

**Buddhadharma:** Touching on what Rita was saying earlier, to what extent is karma our misperception of a solid and truly existent reality? And what is the antidote to that? Is it wisdom?

**Rita Gross:** Practice and study.

**Larry Ward:** From which we hope wisdom and compassion come.

**Andrew Olendzki:** Looking at karma from the psychological standpoint, we have to act every moment. You know sankhara, which is related to the word karma, is one of the five aggregates, and it simply means every moment that we're cognizing an object or perceiving it, we have to respond to it. So we must act every single moment either by body, speech, or mind. Karma is intrinsic to the human condition, and we need to understand the implications of cause and effect and the quality of mind that goes into how we act. That's what's going to clean things up as we purify the mind and, through our interactions, help improve conditions for everyone.

**Larry Ward:** Right, and another aspect of the antidote to karma creation and manifestation is to meditate on—and discover and name and wrestle with—our own psychological conditioning at the deep levels of our mind that results in the subject-object dualism in which karma itself can subtly become another object of clinging. So I think we must combine study and practice with the aspiration for wisdom and compassion.

**Buddhadharma:** All three of you have described karma in down-to-earth understandable terms. For many people the concept of karma seems philosophical and abstract, and so the question is, what should we actually do with these teachings or these principles in our lives? There is a saying, Tibetan I believe, that we should protect our karma more carefully than we protect our eyes, that it's the most precious thing we have. So 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?

**Andrew Olendzki:** 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, as happy as possible, as well off 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.

**Larry Ward:** Some of my recent research is an attempt to parallel Buddhist practice with recent neurological findings on how our neurons fire when we think and take action. I find that a biological grounding in how our brains and minds work can be very helpful for practitioners. The phrase “when neurons fire together they wire together” is one way to understand the neurological basis of habit, which ties into what we’ve already said about some aspects of the nature of karma. We now know that our actions of body, speech, and mind leave traces neurologically, not just in our mind but also in our brain.

**Rita Gross:** I find it’s important to think about karma beyond the level of self-interest. In the larger scheme of things, there’s a level of choicelessness about doing what needs to be done for the greater good that’s more important than anything else. That level of choicelessness is the basis from which I approach whatever arises in the present. I really don’t think about calculating karma in a self-interested way.



The only way to undo or alter karma is to truly understand emptiness and to not reify or substantialize everything we encounter. —RITA GROSS

**Andrew Olendzki:** 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. Whatever the subtle philosophical and theological issues in Buddhism may be, I think most of your readers are thinking very practically about karma—you know, what actions cause more trouble and what actions can help create a better future, a better reality.

**Larry Ward:** One important phrase for me in the Buddhist tradition is "I-making," or "identity-making." What does it mean to look at identity-making in terms of the suffering it might create in oneself or others? It's important to look at I-making in terms of group identity, national identities, corporate identities, and what we're willing to deny, hide from, or aggressively defend in order to protect these identities we've concocted. We need to see how we

invent ourselves, and then how we reify those inventions in ways that can cause suffering, leading to war or poverty or ignorance on the societal level.

**Rita Gross:** Yes. People think that identity is a given, but there are ways that we can mold our identity if we want to. It's fairly easy to see the way that collective identities cause harm.

The default position for us psychologically as human beings is subject-object duality. Most people take it for granted. Most people have no 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 question, why do you think that about yourself or about others?

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

**Rita Gross:** Yes. And as a result, there will always be suffering. 🌿



## Karma Is Not Fate

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You can't deny your karmic inheritance, said the late **Traleg Rinpoche**, but that doesn't mean you can't change.

CRITIQUES OF KARMA often center on the notion of individual responsibility and suggest it produces an unsympathetic attitude toward others and leads to a dubious tendency to blame. The poor are blamed for being poor, and so on. Buddhism is said, falsely, to assign fault to individuals for all their circumstances and to deny agency. If we are poor, for instance, it might be thought, more or less automatically, that we will stay that way until our karmic debt runs out, and then, after we die, we may then be reborn in fortunate circumstances, perhaps becoming a wealthy entrepreneur. This type of thinking cannot be reconciled with Buddhism's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things, though, which fully acknowledges the fertile complexity of influences on persons, including their environment.

Certainly Buddhism contains the idea of an accumulation of karmic imprints and dispositions, a gathering of propensities throughout our lives—habit patterns are formed, and so forth. Even so, this does not mean that we simply wait for particular

karmic imprints or debts or inheritance to evaporate or disappear before anything can be done. Buddhist karmic theory is not akin to fatalism or predetermination. We do have real choice in our affairs. If we did not, then karmic theory would truly produce judgmental and moralistic attitudes, and the Buddha's teachings would be far less inspirational and much less effective.



Buddhist karmic theory is not akin to fatalism or predetermination. We do have real choice in our affairs.

Karmic theory does not have fixed attributes of this kind, though, and it is not linked to a static moral order. Of course, an element of determinism is involved and has to be accepted. We are who we are because of our karmic inheritance. We would not be as we are without it, but this does not mean we have to remain this way.

More to the point is that karmic theory is supposed to encourage us to think, “I can become the person that I want to be and not dwell on what I already am.” That would be a proper appreciation of the Buddhist theory of karma. ❁

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From *Karma: What It Is, What It Isn't, Why It Matters*, Shambhala 2015



## Inquiring Into Karma

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The notion of karma raises deep and challenging questions, says **Andy Karr**. And they're worth exploring.

FEW BUDDHIST IDEAS resonate more, yet produce more dissonance for Western dharma practitioners, than karma. It's easy to feel that the laws of karma are at work when you see the chickens coming home to roost for someone with an outsized ego. They had it coming. But we are still waiting to see the Harvard Business School case study of how Bill Gates' extraordinary generosity in previous lives caused his unbelievable wealth in this life.

Karma is a Sanskrit word that means "action." The teachings on karma are about action and its results, cause and effect. On the cause side of the equation, intention or motivation is crucial. The seminal text *The Treasury of Abhidharma* by Vasubandhu (fifth century) says that karma is intention and the acts that flow out of intention. If you worry about the karmic consequences of all the dead bugs splattered on your windshield, don't. When there is no intention to cause harm, no negative karmic seeds are planted.

On the effect side of the equation, the cardinal rule is that karma never fades away. The results of an action may not mature for many lifetimes, but when appropriate conditions are encountered, the results inevitably arise. And they always arise for the one who performed the action.

This is where things get tricky. “Instant karma” makes intuitive sense. We can understand how being mean and angry makes us unpleasant, distorts our features, and causes other people to avoid us. And we can see how disturbed states of mind cause accidents to happen. On the other hand, when we are told that a dear friend’s cancer is the ripened result of negative actions performed in previous lives, we don’t know what to make of it. The problem is, we can’t see the past or future lives and we can’t prove they exist with scientific instruments or psychological theories. Our rationalist and materialistic instincts don’t want to go there. We just don’t know.

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The cardinal rule is that karma never fades away.

—ANDY KARR

To really “know” what karma means, it helps to consider what “knowing” means. The Buddhist theory of knowledge says that we can know things in three ways: through direct perception, by inference, or by relying on trusted authority. Perception works for manifest phenomena, the things we feel and can bump into. In that case, we know something because “we see it with our own eyes.” Inference works for hidden phenomena. We know “where there is smoke, there is fire.” Trusted authority works for extremely hidden phenomena. The workings of karma are extremely hidden. To know them, we rely on trusted authority. Trusted authority is not blind faith, because trust is based on the

authority's track record. We may well regard the Buddha as trustworthy because we have tested his teachings and found them to be reliable.

Nevertheless, even if we start out by taking something on authority, it helps to inquire, and karma is worth inquiring about. It raises deep questions: If there is no self, who receives the karmic fruit? If everything is produced by karma, is everything predetermined? What about free will? These questions go to the core of buddhadharma: the relationship between bondage and liberation.

Karmic cause and effect is driven by compulsion. It is made up of chain reactions, one thing leading to another in the twelve links of dependent origination that take us from ignorance to old age and death and back around again, and again, and again. Relentless pressure endlessly turns the wheel of samsara. But we can find gaps in the momentum, and in those gaps we can make choices.

Even more basically, karma depends on ignorance, specifically the ignorance that clings to “I” and “mine,” or ego and its projections. When this ignorance is overcome, karmic cause and effect is like cause and effect in a dream when you realize you're dreaming. It appears, but it is powerless. From the Buddhist point of view, free will is a contradiction. “Will” means the delusion of ego. “Free” means freedom from the compulsion that arises from this ignorance. ❁





## The Power of Positive Karma

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Rebirth and karma are the Buddhist beliefs that Westerners find hardest to accept. Yet are they really so foreign to us? If we look at our own experience, we see that the seeds we plant in our consciousness in one moment will determine what we experience in the next. This is also what we experience as we go from lifetime to lifetime. Therefore, says **Tulku Thondup**, we should be concerned above all else with creating positive karma to lay the ground for our future enlightenment.

Beings evolve through karma, take birth because of karma, enjoy and (function) through karma. —*Karmavibhanga Sutra*

Buddhism teaches that in our true nature, we are enlightened—totally open, peaceful, joyful, compassionate, and omniscient. The Buddha proclaimed:

Profound, peaceful, and free from concepts,  
Luminous and uncompounded—  
A nectar-like nature—that I have realized!

This aspect of our mind is “the true nature of the mind.” When we become aware of and perfect it, we become blossoming buddhas.

We’re all attracted to these highest views. But some students of Buddhism just want to meditate on the nature of the mind, emptiness-wisdom, free from concepts, without opening their hearts to the merit-making practices that are indispensable to liberation. They regard important practices like praying and generating devotion as “theistic” and “dualistic.”

There are many ways to make merit, or positive karma. The most comprehensive are the six perfections (paramitas) that Mahayana Buddhism prescribes as the path to enlightenment. They are: giving (generosity), discipline (morality), patience (fearlessness), diligence (eagerness), tranquillity (contemplation), and wisdom.

The first five perfections, collectively referred to as “skillful means,” are especially for accumulating merit. The sixth, wisdom, involves realizing the true nature of mind, which is wisdom-emptiness.

The undervaluation of skillful-means practices to develop merit is unfortunate. Their purpose is to refine and transform our mind. Devotion opens our hearts. Compassion dissolves ego. Prayer unites us with our enlightened qualities. Pure perception transforms our awareness. Serving others, especially those who rely on us, is the purpose of dharma. There is no such thing as a buddha who doesn’t help others. So the more we open our hearts to skillful means, the more quickly and surely we reach

buddhahood. We should never abandon these practices, for the path of skillful means is perfected in the goal of enlightenment, just as bricks become the finished house.

## The Need for Dualistic Practice

Why do we need dualistic practices, such as generating merit, to reach a state that transcends duality? Because we have to start from where we are. Our mind's true nature is covered by karmic turbulence caused by our grasping at self and our negative mental habits. "Grasping at a self" refers to the way we grasp at mental objects as truly existing, perceiving them dualistically as subject and object. The aspect of our mind that perceives this way is conceptual mind. Conceptual mind and the true nature of mind are like the surface and depths of the ocean: The surface is choppy with wind-tossed waves; beneath it is still and peaceful.

Most of us can't glimpse into the depths, our true nature, because our conceptual mind is constantly churning out turbulence. Grasping at self tricks us, like a nightmare, into believing that we are separate from the world and each other. This triggers negative emotions, from craving and anxiety to jealousy and aggression, which spill out into unhealthy words and actions.

Every dualistic perception, every negative thought, feeling, word, and deed, leaves a negative karmic imprint in our conceptual mind that walls us off from our true nature. On the other

hand, positive mentalities leave positive karmic imprints that open our mind, loosen grasping at self, and thin out the barriers to our true nature.

As long as we have dualistic concepts and emotions, the world is solid to us. Our suffering is all too real. Circumstances matter. If our surroundings are chaotic, it will be hard to find tranquillity. If we experience peace and joy, however, we will be inspired to generate even more peace and joy. Then whatever we say and do will be the words and deeds of joy and peace. We progressively loosen our grasping at self, and eventually we glimpse the luminous nature of our mind. If we perfect this realization, we uproot grasping at self and become fully awakened.

## Merit and Emptiness

I am not saying that we should not meditate on the nature of the mind. My point is that we should do so in conjunction with skillful means. Buddhist masters have always said that buddhahood is the result of two accumulations: of skillful means *and* of wisdom. Merit and wisdom are each as indispensable to attaining enlightenment as two wings are to a bird's ability to fly. Chandrakirti (7th century) writes:

With two widely opened white wings  
Of relative truth [skillful means] and absolute truth [wisdom]  
The kings of swans [bodhisattvas] and their flock of swans [disciples]  
Soar through the ocean of supreme Buddha qualities.

Practicing skillful means such as generosity and morality is a powerful way to create positive karma. The more wholeheartedly we devote ourselves to it, the deeper its positive imprints go in our mind and the more walls we break through. Trying to meditate on emptiness without accumulating merit may not make an impact on the walls barricading our true nature. So its effect is uncertain at best. Saraha (1st century) writes:

Without compassion [merit], the view of emptiness  
*Will not lead you through the sublime path.*

And Gampopa (1079-1153) says:

Great wisdom will not take birth in you  
 If you have earned little merit.

Attempting to meditate on emptiness without merit can invite self-deception. We might think that we are in a state of awareness without grasping, when we are actually grasping at a subtle level at meditative experiences like clarity, joy, and no-concepts. It is grasping, or attachment, that keeps us in samsara. Tilopa told Naropa (11th century):

Son, appearances are not the issue.  
 Rather, attachment to them is.  
 So Naropa, cut [your] attachment.

Or, meditating only on emptiness, we could drift into the absence of thoughts. Contemplating in this state creates no merit, but leads to rebirth in samsara's formless realms. Jigme Lingpa says,

“If you are attached to ‘no-thoughts,’ you will fall into the formless realms.” Beings there remain semi-unconscious without making progress for possibly millions of years.

## Karma

So we need to create circumstances conducive to our development. Since we live in a world that is created by and operates through karma, we have to abide by its laws and travel the path of positive karma. To emphasize the importance of making merit, we should note that even the buddhas observe karma. Guru Padmasambhava said, “My realization is higher than the sky. But my observance of karma is finer than grains of flour.”

Some people think karma is fate. “It must be my karma,” they sigh, resigning themselves to some calamity. But karma doesn’t have to be bad. It can be good. And we make our own karma. Every thought, feeling, and deed sows a habitual karmic seed in our mind that ripens into a corresponding positive, negative, or neutral experience. Anger and jealousy manifest as painful, unhappy experiences. Selfless, joyful thoughts and feelings flower into wondrous, fulfilling experiences.

So we don’t have to resign ourselves to “our karma.” We control our karma. Every moment is a new juncture, a chance to improve our way of thinking and thus our circumstances. This principle of interdependent causation is the bedrock of the Buddha’s first teachings, the four noble truths.

## Karma, Merit, and Samsara

No matter how seemingly pleasant, samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth, is a delusory nightmare of confusion and suffering. Nothing lasts. In some lives we may be reborn in higher realms; in other lives we go to lower realms, depending on which of our karmas are ripening and how we lived our preceding life.

Our cycling in samsara stems from grasping at self. Nagarjuna writes:

If we grasp at the (five) aggregates, we are grasping at self.  
If we grasp at self, from that (arises) karma, and from (karma arises) birth.

Through these three, without a beginning, middle, or end,  
Revolves the fire-brand circle of samsara  
By depending on each other as the cause.

So Shantideva asks:

All the violence, fear, and suffering that exist in the world  
Come from grasping at self.  
What use is this great evil monster to us?

To uproot grasping at self, we need to realize wisdom. To realize wisdom, we need merit. Merit releases us from negative emotions, the cause of samsaric suffering, and loosens our grasping at self. As that happens, we glimpse the true nature of our mind. Once we do, we can meditate on the true nature to perfect the realization of wisdom. Until then, we need to make merit.

If we don't tackle our negative emotional patterns, we are bound to repeat them and remain in samsara. Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) writes: “The root of all ills is taking rebirth in samsara. That must be stopped. Stopping it depends on preventing its causes, which are karma and negative emotions. Between these two, if there is no negative emotion, karma will not become the cause of rebirth. However, if you have negative emotions, then even if there is no accumulated karma, new ones will quickly pile up.”

So we need to check ourselves and start from where we are. There are three possible mindsets: negative, positive, and perfect. By perfect I mean total wisdom, the nonconceptual realization of our true nature.

Chances are, we are a mix of positive and negative, as only realized masters are perfect. As long as we are mired in negative emotions, we can't leap to perfection, just as we can't jump from a mountain base to its peak. So we need to go from negative to positive to perfect. Acting as though we were near spiritual perfection when we aren't is just fooling ourselves.

Atisha (982–1055) once said, “The ultimate meaning of all teachings is emptiness, of which compassion (skillful means) is the essence.”

“Then how come,” his disciple asked, “so many people say that they have realized emptiness when they haven't made a dent in their hatred and attachment?”

“Because,” Atisha replied, “their claims are mere words.”



Our ego is solid like a rock. The more we generate compassion and devotion and make merit, the softer it gets. Eventually it becomes intangible. One day, it dissolves. All the cloud-like traces of negative karmas vanish from our sky-like mind, and our sun-like unstained enlightened nature shines forth spontaneously. The Buddha says:

Sentient beings are buddha in their true nature.  
However, (their true nature) has been covered by adventitious obscurations.  
When their obscurations are cleared, they are the very Buddha.

## Rebirth

We sometimes think that karma depends only on what we do. But what counts most is our mind. The Buddha said:

Mind is the main factor and forerunner of all actions.  
Whoever acts or speaks with a cruel mind will cause miseries for himself...  
With a pure thought, will cause happiness for himself.

Karma has its greatest chance to change our lives when we leave our body at death. When we enter the bardo, the transitional passage between death and our next incarnation, all we are is mind. Freed from the strictures of our physical surroundings and body, our mind runs its own show. Our karmic habits unfold as the terrain, sights, and sounds of the bardo and propel us to our next birth.

If we have cultivated compassion and devotion, loving images will greet us. Flowers may shower upon us from the sky. Buddhas and teachers to whom we prayed could appear. Negative mental habits, however, will manifest as frightful images.

People often assume that they will come back as people. But a human rebirth requires much merit and many aspirations. It doesn't happen automatically.

There are six realms in samsara, and infinite Pure Lands, or paradises, outside samsara. We go where our karma impels. Nagarjuna says:

Greed, hatred, and ignorance give rise to unvirtuous deeds.  
 (Thoughts with) no greed, hatred, and ignorance give rise to virtuous deeds.  
 Unvirtuous deeds cause all suffering and (births in) inferior realms.  
 Virtuous deeds (cause births in) higher realms and happiness in all our lives.

In particular, Nagarjuna explains:

Hatred leads you to the hell realm.  
 Greed leads you to the hungry ghost realm.  
 Ignorance mostly leads you to the animal realm.

Some modern Buddhists don't accept rebirth and karma. These teachings, however, go back to the Buddha. The *Lankavatara Sutra* says:

There are six realms of transmigration where beings take birth.  
 They are the realms of gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry  
 ghosts, and hell.  
 You take birth in those realms because of superior, middling, and  
 evil karmas.

There is much evidence to support the notion of rebirth.  
 Many masters remember their past lives and see where they will  
 be reborn. Apang Tertön (1895–1944/5) told his family, “I will be  
 reborn in the Sakya family. Come visit me when I am three.” Sure  
 enough, Kyabje Sakya Trizin (1945–) was later born in the Sakya  
 family and remembered details of his life as Apang Tertön.

When my own teacher, Kyabje Dodrup-chen Rinpoche, was a  
 toddler, he described details of his previous life and Guru Padma-  
 sambhava’s Pure Land, which he had visited between lives.

Tibet also has a remarkable tradition of *delogs*, or returners  
 from death. Delogs travel extensively in other worlds until they  
 revive, days later, to share what they learned. My book, *Peaceful  
 Death, Joyful Rebirth*, includes eleven such first-hand accounts.  
 Although these delogs never met, their descriptions of the six  
 realms, Pure Lands, and bardo are strikingly similar.

## Pure Lands

It is at death that merit makes the greatest difference for our  
 future. If we made merit and aspirations, we could go to a Pure  
 Land, a paradise of light and love where beings become enlight-  
 ened in one lifetime.

Many of us like it here on Earth. For all its attributes, however, the human realm is filled with struggle and uncertainty. Who knows, if we come back here in our next life, whether we will have the leisure to practice? Also, human beings are highly emotional. There is no telling whether, in a fit of passion, we might make some big mistake and regress.

However, in the Pure Lands, where we are supported by countless enlightened beings, we never regress or experience negative emotions. We evolve until we become enlightened. It is the ultimate example of positive karma building on itself until perfection is attained.

Some people have the misimpression that going to the Pure Land is selfish. When beings first take rebirth there, they have clairvoyance and can help those with whom they were linked in their previous lives. As they grow, they do even more. When they become enlightened, they become a source of boundless service for all beings through infinite manifestations. Their manifestations appear wherever they can help. As the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra* says, “It is impossible to liberate others while you are bound. It is possible to liberate others when you are free.”

In *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, I focus on Sukhavati, the Blissful Pure Land, as the easiest Pure Land to take rebirth in. Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, the body of love and wisdom, manifested it so that beings with good karma could take rebirth there without needing high spiritual realization. All we need are four causes.

First, we need to repeatedly think in detail about and visualize Amitabha and his Pure Land. If these perceptions become part of our mental habit, they will arise before us when we die. Second, we need merit, as the fuel to ferry us there. Third, we need to commit to lead all beings to the Pure Land, thus magnifying our merit. Fourth, we need to make strong aspirations and dedicate our merit as the cause of our and all beings' rebirth in the Pure Land. This augments our merit many times and ensures that our merit goes towards rebirth there.

Sometimes our obstructions and resistance to practice feel insurmountable. But if we stay on the path of training, accepting the teachings as they are, we will be making progress—whether we can see it or not—and the goal of peace, joy, and enlightenment will be ours to share with all. ❀