

Karma and Karma Yoga

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The Sanskrit word Karma literally means action. To the yogi this means the thought, the action, the reaction, the reaction to the reaction, and the mental “seed” left behind by the thought or action. In Buddhism, karma can be said to refer to one's intention or motivation while doing an action. For us westerners karma is not as foreign as we think. The teachings of karma echo the Newtonian principle that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction. Every time we think or do something, we create a cause, which in time will bear its corresponding effects. This cyclical cause and effect generates the world of birth and reincarnation.

Karma is not a system of punishment and reward. There is no higher being arbitrarily deciding who will be punished and who will be rewarded. We are “punishing” ourselves every time we act motivated by selfish reasons. Our punishment is simply the effect of our own selfish desires. Intention is the most important of all mental activities because it gives direction to the mind, determining whether we engage with virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral thoughts, actions and reactions. Just as iron is powerlessly drawn to a magnet, our minds are powerlessly drawn to the object of our intentions.

“Some people misunderstand the concept of karma. They take the Buddha's doctrine of the law of causality to mean that all is predetermined, that there is nothing that the individual can do. This is a total misunderstanding. The very term karma or action is a term of active force, which indicates that future events are within your own hands. Since action is a phenomenon that is committed by a person, a living being, it is within your own hands whether or not you engage in action.” [His Holiness the Dalai Lama]

Every mainstream religion teaches us about the consequences of our actions. The explanations may differ, but does it really matter in the end whether the law of karma causes us trouble or God himself in his final judgment?

An intention is a mental action that may be expressed through either physical or verbal means. Thus, action, or karma, is also composed of two aspects, the intention behind the action and the action. The intention is the thought or impulse to engage in a physical or verbal act. The action is the physical or verbal expression of our intention.

“I am the owner of my karma. I inherit my karma. I am born of my karma. I am related to my karma. I live supported by my karma. Whatever karma I create, whether good or evil, that I shall inherit.” [The Buddha]

How do we accumulate karmic seeds? Karma is not destiny or fate. We are ultimately creatures with the ability to express free will. It's in expressing our will that we can get into trouble. Every physical and

verbal action is preceded by mental activity. Selflessness motivates a kind gesture, selfishness motivates nasty words. Selfishness ultimately causes mental, emotional or physical harm to others and us. Thus, before and during an unskillful action, selfishness is present in our mind. The presence of selfishness before and during this act has an impact and influence on the mind leaving behind a karmic seed, a seed planted in our mind by physical, verbal or mental action. The strength or depth of this seed is determined by how strong our intention is, whether we clearly understand what we are doing, whether we act on our intention, whether the physical or verbal action is completed, and how often.

Seeds will remain in the mind until they have the proper environment to sprout or are destroyed. Seeds left by negative mental events and actions can be destroyed by regret for the negative act and a firm resolve not to act that way again in the future. Seeds left by positive mental events and actions can be destroyed by anger. Even if we do not act on a negative intention, a karmic seed of diminished potency is still left in the mind. If it is not destroyed, a negative seed will eventually produce an unpleasant and negative effect, while a positive seed will produce a pleasant and positive effect. Karmic seeds do not go to waste it is said that even after one hundred eons they will come to fruition when the time and proper conditions avail. All seeds whether “positive” or “negative” keep us tied to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Some people look at the concept of Karma as fatalistic. It absolutely is not. We create our own Karma and we ourselves can affect it.

“Sow a thought, reap an action

Sow an action, reap a habit

Sow a habit, reap a character

Sow a character, reap a destiny” [Sri Swami Sivananda]

Remember that I said Karma is not a punishment. Unfortunately, and fortunately we cannot necessarily see or know what the original cause was, that set-in motion a set of circumstances. Often it is a hard thing to understand especially when we are amid the most horrible thing imaginable to us, however all events are meant to be opportunities for growth for us and the people around us and we are not meant to understand the how and why right now. There is also the understanding that sometimes very advanced souls selflessly come to us for a short time and leave again once their work in this physical lifetime is done, again this may be beyond our comprehension at the time.

So how do we work with this Karma we have created for ourselves? Karma can be divided into three kinds based on action and reaction: *Prarabdha* (past actions that have given rise to the present birth), *Sanchitta* (the balance of past actions that will give rise to future births - the storehouse of accumulated actions) and *Agama / Kriyamana* (acts being done in the present life). The analogy given in the scriptures is that of an archer. The arrow already released from the bow and on its way to the target is our Prarabdha Karma, the arrow in the bow waiting to be released is our Sanchitta Karma, and the arrows still in the quiver are our Agama Karmas.

There is not a lot that can be done about *Prarabdha Karma* as those are already manifesting themselves in various ways in our lives. Although it has been said that the arrow can take the head or take the hat. Some effect must happen, it can be "severe" or just uncomfortable, and I like to say life can tap you on the shoulder or hit you with a baseball bat, either way its intent is getting your attention, so listen the first time, before it's hitting you with the bat. Remember it's not a punishment it's a correction to our improper behavior.

Sanchitta and even more so Agama offer the greatest chance for effecting change in our Karmic cycle. One of the greatest tools for working in these areas is Karma Yoga (selfless service). According to the scriptures, the discipline of unattached action (*Nishkâma Karma*) leads to *moksha* (liberation). As Lord Krishna has said in the Bhagavad Gita: "To the man thinking about the objects (of the senses) there arises attachment towards them; from attachment, arises longing; and from longing arises anger. From anger comes delusion; and from delusion, loss of memory; from loss of memory, the ruin of discrimination; and on the ruin of discrimination, he perishes". Krishna specifically speaks later in the Gita about performing all actions as an offering to him, however performing action with the intention that it is an offering to anyone, society, or whatever form of God one chooses (Ishtadevata) and not being attached to the outcome of the work is Karma Yoga.

Mother Teresa was the perfect Karma Yogini. There are two stories that reflect her practice of Karma Yoga (she probably would never have referred to what she did as Karma Yoga or herself as a Yogini). One is when a group of young documentary makers followed her around filming her service. At one point the filmmaker stated that they were exhausted and asked how Mother Teresa could serve so many people. Her reply was that she was only serving one. Mother Teresa saw the face of God (Jesus) in all whom she served. The other is when she was asked to speak someplace in Europe. It was cold and damp. Mother Teresa was only wearing a sari, so people began to pass their coats up to her. Each time she was given one she would look around for someone in the audience who did not have a coat and passed it to them.

Karma Yoga as a practice is freeing because when done properly it removes the desires (unfulfilled desires) and agitations in the mind which cause us to act in ways which keep us bound to our Karmas. When we desire, the desire may be fulfilled or not. When it is not fulfilled we can be upset, angry, and vindictive. When it is fulfilled it can breed more desires or fear of losing what we have already gained. Whenever a desire is formed expectations are set. Often people will do almost anything to achieve their desires no matter whom or what is harmed. Because of the expectations that we have set, we might not even enjoy fulfilling the desire because it hasn't meet our expectations. Do nice things but set no expectations, enjoy the doing and the excitement of "wow what's next". Doing nice things but expecting something in return is charity, which is still beautiful, however the expectation plants a karmic seed. The expectation also sets us up for pain. What happens when we don't get that

recognition that we expected. The agitation caused in the mind removes much of the beauty of the act performed and may cause us to act in a way which could produce further harm.

Now, since the practice of offering up the fruits (result) of an action is empowering. We do something, and it turns out great. "Wow God that was great, what's next?" We put 100% into something and it doesn't exactly come out right. "Well God, I gave it my best shot, but I guess it wasn't meant to be, at least right now." God (Universal Consciousness, whatever sounds better) is infinitely abundant and much more creative than we are. If God wants you to do something and you give 100% effort and are open to universal input, it will happen. If for some reason it's not meant to happen, it won't. "God hears and answers all prayers. Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes the answer is go slow (the time is not right). Sometimes the answer is grow (you're not ready yet). Sometimes the answer is Go (yes)." [Unknown]

Everything in nature, but man, performs selflessly. Animals sacrifice their lives for each other with no expectations. Plants sacrifice themselves to animals and for the preservation of their species. The apple tree is often given as an example of selfless service. It will spend years growing until it gets to the point where it can even flower and fruit. When the apples are ripe what does the tree do? Does it eat them? Hoard them for itself? No. It gives freely to all so that all may benefit and possibly a new tree will eventually come in its place.

Often the question comes, what about doing things for me? Even things done for ourselves can be done as Karma Yoga. After all, if we don't take care of ourselves we will become tired, stressed, and ill. That time taken to read a book or practice yoga or whatever refreshes and uplifts us is needed so that we can better serve. Mommy time, Daddy time, or Junior's time is necessary so that we can be more productive for our families.

Our practice as yogis is to set in motion Karmas that benefit others. Be the change you wish to see in the world. Then as collective consciousness shifts we can as a human race transcend suffering and experience our true nature which is peace, joy, and everlasting bliss.

I bow to all on this incredible, exciting journey.

Shiva (Neil)