



WEEK 8: KARMA

All of the practices you are exploring in this course help you to accumulate positive *karma* and generate the seeds of enlightenment.

Karma is a deep and subtle concept in Tibetan Buddhism, and we want to say up front that we are qualified only to guide you only on one very specific point – the way that Tibetan people commonly understand the concept of karma.



Wheel of Life – Siwa korlo – from Wisdom's Tibetan Art Calendar 2004.

I am the owner of my actions [karma], heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir...

The Buddha, Anguttara Nikaya V.57, Upajjhatthana Sutta ¹

What Tibetans teach their kids about karma

Like many Buddhist concepts, karma is taught to Tibetan children more by experience than through books or spiritual study. As a child, most every Tibetan is discouraged from killing insects – “Don’t kill that...you will get bad karma.” We are told not to treat people badly, for the same reason. The basic understanding is that if you do something bad, it will come back to haunt you, maybe not in this lifetime, but in one of your endless lifetime of lifetimes. Not like a ghost would haunt you, but more like an undeniable, unavoidable consequence of your action.

You will see that karma, in common usage, refers to both as one’s actions and the consequences of those actions. You might think of it simply as cause and effect. The karma is both the initial action and the eventual result, and the whole process of cause and effect itself.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s thoughts on karma

His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains the consequences of bad karma like this:

Countless rebirths lie ahead, both good and bad. The effects of karma (actions) are inevitable, and in previous lifetimes we have accumulated negative karma, which will inevitably have its fruition in this or future lives. Just as someone witnessed by police in a criminal act will eventually be caught and punished, so we too must face the consequences of faulty actions we have committed in the past, there is no way to be at ease; those actions are irreversible; we must eventually undergo their effects.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, from Kindness, Clarity, and Insight

Good karma

The good news is that good karma (actions) also come back to us and bear positive fruit. Any wholesome act, no matter how small, will always come back to us, to increase the joy and comfort of our lives. It could be bringing some magazines to your sick friend, a smile, welcoming someone who is new to your work or school, cooking for an elderly friend, or simply offering a few words of encouragement to someone who is down. All of these create good karma.

Planting the seeds of good and bad karma

As an adult, when either good or bad things happen to us, it is quite common for we Tibetans to think of karma as the fruition of actions we committed in the past. “This year has been full of tragedy and misfortune. This is my bad karma.” We believe that the seed for this current tragedy was planted at some point in our past, and is now bearing fruit.

Even when bad things happen to good people, we think of the misfortune as consequences of past bad actions. We believe that somewhere in his or her past, perhaps even in a long ago lifetime, she or he performed some bad actions and now must face the consequences.

Taking the long view

In this way, the Tibetan way of thinking takes a very long view. **Knowing that all of our actions will eventually come back to us, even in a far distant future lifetime, is a strong incentive to take good actions!** So the concept of karma helps keep us straight, and encourages us to act with honesty, respect, kindness, discipline, loyalty, faith, integrity, courage, generosity, and love.

A demonstration of how karma circles back around

The following little YouTube movie beautifully demonstrates the way that our actions circle back to us, sometimes many years later:

Video: TrueMove H: Giving

Footnotes

1. Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

More on this Topic

- *His Holiness the Dalai Lama: Happiness, Karma and Mind*
- *A View on Buddhism's View of Buddhist Karma*

WEEK EIGHT PRACTICE

This week's practice is easy and fun — make some good karma by taking good actions! Please take three good actions this week, no matter how large or small.

We can't think of a better way to brighten each other's days than by posting any of the good actions that you'd like to share on the Facebook group page.

We have created a handout list of wholesome actions to get your good karma creative juices flowing and we would love to add some of your actions on the list over time. If appropriate, a photo or a video of your good action would be wonderful.