



# **INSIGHTS INTO KARMA**

**The Law of Cause and Effect**

**Alexander Peck**



# **INSIGHTS INTO KARMA**

Also by Alexander Peck and co-authored with Eva Peck:

*Pathway to Life – Through the Holy Scriptures*

*Journey to the Divine Within – Through Silence, Stillness and  
Simplicity*

*Let's Talk Anew – Modern Conversation Themes in English*

[ESL book]

For more information on Alexander Peck, see these websites at:

*[www.spirituality-for-life.org](http://www.spirituality-for-life.org)*

*[www.prayer-of-the-heart.org](http://www.prayer-of-the-heart.org)*

*[www.pathway-publishing.org](http://www.pathway-publishing.org)*

# **INSIGHTS INTO KARMA**

## **The Law of Cause and Effect**

Alexander Peck

The right of Alexander Peck  
to be identified as author of this work  
has been asserted by him in accordance with  
the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

© Alexander Peck, 2012

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced  
in any form or by any means except for the quotation  
of brief passages for the purpose of private  
study, research, or review.

Cover design: Eva Peck

Cover photo purchased from [www.dreamstime.com](http://www.dreamstime.com)

Photo credits: Jindrich Degen

Cover picture: The wagon wheel alludes to the Buddhist *Wheel of Life*.  
Karma is a law that influences all of life, expressed in the words "what  
goes around, comes around".

Quotations for section divider pages are taken from: Mascaró, Juan,  
trans. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*. London: Penguin  
Books, 1973. They are intended to reflect the cause-effect theme  
underlying the book.

This book was produced using the Blurb creative publishing service. It  
can be purchased online through:  
[www.pathway-publishing.org](http://www.pathway-publishing.org)

Pathway Publishing  
Brisbane, Australia

This book is dedicated to

You, the reader.

May it be a cause for your personal Enlightenment.

Also to Greg, my younger brother,  
who, after our mother's funeral, left me with these words to  
ponder:

"Make sure you create good karma".

"If you send out goodness from yourself, or if you share that which is happy or good within you, it will all come back to you multiplied ten thousand times. In the kingdom of love there is no competition; there is no possessiveness or control. The more love you give away, the more love you will have."

(John O'Donohue)

"I believe that my life's gonna see the love I give returned to me."

(John Mayer)



## **Acknowledgments**

I am particularly indebted to each author listed in the Bibliography for helping to make this book a reality.

Also, heartfelt appreciation goes to my wonderful wife, Eva, for her continued loving support and encouragement. Her love and light are a daily inspiration. She is always ready to assist with editing and to give helpful, and at times spirited, advice. Without her insightful input, this book would simply never have come out as it has.

"Like gravity, karma is so basic we often don't even notice it."

(Sakyong Mipham)

"The recognition of the law of the cause and effect, also known as karma, is a fundamental key to understand how you've created your world, with actions of your body, speech and mind. When you truly understand karma, then you realize you are responsible for everything in your life. It is incredibly empowering to know that your future is in your hands."

(Keanu Reeves)

# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Overview</b>	<b>21</b>
Essence of Karma	21
Karma Is Universal	22
Fashioning our Lives	24
Puzzling and Complex	24
Frequently-Asked Questions	27
<b>PART 1: NATURE OF KARMA</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>What Is Karma?</b>	<b>31</b>
Web of Karma	33
Karmic Imprints and Seeds	34
Two Types of Actions	37
Boomerang Effect	37
Significance of Intention	39
Complete Actions	40
Power of Actions	42
A Law of the Heart	44
An Overview	47
<b>"Four Laws of Karma"</b>	<b>51</b>

Pond Analogy	52
Karma Is Definite – Reaping What Is Sown	52
Karma Is Dynamic – Reaping More Than Is Sown	54
Karma Is Specific – Not Reaping What Is Not Sown	57
Karma Is Never Wasted – Reaping Now and Later	59
Modifying Behavior	61

## **Six Ways Actions Create Results 63**

Past Actions (Remembering)	63
Present Actions (Doing)	63
Future Actions (Planning)	64
Human Relations (How People Relate to Us)	64
Personality and Character (Habitual Mind States)	64
Results of Actions in Future Lives	65

## **PART 2: PRESENT KARMA 67**

### **Mindfulness 69**

Practicing Mindfulness	69
Certainty of Karma	70
Karma Mindfulness Checklist	71
Guarding Our Karma	75
Immediate Karma	79
Karmic Creation of Our World	82
"We Are in Charge"	82

### **Karmic Awareness 85**

Present Karma	85
Creating Negative Karma	86
Memories	87

Happiness and Misery	88
Interacting with Others	89
Cause of Our Unhappiness	90
Reaping the Fruit of Actions	91
Fairness in a Moral Universe	93
Dream Analogy	94
Personality	97
Relationships	99
Health and Well-Being	99

### **Responsibility 103**

Greater Assurance	104
Creating Right Causes	105
The Law of Abundance	105
The Law of Attraction	106
The Law of Manifestation	108
Interfering with Others' Karma?	109
Alert and Watchful	111

### **Mental Health 115**

Problems Not External	115
Ripening of Karmic Seeds	116
Thought Transformation	117
Resolve to Change	122
Uncertainty of Life	124
Peace amidst Problems	126
An Elegant Spirit	127

### **Compassion 133**

Response to Enemies	133
Accepting Others	134
Responsibility toward Others	137
Care and Consideration of Others	138
Avoiding Indifference	139
What Is Needed: Compassion	139

### **PART 3: FUTURE KARMA 143**

#### **Karma and Rebirth 145**

Karmic Consequences	147
Why Take Rebirths?	148
Candle Analogy for Rebirth	149
Sleep Analogy for Rebirth	150
Larger Time Frame	152
Different Realms of Rebirth	153
Human and Animal Rebirths	157
Giftedness of People	157
A Wise and Compassionate System	158

#### **Actions and Results 161**

Ten Non-Virtuous Actions	161
Ten Virtuous Actions	169

### **PART 4: PAST KARMA 171**

#### **Dealing with the Past 173**

Good and Bad News	174
Discovering Our Karmic Issues	174
Clearing Accumulated Karma	175
Healing Our Karma	176

Changing Our Karma	177
Purifying Negative Karma	178
Letting Karma Burn Out	185
No Longer Blaming Others	186
Urgency of Purification	188
Pitfalls of Purification	189
Further Strategies	190
A Story of Purification	192
Prayers and Affirmations	194
Purification in a Nutshell	195

## **PART 5: MISUNDERSTANDING KARMA      199**

### **Misconceptions      201**

Fate or Predetermination	201
Theistic Determinism	202
Indeterminism	202
Reward and Punishment	202
Mystical Fate or Fortune	204
Grace Transcends Karma	204

### **Misinterpretations      207**

Cosmic Justice	207
Socially Disempowering	208
Fundamentalism	209
Judging Others	210
Blaming Past Karma	211
Passive Resignation	211
Karma as Rear-View Mirror	212

Coveting "Good Karma" 213

## **PART 6: MEDITATIONS 215**

### **Basic Meditation Guidelines 217**

Seven Tips 217

Breathing Meditation 218

### **"Four Laws of Karma" 219**

Karma Is Definite 219

Karma Increases 219

Karma Is Specific 220

Karma Is Never Lost 220

### **Ten Non-Virtues/Virtues 221**

Sincere Regret 221

Checklist of Actions 222

### **Compassion and Karma 225**

Heirs to One's Own Karma 225

Equanimity 225

### **The SourcePoint Practice 227**

Background 227

Description 227

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS . . . 231**

### **Conclusion 233**

Conviction about Karma 233

Source of all Suffering 234

Peace beyond Understanding 235

Power of Karma 236

Bringing It All Together 237



Our Most Precious Gift 238

Karma in a Nutshell 239

## **APPENDICES 243**

### **Appendix 1 – Types of Karma 245**

Mental, Verbal and Bodily Karma 245

Skillful and Unskillful Karma 245

Results-Based Karma 247

Individual and Collective Karma 247

Reproductive or Throwing Karma 249

Supportive or Completing Karma 250

Counteractive Karma 252

Destructive Karma 252

Proximate Karma 254

Habitual Karma 254

Random Karma 254

### **Appendix 2 – Karma in Buddhism 257**

Life and Death 257

Karma and Buddhism 258

Five Causal Factors 263

Karma and Emptiness 266

### **Appendix 3 – Miscellaneous 269**

The Bible and Karma 269

Karma, Rebirth and the Christian View 275

Beyond Karma 279

Proving Karma 281

Reflections on Rebirth and Karma 283

Cause and Effect in Life	291
Karma-Related Quotations	294
SourcePoint Practice Commentary	299
Science of Karma	302

**RESOURCES 307**

**Bibliography 309**

**Websites 314**

**About the Author 315**

# Preface

This book is about *karma* – the timeless and universal law of cause and effect, expressed in the words "what we sow, we reap". Four basic aspects of this law are covered: we reap what we sow; we reap far more than we sow; we don't reap if we don't sow; and, we reap both now and later. Karma remains a deep and profound principle of life, and not all its workings can be precisely explained.

The purpose of this book is to present a clear description of karma, as much as is possible, and to show how awareness of karma can remarkably benefit our lives.

Karma – our actions and their results (fruits) – governs our *present* reality, determines our *future*, and explains some of our *past*.

Understanding and applying the law of karma allows us to better navigate through the life we have been given, with all its mystery. We no longer need to feel that life unfolds in totally puzzling, strange, and bewildering ways. In fact, to our surprise, the principle of karma provides satisfying answers that help make greater sense of life.

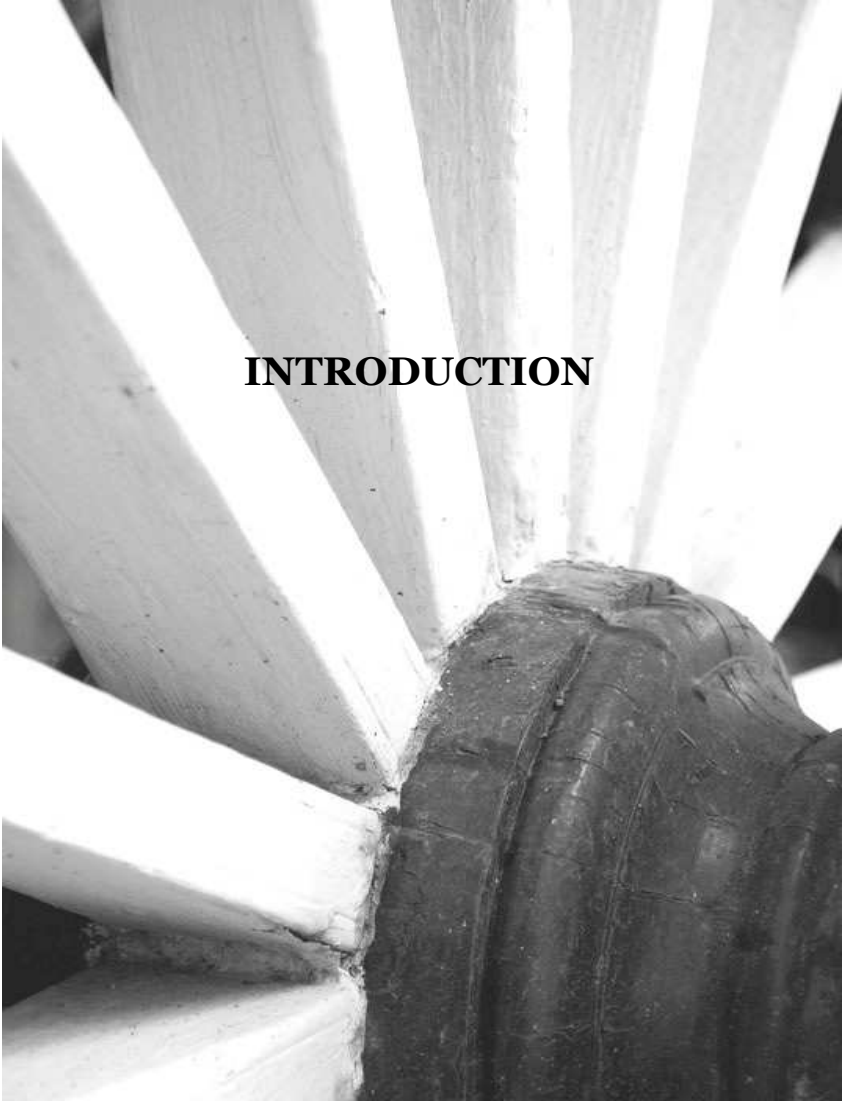
Certain themes relating to karma are repeated in the book. Such repetition has been retained as a means of gentle emphasis. Additionally, Buddhist understanding is drawn on since this tradition has extensively written on the law of karma.

Finally, while the focus of this book is about karma in the present, it also touches on the possibility of rebirth, and that

actions in this life influence our future state. By keeping an open mind on rebirth, we can stay receptive to possible new levels of insight, while realizing that details about an afterlife remain unknowable and unsolvable.

May this book lead you to a place where you can personally experience the exciting reality of karma – a law governing life that can enable you to see, and better manage, the causes of your own suffering and happiness.

Alexander Peck  
Brisbane, Australia  
January 7, 2013



Only a man himself can be the master of himself: who else from outside could be his master? When the Master and servant are one, then there is true help and self-possession.

*(The Dhammapada: Self-Possession, 160.)*

Any wrong or evil a man does, is born in himself and is caused by himself; and this crushes the foolish man as a hard stone grinds the weaker stone.

*(The Dhammapada: Self-Possession, 161.)*

# Overview

Karma – referring to the law of cause and effect – is an ancient and profound spiritual principle. While the teachings on karma originated in Hinduism, Buddhists understand karma somewhat differently from Hindus, and it is their perspective that is drawn on here.

Karma is a significant law governing our lives on the physical, mental, and spiritual levels. This book seeks to offer a straightforward explanation of this essential law of life. It shows how understanding karma can benefit and enrich our lives.

## *Essence of Karma*

In essence, the teaching of karma is: "Do as you would be done by, for you will be done by as you do!" It predicts that if we treat others well, life will treat us well; but, if we treat others badly, life will treat us badly. This is a spiritual paradox – act selfishly, and we will suffer; act selflessly, and we will benefit (in addition to others).<sup>1</sup> Karma, then, deals with the *action-reaction* principle of life.

Over forty years ago, a visiting American pastor spoke at our place of worship about the "laws of harvest". Living in a rural community, my hearing about harvest laws left an indelible impression. Their application to life equally fascinated me. Later I realized that it was the four basic aspects of karma, or the "four laws of karma", that he described. These are:

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Freke, *Encyclopedia of Spirituality: Information and Inspiration to Transform Your Life* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2000), 206.

- We reap what we sow.
- We reap far more than we sow.
- We don't reap if we don't sow.
- We reap both now and in the future.

### ***Karma Is Universal***

Karma, of course, is not only a Hindu or Buddhist idea. It is an observable, natural law influencing life and all that exists on earth. It works on a universal scale. *Deeds bring about consequences* – in the next second, in the next hour, day, month, year, decade, next lifetime, or even (as some believe) in a distant future rebirth.

"Essentially karma is one of the natural and inescapable laws of the universe," writes Gill Farrer-Halls, "which means that we are all subject to its workings, whether or not we have heard of – or understood – the teachings on karma. . . . the true meaning of karma is rarely realized in the modern world."<sup>2</sup>

Another universal law is gravity – a physical law of nature that Isaac Newton described from his empirical observations. Needless to say, it is not "*Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation*", in the sense that it belongs to Newton. In the same way, karma does not solely belong to Buddhism.

The Christian Scriptures, for example, also attest to the law or principle of karma:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. *A man reaps what he sows*. The one who sows to please his sinful

---

<sup>2</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 6.



nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9, NIV, emphasis mine).

Likewise, the Koran mentions the law of cause and effect as follows:

Whatever affliction may visit you is what your own hands have earned you. (Holy Qur'an 42:30. See also 35:30.)

And so, whether convinced of the law of karma or not, whether we believe in it or not, we produce karma all the time. "Worse, we produce it without any understanding that it is we ourselves who create the causes of all our suffering"<sup>3</sup> teaches Renate Ogilvie. Moreover:

Producing karma in this uncontrolled, unaware manner means that we are completely caught in a spiral of unhappiness and suffering. This is created by our own mind, as it puts trust into deluded perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

We become our own worst enemies by creating and holding on to misperceptions of others, often seeing them as rivals and adversaries, rather than as friends and allies. The words in a short New Testament passage fit aptly: "a man's

---

<sup>3</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Module 6: All About Karma", teachings by Renate Ogilvie, meditations by Ven. Yeshe Khadro and Kendall Magnussen (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005, 2006), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:36, NIV). Those enemies are the judgments, criticisms, and hatreds we harbor in our own mind (our household).

### ***Fashioning our Lives***

Understanding the law of karma enables us to take greater responsibility for our own destiny – and to shape it more the way we envision. Indeed there is a way that leads to abundance and happiness, and a path that brings us to misery and suffering. Once we understand that the choice is fully ours, we become completely free to decide which direction we will follow.

If we are mindful, we can gain insight into the outworking of karma in the midst of daily life. We will discern and observe a karmic relationship between our actions and their results. However, as alluded to, it would be impossible to prove or demonstrate exactly how each action has produced its own effect. Only divine beings can see such relationships perfectly.

### ***Puzzling and Complex***

Why are some people rich and others poor? Why are some able to enjoy the beauty, diversity, and abundance of many developed nations – while others live in ravaged, war-torn areas of the earth? Why are some people prone to be sickly, while others enjoy robust health for most of their life? Why do some people die young and others die old? Why is it that some human beings more beautiful and others seemingly unattractive? These remain valid questions for a pondering mind.

The Buddha was once asked as to what accounted for these differences among people. His reply was that all humans are the *heirs of their own past karma*. Their lives in the present were

the result of their past actions. There were actions that produced each of these various results. Such a response intrigues us.

According to Buddhism, then, the inequalities described are due not only to heredity and environment ("nature and nurture"), but also to karma. In other words, our own past and present actions are vital and weighty factors in our happiness and misery. We create our own heaven and hell. To a significant degree we are the architects of our own fate. While we are born with hereditary characteristics of mind and body, we also possess innate abilities that science cannot always explain. Some believe that these can be accounted for in terms of accumulated karmic tendencies that have been inherited from the course of previous lives.

The Buddha himself was exceptional as far as his physical, moral, and intellectual abilities when compared to his long royal lineage. "Thus, from a Buddhist point of view," concludes Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, "our present mental, moral, intellectual and temperamental differences are, for the most part, due to our own actions and tendencies, both past and present."<sup>5</sup> He quotes the following commentary:<sup>6</sup>

Depending on this difference in karma appear the differences in the birth of beings, high and low, base and exalted, happy and miserable. Depending on the difference in karma appears the difference in the individual features

---

<sup>5</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma* (Buddhist Studies: Buddha Dharma Education Association & Buddhnet, 1996-2012) Accessed on October 31. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

of beings as beautiful and ugly, high-born or low born, well-built or deformed. Depending on the difference in karma appears the difference in worldly conditions of beings, such as gain and loss . . . blame and praise, happiness and misery.

However, Buddhism does *not* assert that everything is due to karma. It is only one of many other conditions described in Buddhist texts. Sayadaw also states:<sup>7</sup> "In one sense, we are the result of what we were; we will be the result of what we are. In another sense, it should be added, we are not totally the result of what we were; we will not absolutely be the result of what we are. The present is no doubt the offspring of the past and is the present of the future, but the present is not always a true index of either the past or the future; so complex is the working of karma."

This book mainly explores the meaning of karma for our *present* lives today. It also touches on the *future* aspect of karma, including beyond this life. In short, the book looks at karma from as many angles as possible, and shares insights regarding this basic law of life, observable in creation and humanity.

Nevertheless, karma remains a multifaceted, complex subject. For any given action, there are multiple conditions and causes involved, resulting in multiple effects. Often it is humanly impossible to determine the exact links in the equation of cause and effect.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## ***Frequently-Asked Questions***

Specifically, this book looks at the following questions, among others:

- What is karma?
- How does karma work?
- How are karma and mindfulness related?
- Does karma help in understanding events in our lives?
- Does karma include taking personal responsibility?
- Is there a connection between karma and mental health?
- Does understanding karma lead to compassion?
- What connection is there between karma and rebirth?
- What are some predictable karmic results of our actions?
- How do I deal with my past karma?
- In what ways is karma misunderstood?
- How could I meditate on karma?
- Are there different types of karma?
- Where does karma fit in our understanding of life?

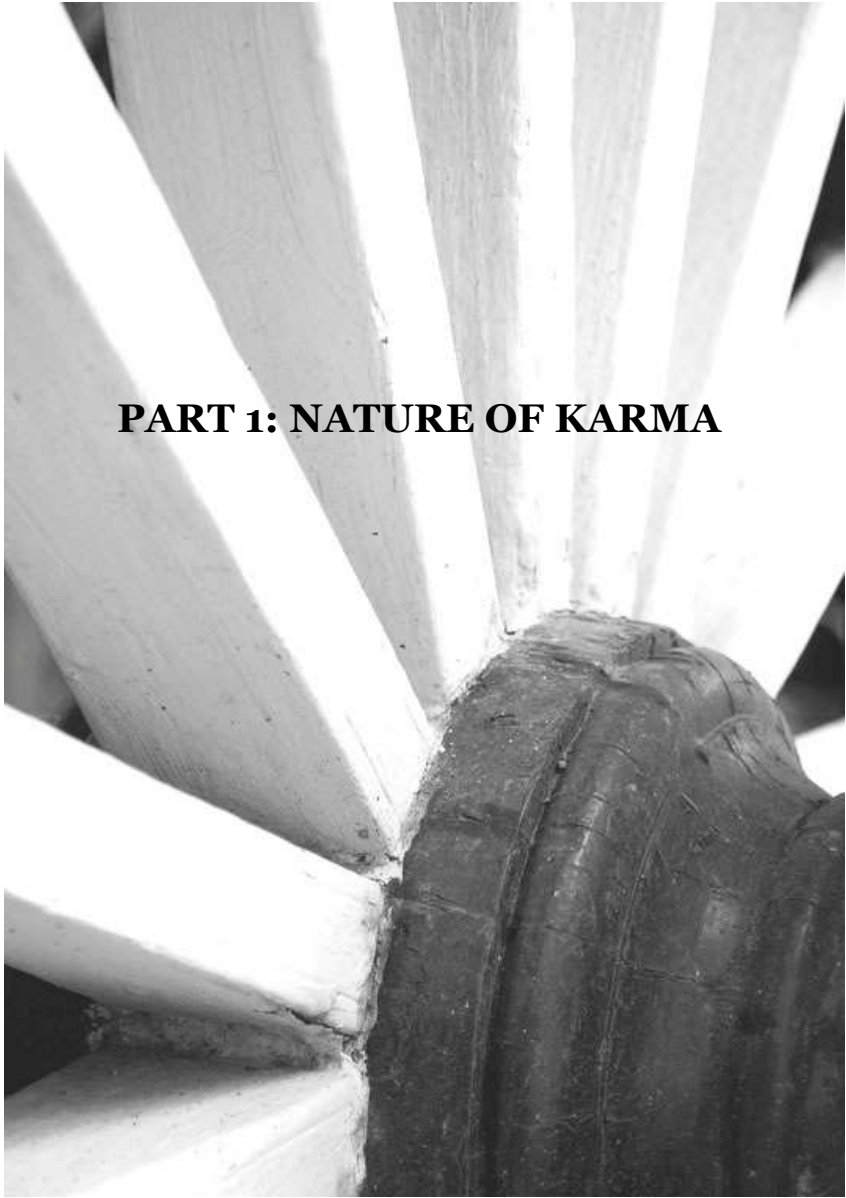
As we come to understand the profound nature of karma, and how it works in our lives, may we embark on a way of living that will enable us to fashion our lives to yield greater love, peace, and happiness.

Watchfulness is the path of immortality: unwatchfulness is the path of death. Those who are watchful never die: those who do not watch are already as dead.

*(The Dhammapada: Watchfulness, 21.)*

The man who arises in faith, who ever remembers his high purpose, whose work is pure, and who carefully considers his work, who in self-possession lives the life of perfection, and who ever, forever, is watchful, that man shall arise in glory.

*(The Dhammapada: Watchfulness, 24.)*



**PART 1: NATURE OF KARMA**

Men who are foolish and ignorant are careless and never watchful; but the man who lives in watchfulness considers it his greatest treasure.

*(The Dhammapada: Watchfulness, 26.)*

Watchful amongst the unwatchful, awake amongst those who sleep, the wise man like a swift horse runs his race, outrunning those who are slow.

*(The Dhammapada: Watchfulness, 29.)*



## What Is Karma?

"Karma" is a Sanskrit word ("kamma" in Pali) meaning "action" or "doing". All actions performed by the mind, body, and speech are karma. Of these three, mental actions – that is, *intentions* – are more important than either bodily or verbal actions. This is because bodily and verbal actions depend on, and are preceded by, mental intentions to act. In addition to volitional or willful acts, the word karma is used by Westerners for the fruits or *results* (that is, consequences) that arise from these acts.

Strictly speaking, however, *karma* is action and *vipaka* is the reaction – that is, the fruit or result. If karma is like a potential seed, then vipaka would be the fruit arising from the tree – the effect or result. As karma may be good or bad, so may vipaka (the fruit) be good or bad. As karma is mental, so vipaka is mental (of the mind). It is experienced as happiness and bliss; or, as unhappiness and misery, according to the nature of the karma seed.<sup>8</sup>

The *law of karma* refers to the law of cause and effect – the connection between intentional actions and their results or fruit. Wholesome actions lead to wholesome states, while unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome states, individually as well as collectively. Based on the law of karma, what we are is

---

<sup>8</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012. Strictly speaking, any happiness or suffering experienced is not actual karma, but is the effect of karma from an earlier moment or time.

determined largely by what we thought, said and did in the past, while what we are thinking, saying, and doing now will form our future. The karma of past, present, and future events, then, are closely linked by the law of karma (cause and effect).

Because karma involves the cause and effect, it is similar to other cause-and-effect relationships, such as the relationship between a seed and its shoots or sprouts. If we plant tomato seeds, we will get tomato plants, not carrots. We can, therefore, also think in terms of planting seeds of karma (actions or causes) and then experiencing the ripening of the karmic seeds (results or effects).

While the basic idea of karma is simple – causes lead to effects – the law of karma is also quite complex. For example, karma can ripen in different ways, and there can be time lags between causes and effects. (These will be explored later in the book.)

In sum, karma is action for which there is a reaction – namely, fruit or a result. Just as every object has a shadow, so every action is accompanied by its effect. An action may be skillful or unskillful; so too its fruit will be pleasant or unpleasant. As we sow, we reap – both now, as well as sometime and somewhere in the future. For instance, if I react with an angry outburst toward someone, anger is imprinted in my mind stream. Given a similar situation in the future, I may respond in the same way because of conditioning that takes place in the mind. The person with whom I was angry may also react in a negative way toward me in the future

What we reap today is what we have sown both in the present and in the past. For example, if I am feeling badly

toward someone at the moment, this is being caused by present ill will in my mind stream. The ill will is present because it was planted in my mind in the past, and possibly conditioned over time to where it has become a habitual response under a given circumstance.

Happiness and misery, common to humanity, are the inevitable effects of causes. Karma is a natural law where acts bring about their own pleasure ("rewards") or pain ("punishments") – regardless of any human justice system. The terms *rewards* and *punishments* should be used cautiously, and not in a judgmental way. We are simply describing consequences of behavior – and not judging the person or their motives behind the actions.

### ***Web of Karma***

In his book, *The Heart of Understanding*, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh introduces a new term – *interbeing*. It refers to the fact that all phenomena are interdependent and interwoven. No part of the world can exist apart from all others – there is no such thing as a totally separate object, event, or experience. Everything is made up of other things (constituent elements). The world is a web of combinations, and patterns of relationships – nothing exists independent of everything else.

The idea of interbeing, then, allows us to understand the *web of karma*, described as follows:<sup>9</sup>

The wheel shapes the path; the path shapes the wheel. This is how we can see karma as continual interaction and

---

<sup>9</sup> Gary Gach, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Buddhism*, 3d ed. (New York: Alpha Books, 2009), 99.

interreaction. What we think in turns affects what we feel, which affects what we say and do – along with causes and conditions themselves dependent upon other causes and conditions. With karma, we help make or co-create our world. Simple, it's also complex and all-embracing, because it is so inherent in everything, all the time. Karma choice-points are everywhere. They create ripples that will create further ripples; the seeds of an apple (cause) become apples (result) and then become a new cause. So we imagine the vast web of all the threads of karma as more complex and precise than any supercomputer (or even human brain). . . . In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said of karma's web, we are all "inescapably caught in a network of mutuality." Interbeing is that network.

### ***Karmic Imprints and Seeds***

All mental, bodily, and verbal actions have consequences of some kind. These actions also leave *imprints* or *seeds* on the mind stream.<sup>10</sup> In other words, each action we perform leaves an imprint on our mind – and each imprint will be a cause that eventually gives rise to its own effect. It is like planting a seed in the mind stream. These seeds hold the potential to ripen. "Our

---

<sup>10</sup> Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 184. Yangsi Rinpoche distinguishes between *karmic imprints* and *karmic seeds*. He states that the difference between a seed and an imprint is primarily a matter of subtlety – a karmic imprint is more subtle than a karmic seed, and thus it is more difficult to eliminate the imprint of an action from the mind than it is to eliminate the seed. He writes: "The two also function differently within the mind. According to the philosophical texts, the karmic imprint of ignorance is what causes the appearance of inherent existence, and the karmic seed is what ripens to cause the grasping at that appearance."

mind is like a field," explains Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, "and performing actions is like sowing seeds in that field. Virtuous actions sow seeds of future happiness and non-virtuous actions sow seeds of future suffering. These seeds remain dormant in our mind until the conditions for them to ripen occur, and then they produce their effect."<sup>11</sup>

However, any action also bears an *immediate* reaction within the mind. If I act with pure generosity toward someone, for example, I will immediately feel good about the action. If, on the other hand, I knowingly act in an under-handed manner, misgivings will immediately linger in my mind.

As mentioned, later when appropriate conditions exist, the seeds we plant will further ripen. The same process occurs in agriculture – a farmer may plant carrot seeds in the ground, but unless certain favorable conditions exist (sunshine, water, nutrients in the soil), the seeds will appear not to grow. Nevertheless, underground in the soil, certain dynamic processes are immediately underway once a seed has been planted.

When we are discerning, the ripening of seeds in our life can be understood and seen firsthand, in the course of an hour, a day, a week, a month, or years. There will, however, be longer-term ripening of seeds in life which are subtle and difficult to comprehend. In other words, the workings of karma can be hidden and impossible to trace (especially if future lifetimes are considered).

---

<sup>11</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism: An Explanation of the Buddhist Way of Life* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2002), 27.

In their book, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Goldstein and Kornfield explain this as follows:<sup>12</sup>

The law of karma can be understood on two levels, which indicate the vast scope of its implications in our lives. On one level, karma refers to the experience of cause and effect *over a period of time*. We perform an action, and sometime later we begin to experience its results. We plant a mango seed, and many years later we taste the fruit. The other level of understanding karma has to do with the quality of mind *in the very moment of action*. When we experience a mind state of love, there comes naturally along with it a feeling of openness and joy that is its immediate fruit; similarly, when there are moments of greed or hatred, in addition to whatever future results will come, we also experience the painful energies that arise with those states. Our direct awareness of how the karmic law is working in each moment can be a strong motivation to develop skillful states of mind that create happiness for us in the moment, as well as produce the fruit of well-being in the future.

I recently noticed a young man in our city take the liberty to cross a busy street even when a flashing red, "Don't Walk" sign persisted. In doing so, he planted a non-virtuous seed in his mind stream which states, "I can take risks; I can ignore this pedestrian law". If he continues doing this, his unskillful risk-

---

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*, with a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987). Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

taking behavior is becoming more conditioned in his mind. One day, a car could swiftly turn at that intersection and collide with the man – the conditions will have existed for him to reap what he had sown. He will then inevitably experience suffering and misery, depending on the severity of the accident.

If a person regrets an action, the power of regret removes the causes and conditions for the karmic seed to ripen in the future. For example, if I regret in a heartfelt way of having deliberately said something unkind and resolve never to repeat such cruel words, then the suffering in my mind will pass. Also, the proclivity to use harsh words will have been removed from my mind stream, or at least strongly weakened. This is somewhat similar to a farmer realizing that he planted inferior cucumber seeds, and then deciding to dig out the freshly-planted seeds. No cucumber plants would result.

### ***Two Types of Actions***

Actions may be divided into one of two basic types, based on their results or outcomes (fruits). First, actions are *non-virtuous* or unskillful, if they result in some form of pain, misery, or unhappiness (what is negative or destructive). Second, actions are *virtuous* or skillful, if their outcome is well-being, peace, and happiness (what is positive and constructive). Actions in themselves cannot be classified as inherently bad or good.

### ***Boomerang Effect***

Karma is the law of action and reaction at work in a *moral* universe. That is, we live in an ordered universe and an awareness of this cosmic order underpins our actions. It is also the basis for love, compassion, and altruism. Every thought, word, and action produces an effect that rebounds on the person

who generated it.<sup>13</sup> There is a dependent relationship between actions and effects – virtuous actions cause happiness; non-virtuous actions cause unhappiness or suffering.

As mentioned, the ripening of karma in this lifetime can be seen – both in the immediate short term and also longer term – in the results or fruits of many of our actions.

If we consider for a moment the premise of previous and future rebirths, then the long-term results of karma cannot be comprehended. Based on this understanding, a lot of karma ripens for us for which we are totally unable to identify the exact causes that were created prior to this lifetime. Similarly, we cannot foresee the future consequences of many of our actions.

According to Buddhist tradition, on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha's mind achieved great clarity and he was able to see the pattern of cause and effect in his previous lives – that is, how actions in earlier lifetimes led to results he experienced in later ones. Later, when the time came for him to provide spiritual guidance, the Buddha was also able to see how cause and effect shaped the lives of others – he could see the historical causes for their current situations.<sup>14</sup>

Today, practitioners of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism continue to believe that one's present life situation is the result of actions committed in past lives. In other words, our conduct

---

<sup>13</sup> Linda Johnsen, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hinduism*, 2d ed., (New York: Alpha Books, 2009), 79.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann, *Buddhism for Dummies*, 2d ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 235.



in this life will directly influence our future lives because of the karmic law of cause and effect.

### ***Significance of Intention***

The intention in our mind is a vital factor in the outworking of karma. In fact, the intentions that propel actions are more important than the actions. Goldstein and Kornfield explain further:<sup>15</sup>

The Buddha used the term karma specifically referring to volition, the intention or motive behind an action. He said that karma is volition, because it is the *motivation behind the action that determines the karmic fruit*. Inherent in each intention in the mind is an energy powerful enough to bring about subsequent results. When we understand that karma is based on volition, we can see the *enormous responsibility we have to become conscious of the intentions* that precede our actions. If we are unaware of the motives in our minds, when unskillful volitions arise we may unmindfully act on them and thus create the conditions for future suffering.

In the Tibetan teachings, it is said that *everything rests on the tip of motivation*. Take for example an act of giving. Both how we feel and the effect on the person will differ according to whether the action is motivated by inner aversion or sincere love – even though to outward appearances, the act of giving is the

---

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

same. The results of the two motivations will be very different – both in the moment, and in the longer term.

In view of the importance of intention, or motivation, in determining the outcome of our actions, it is vital to know what is motivating us as we act. This takes humility, honesty, and courage. Yet, not to consider our motivation means continuing all the conditioned, unskillful habits. While all good and bad actions comprise karma, the most important factor is volition, which is based on motivation.

In sum, the intention or motivation behind an action, rather than the outward appearance, determines the effect. For example, if a person appears kind, but acts with greed or hatred, then the fruit of his action will bear witness to the basic motivation that lay behind the act – and will be a cause for future unhappiness. Almost forty years ago, I gave an impressive box of candy as a gift to a college graduate, and to all concerned appeared as a benevolent graduate assistant. To this day, I feel a touch of remorse over the action, knowing that the chocolates had overly high sugar content and were full of preservatives. My wife and I had received the candy from another party, and were glad to get rid of them. It was an expedient act on my part.

### ***Complete Actions***

A complete karmic action has four elements, or stages:

*Intention* – is based on a motivation to perform an action which may be rooted, for example, in attachment or aversion, or, in generosity or compassion

*Basis* – is an object, and may be a person or a thing

*Action* – is a chosen and planned method

*Completion* – is the successful fulfillment of the action, as well as the satisfaction in completing the action

However, even *incomplete* actions will produce some karmic results. If, for example, only one or two elements of a completed karmic action are fulfilled, then karmic fruit is still created, albeit less. A fully finished action produces more karmic consequences. Therefore, unintentional, unconscious, or even involuntary deeds would also be incomplete actions in that volition based on intention and motivation, the most important factors in determining karma, are absent.

Gill Farrer-Halls gives an example of incomplete karmic action in her book, *Working with Karma*:<sup>16</sup>

If you mistakenly squash an insect and feel genuinely sorry that you killed it, then only the action itself has occurred; there was no intention or satisfaction involved. The karmic consequences are therefore considerably less than if you had the intention and deliberately jumped on the insect, and then felt happy and satisfied that you had successfully killed it.

If a person's intention or motivation is good, and they accomplish an action well, then the karmic result produced is skillful – and a positive outcome is guaranteed, both immediately and in the future. On the other hand, if an intention and the accomplishment are unskillful – then negative karmic fruit will ripen, leading to suffering, both immediately and in the

---

<sup>16</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 15.

future. The immediate result is usually in the mind – either we feel pleased about an action, or we have a measure of remorse.

However, the resultant karma is more difficult to analyze when the intention and accomplishment are mixed – that is, when the intention is good, but the accomplishment is negative, or vice versa.

Both *compassion* and *wisdom* are needed to be effective – one without the other leads to ineffectiveness. A skillful action would reflect a good balance between wisdom (seen in the accomplishment) and compassion (reflected in the intention). The better the equilibrium of intention and accomplishment, the better the karmic result produced.

### ***Power of Actions***

In the Buddhist teachings, the power or *potency* of certain actions is greater than others. For example, there is great power associated with sincere generosity. More powerful than generosity is a mind focused on extending thoughts of loving-kindness toward all beings. "When we genuinely open our hearts," write Goldstein and Kornfield, "the deep feeling of our connectedness to all beings is a tremendously effective force, which can then motivate a wide variety of skillful actions."<sup>17</sup> Another powerful action is when we deeply see the impermanent nature of phenomena. As the above two authors state:<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

This moment of insight is so profound because it *de-conditions attachment* in the mind and opens up the possibility of true non-attachment. When we deeply see the impermanent, ephemeral nature of the mind and body, how they are in constant flux, we develop detachment and equanimity toward the dreamlike elements of our experience. Sometimes in meditation practice when we are dealing with the pain, restlessness, boredom, and other difficulties that come up, we may lose sight of the larger context of what the practice is about. It is helpful to remember that *the karmic energy generated by the repeated observation and awareness of the changing nature of things is a tremendously powerful karmic force that leads to many kinds of happiness and to freedom.*

Causes create results – what we sow, we reap. If a farmer plants tomato seeds in his greenhouse, tomato plants will grow, not red pepper. If red pepper seeds are planted, red peppers will grow, not tomatoes. And, once the seed is planted, no amount of pleading or protesting will persuade the plant to produce a different fruit. Similarly, our positive actions yield happiness; our negative actions bear unhappiness. Naturally, if the farmer does not plant any seeds, then nothing will grow. Likewise, if we produce no actions, then we will not experience any result.

If we genuinely and immediately regret an action, we prevent the karmic imprint or seed in our mind to ripen in the future. If we later regret an action, this will also avert negative karmic seeds from future ripening. (Purifying negative karma is covered later in the book.)

## ***A Law of the Heart***

Rabindranath Tagore once stated: “Most people believe the mind to be a mirror, more or less accurately reflecting the world outside them, not realizing on the contrary that the mind is itself the principal element of creation.”

How do we respond to what comes to us in life? On our life's path, we meet all sorts of results (*vipaka*) based on their causes (*karma*) and conditions. We are subjected to countless sense impressions. We experience pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, honor and dishonor, hope and fear, joy and sorrow. These experiences are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The crucial question is: What are our responses to the life that is presented to us?

Our responses are based on our *intentions*. It is not the action, but the intention behind an action that is the source of karma. Karma is the law of the heart! The key is intention. Knowing this, we can bring awareness of intention to our actions in daily life.

Judging from appearance, two actions can appear exactly the same. For example, two people receive an identical gift. However, the intention in giving may be completely different. One person gives unconditionally out of a pure motive; the other gives to seek approval and favor. The intention is the seed of karma. In this case, the karmic results will be entirely different, since the intentions were completely different.

Through mindfulness, we slowly begin to be more and more aware of the intentions and patterns of thought in the heart and mind. We become conscious of the possibility of directing the kind of karma that unfolds. Instead of succumbing

to old habits, we become aware of any arising fear, anger, joy, and so forth. We notice them with loving awareness, and see what our intention is before we act.

Is the intention to get even, to protect ourselves, to be right; or, to connect with another person and to look for a thread of resolution? The intention behind how we act makes all the difference. The same words could be asked, for instance: "What did you mean?" However, the tone of voice could promote anger, or it could promote understanding. Depending on the intention, a conversation will go in an entirely different direction.

How do we attend to and watch over our karma? We tend to karma by *tending our heart* – by attending to our motivation, and watching over our intentions. We practice it with our thoughts, words, and actions. The everyday places and situations are where we create our karma.

We all have suffering, betrayal, and a measure of loss in our lives – everybody. Each of us participates in the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows of our lives. Yet, we don't have to pass them on through seeking revenge or extending anger and bitterness.

In our heart, what seeds do we plant and cultivate? How do we respond? What matters most is how we act in response. All is mind made. "What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind" states the *Dhammapada*.<sup>19</sup> Our life unfolds depending on our heart – on

---

<sup>19</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 35.

the intentions that we bring to situations, and the actions that spring from them. Our responses of the heart determine our life.

We don't, however, get to control the world, making it the way we want. Any moment, anything could happen. Life is tentative. We don't get to choose how it completely unfolds. In fact, life is mysterious and is part of a greater mystery. Periodically, we will get surprised.

What is given to us may be beautiful, or difficult and ugly – it may be the result of past patterns from previous generations (even other lives, who knows?). What really matters is how we tend to our life in this moment – to attend to what comes to us. What matters is how we tend the heart. This determines whether we are happy, unhappy, free or enslaved.

We can determine what seeds we plant in this world – and that will hopefully last even when we're gone. More specifically, we get to plant our seeds in our garden – the seeds in our heart, and the seeds of our words and actions. We need to live in the reality of the present – and make our life new each day. This is what karma speaks of.

In a poem by Mary Oliver entitled, "The Buddha's Last Instruction", are the lines: "'Make of yourself a light,' said the Buddha, before he died." The seeds we plant are what we make of life – who we are, what shines through our eyes. Karma is the tending of our heart. We need to take care of our heart, to cultivate our intentions in the best way. We cannot manipulate other people – we have tried that and it does not work. We need



to tend our own heart. But, because we are part of the web of life, we will also change the world!<sup>20</sup>

### ***An Overview***

In our lives, each moment conditions the next. The *Dhammapada* gives the analogy of a wagon wheel following the hoof of the ox – showing how the mind is the forerunner of all things:<sup>21</sup>

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart. . . . If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow.

Understanding karma allows us to be more aware of how the mind works in our lives – and how each moment of consciousness is affected. We now see how suffering or happiness arises. It all unfolds out of our mind. If, for instance, we speak or act with a pure mind, then happiness follows, like a shadow.

In other words, certain mental factors bring happiness; other mental factors bring unhappiness. We can directly

---

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Jack Kornfield for the insights in this section, given in his presentation entitled "Karma & the Power of Intention" (2012-12-03) at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. <http://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/85/> Accessed December 17, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 35.

experience these for ourselves – firsthand. This is direct seeing, and in this way knowledge is transformed into wisdom. We can know for ourselves what leads to what, which is the law of karma.

Karma, then, is volitional activity in the mind. All volitional activity has the power to bring about results. *Volition* involves exercising choice to determine an action. It is a determination by the will. Volition is similar to intention – the act of determining mentally on some action or result. Intention is the “about to moment” before you do something. Volition and intention lie behind all actions. Try to intuit, or be aware of this.

Moments of volition are quick and small – but they contain huge power. They are not insignificant. Every volition has the power to bring about future results. Each intention can bear many fruits! Volition and intention, then, contain the power or force to bring about significant and lasting results.

Intention itself, however, is a neutral factor. As a force, its function is to organize and gather. It is the *motivation* associated with the intention that brings happiness or suffering. The wholesomeness or unwholesomeness is what determines the karmic fruit.

If, for example, the intention is accompanied by the motivation of greed or hatred, then there will be some kind of suffering. If the intention is associated with love or generosity, then the karmic fruit will be happiness. Everything rests on the tip of motivation! We need to check what motives are associated with the intentions that drive our life. Each intention has enormous power to bear fruit. We need to bring about good fruit or results.

In sum, we can illustrate the working of karma using the following two equations:

- Volition/intention + motivation (based on virtues) → happiness
- Volition/intention + motivation (based on non-virtues) → suffering

When we're about to do something (volition/intention) we can also choose to ask ourselves: What is my motivation here? Often, in the spur of a moment, we do not have such awareness, and end up unwittingly suffering the consequences of an action based on an impure motive. When discontent and misery set in, a common reaction is to look for someone to blame for our feeling of unhappiness – while being oblivious to the fact that it was our unwholesome motive in the first place that is now the cause of our despondency!<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks on karma at <http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/96/>

"How people treat you is their karma; how you react is yours."

(Wayne W. Dyer)

We plant seeds that will flower as results in our lives, so best to remove the weeds of anger, avarice, envy and doubt, that peace and abundance may manifest for all.

(Dorothy Day)

## "Four Laws of Karma"

From our personal experience, we can observe that karma – the law of cause and effect – functions in four discernible ways. These four aspects of karma may be referred to as the "four laws of karma".<sup>23</sup>

First, karma and its results are certain and unfailing – with the results at all times being similar to the cause. Positive actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the positive results of some form of happiness and benefit. Negative actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the negative results of some form of suffering. Karma and its results are exactly like a seed and its fruit.

Second, karma expands. Once we have an imprint of an action in our mind, it tends to be habit-forming.

Third, no results come without a cause. Actions not engaged, will not bring results. In other words, if the cause has not been created, the effect will not be experienced – and things do not just appear out of nothing.

Finally, once an action is done, the result is never lost. An action performed is not lost – it will definitely ripen and bring results.

---

<sup>23</sup> Naljor Prison Dharma Service, "Karma: The Possession That Follows Us Everywhere" (PO Box 1177, Mount Shasta CA 96067), found at <http://www.naljorprisondharma.org/index.html>. Accessed December 1, 2012.

The "four laws of karma" are described in this chapter.

### ***Pond Analogy***

To begin with, an insightful overview of how karma functions is given in *Working with Karma* by Gill Farrer-Halls:<sup>24</sup>

In Buddhism the operation of karma is classically demonstrated with the analogy of throwing a stone into a pond. When the stone is thrown in, it has the effect of creating ripples that spread outwards till they reach the far edges of the pond. This then causes the ripples to spread back to their cause, the stone – and the stone is then subjected to pressure from the ripples. In the same way our actions reverberate outwards and eventually, when the appropriate conditions arise, the results come back and we feel their effect.

### ***Karma Is Definite – Reaping What Is Sown***

Karma is fixed and *definite*. If an intention (compared to a seed planted in the mind stream) is positive, then the mental state, as well as any bodily or verbal action, will be correspondingly positive, creating well-being and happiness. These actions also create more karmic seeds in the mind to ripen in the future.

If, for example, I perform a generous act, then, the action is recorded in my mind stream as a memory. The action also immediately brings about positive thoughts and feelings. All this

---

<sup>24</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 32.

is placed in the memory as well. At a future moment, when certain conditions present themselves, I will have another choice – to act generously, or with miserliness. Based on the positive mind stream imprint of generosity, I will tend to act generously again – thereby further conditioning my mind toward generosity. All this results in continuing good outcomes based on the positive karmic actions of generosity.

By contrast, if an intention is negative, the resulting mental state, as well as any actions or words, will be harmful and unhelpful, creating unhappiness and suffering.

Either way, a karmic result is inescapable – it is definite. In the *Vinaya Suttas*, the Buddha expressed it this way: "For every action we perform we experience a similar result."

Agriculturally, when a farmer plants celery seeds, celery plants will result – not garlic plants. Likewise, happiness cannot come as a result of a non-virtuous cause, and suffering can *only* come from a non-virtuous cause.

Yangsi Rinpoche adds: "Since karma is definite, all negative actions, no matter how small, bring suffering, and all positive actions bring happiness. Whatever we sow, we will reap. Whatever the cause is, so is the result."<sup>25</sup>

A vital consideration arises here. Whenever we take an action (create a karmic cause), we need to exercise care and

---

<sup>25</sup> Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 158-159.

caution, for it is impossible to change things once the cause has produced its results.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the result of a virtuous action (the cause) can only be happiness, not suffering. Likewise, the result of a non-virtuous action (the cause) can only be suffering, not happiness. Or, as Geshe Kelsang Gyatso states:<sup>27</sup>

Just as when a gardener sows a pea seed it is definite that peas and not barley will grow, and when he sows nothing it is definite that nothing will grow, so when we perform positive actions it is definite that we shall experience happy results, when we perform negative actions it is definite that we shall experience unhappy results, and when we perform neutral actions it is definite that we shall experience neutral results.

### ***Karma Is Dynamic – Reaping More Than Is Sown***

Karma *increases* and *expands*. The karmic seed we plant in our mind stream will not only produce a result – rather, there will be results greater than the cause.

---

<sup>26</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 389. Pabongka writes: "It's like if you plant the seed of a hot-tasting plant, chili for example, and then once it has started to grow you plant grapes and apricots and so on around the chili as a way of making it turn sweet. You can't make the chili sweet, because the plants' growth is separate."

<sup>27</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 230.



As an illustration, my father, who delighted in home gardening, each spring planted tomato seeds in carefully cultivated soil furrows. It never ceased to amaze me, seeing my father during late summer standing among the fully grown plants, harvesting tomatoes by the basketful. The few seeds he planted were nothing in comparison with the baskets full of red ripe tomatoes!

“The increasing nature of karma,” writes Yangsi Rinpoche, “means that even a very small negative action can bring forth a tremendous negative effect. In the same way, even a very small virtuous action can bring forth a very powerful positive effect. . . . For this reason, we should work very hard to purify even our most minor negative actions, and rejoice in and cherish even our most minor virtuous acts.”<sup>28</sup>

The fact that karma is expandable is heartening if it is good karma. A person performs a virtuous action. This immediately brings them peace in their mind and more beneficial results in the future. It is an expanded result from one deed. By contrast, a non-virtuous action, such as one prompted by anger, can yield vastly destructive negative results.

In the sayings of the Buddha, it is written:<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 160.

<sup>29</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 391.

Do not think 'The small sins I do will not return in my future lives.' Just as falling drops of water will fill a large container, the little sins a churl accumulates will completely overwhelm him.

Likewise from the sayings of the Buddha:<sup>30</sup>

Do not think 'A small virtue will not return in my future lives.' Just as falling drops of water will fill a large container, the little virtues the steadfast accumulate will completely overwhelm them.

Small actions can have devastating or momentous consequences. We never know, for example, what type of effect even one word has on another person's life. A critical, harshly spoken word can be remembered for decades, especially for people already suffering under great difficulties. It has been said that "if one moves a grain of sand, one changes the universe". A sand particle is moved, which causes another particle to shift a fraction, and another, and so on, without ceasing. Such a grain of sand can be compared to our motives for a given action – how important, therefore, to consider one's motives before acting!<sup>31</sup>

In sum, recognizing how karma greatly increases prompts one to definitely want to practice virtues and to abandon non-virtues. Also, we can now confidently practice even the smallest

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>31</sup> Venerable Adrienne Howley, *The Naked Buddha: A Practical Guide to the Buddha's Life and Teachings* (New York, Marlowe & Company, 2003), 59, 119.

virtue and abandon even the smallest non-virtue. Or, as Geshe Kelsang Gyatso notes:<sup>32</sup>

Even very small non-virtuous actions bear large fruits of suffering and very small virtuous actions bear large fruits of happiness. In this way great suffering or great happiness can grow from small actions – our actions are like small seeds such as tiny acorns that produce huge oak trees. Although we may create a very small non-virtuous action, as long as we fail to purify it, its power to produce suffering increases day by day. . . . By meditating on this point we shall develop a strong determination to avoid even the slightest non-virtue and to nurture even the smallest good thoughts and deeds.

### ***Karma Is Specific – Not Reaping What Is Not Sown***

Karma is *specific*. When my father planted his vegetable garden in the spring, he enacted the specific causes that would bring about the specific effects. Planting pea, lettuce, and onion seeds meant that he could fully expect to harvest peas, lettuce, and onions in the summer. And, year after year, this is what precisely occurred.

Likewise, a person will experience the result for which they created the cause. By contrast, a person will *not* experience a result for which they have not created the cause. This correlation is definitely not always clear.

When puzzling events develop in life, some people draw on the premise of past and future rebirths to help explain difficult

---

<sup>32</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 232.

situations. For example, a man is faced with having been swindled in a business deal, costing him his life's savings. The law of karma, seen across lifetimes, could suggest the possibility that the swindled man himself had acted dishonestly in a previous time. The reasoning behind this thinking is that one does not meet with something if one has not created the karma for it to happen.

Another example of this may occur during a time of war or other conflict. Some people come to no harm, even though fighting rages all around them. Observers find such accounts amazing. However, this explained by stated that these are cases where the people have not met with something for which they had not created the karma.<sup>33</sup>

Since karma is specific, it is *not* transferable. Even if a person desired to take on other peoples' karma, they cannot do so. Beings cannot be relieved from their negative karma by others' wishes. Similarly, a Buddha (an enlightened being) cannot take on one's negative karma. If enlightened beings were able to, they would have done so out of their great compassion, and all living beings would be enlightened. However, the attitude of desiring to take on others' suffering and giving happiness, trains us to be able to do the work of a Buddha.

In sum, if an action is not performed, its result cannot be experienced. As mentioned, in a war when soldiers fight one another, some are killed and others survive. The survivors are

---

<sup>33</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 393.

not saved because they are braver than the others, but because they did not create the cause to die at that time.<sup>34</sup> Further, in the words of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso:<sup>35</sup>

We can find many other such examples in the daily newspapers. When a terrorist plants a bomb in a large building some people are killed while others escape in spite of being at the centre of the blast. When there is an aeroplane crash or a volcanic eruption some people are killed and others escape, although their survival seems like a miracle. In many accidents the survivors themselves are astonished by their escape and feel it is strange that others died who were so close to them when the disaster occurred. By meditating on this point we shall develop the strong determination: 'I will practice purification and engage only in virtuous actions'.

### ***Karma Is Never Wasted – Reaping Now and Later***

Karmic seeds may be *dormant* for a time, but they are *never lost*. They will come to fruition when the right conditions arise for ripening. An example in nature from inland Australian highlights this. Normally, rainfall in central Australia is minimal, and acutely so during years of drought. Then, once in about a generation, heavy rains come. The entire landscape is carpeted in spectacular floral beauty. Interestingly, all during the drought years, the seeds existed, lying dormant in the ground – but the necessary condition of rain did not allow them to bloom.

---

<sup>34</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 233.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

Whenever we engage in any action, the karmic imprint of that action is established in our consciousness. This is an immediate consequence. The karmic imprint will then continue to be carried in the consciousness until the conditions are right for it to ripen.

In other words, once karma is created, it will not disappear of its own accord. "Karma does not grow stale after a long time," writes Pabongka Rinpoche, "nor does it lessen, become non-existent, and so on."<sup>36</sup> Clearly, being mindful of all our actions is vitally important.

For those who contemplate the possibility of past lives, the causes for certain outcomes may be created in one life, but the results will come forth in another life. Therefore, due to its delayed fruition, karma remains a hidden factor, veiled and unknown.

An example illustrates. A person might observe that some people are well-off, but also stingy, and conclude "I don't believe in karma." However, such wealthy, but miserly, people do *not* disprove karma. Since there is a law of cause and effect, one may conclude that their wealth has come from generosity in the past. True, they may be tight now, which is opposite to the cause of their wealth. Their miserliness may well cause them financial difficulties and loss in a future life. In other words, karma is an unseen factor, operating across lifetimes, and peoples' present wealth is not related to their current miserly approach.

---

<sup>36</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 395.

In sum, an action is never wasted. The Buddha stated: "The actions of living beings are never wasted even though hundreds of eons may pass before their effects are experienced."<sup>37</sup> In the words of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso:<sup>38</sup>

Actions cannot simply vanish and we cannot give them away to someone else and thus avoid our responsibility. Although the momentary mental intentions that initiated our past actions have ceased, the potentialities they have created in our mind do not cease until they have ripened. The only way to destroy negative potentialities before they ripen as suffering is to do purification with the four opponent powers. [This is described later in the book.]

### ***Modifying Behavior***

When we see how karma works, it prompts faith and conviction in the inevitable law of cause and effect – as well as a corresponding desire to change our behavior accordingly. The spiritual classic, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, presents a tenfold path dealing with virtuous and non-virtuous karma. It is an overall scheme describing virtue and non-virtue – and gives a framework for modifying behavior.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 234.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 396.

The ten non-virtues, or behaviors to abandon, are: killing, taking things not given, and sexual misconduct (non-virtues of the body); lying, divisive speech, harsh words, and idle gossip (non-virtues of speech); and covetousness, harmful intent, and wrong views (non-virtues of the mind).<sup>40</sup> Their specific outcomes are described in greater detail in a later chapter.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 398.



## **Six Ways Actions Create Results**

There are six ways in which our actions have definite, on-going consequences – from the past, in the present, and into the future<sup>41</sup>:

### ***Past Actions (Remembering)***

When we remember or ponder actions we did in the past, there will continue to be a good feeling if we've expressed goodness, generosity, or kindness. Likewise, when we reflect on actions in which we hurt or harmed a person, we will continue to experience feelings of regret. As an example, I'll never forget the smiles of appreciation when one morning while teaching in Asia, I brought out fresh bread to immigrant laborers by the roadside, waiting for the worker's bus to pick them up. By contrast, I am still saddened over having gotten angry with an academic advisor who had my interests at heart, even though at the time it didn't seem the case.

### ***Present Actions (Doing)***

In performing actions in the present, it feels heartwarming to give, to love, or to help. Likewise, it feels rather awful to hurt someone. If we are sensitive, we can experience these feelings in the moment. For instance, as I write, my wife is also writing at her computer – if I were to go and give her a shoulder massage, I know I would feel good about it as I did it. By contrast, if I yelled

---

<sup>41</sup> I am indebted to Guy Armstrong for the insights in this section, given in his presentation entitled "Emptiness and Karma " (2012-12-04) at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. <http://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/79/> Accessed December 17, 2012.

at her about being late for an appointment shortly, I would be the first to feel badly in losing my temper.

### ***Future Actions (Planning)***

When we think about doing something, we will feel good just thinking about it, if the action is wholesome and kind. On the other hand, if we are thinking of something that is hurtful, it does not feel good – and we immediately feel it. An example comes to mind with Christmas approaching. Just thinking about surprising my wife’s ninety year-old father brings a feeling of joy. By contrast, thinking of having to go to our neighbor’s teenager and to ask him to turn down the volume of his music doesn’t feel so good – since there may be some sort of confrontation involved.

### ***Human Relations (How People Relate to Us)***

If we are consistently warm, friendly, and thoughtful toward people, then they will like to see us coming and will welcome our presence. On the other hand, if we are critical, judgmental, and angry, then others will feel that energy, back off, and not be so welcoming.

### ***Personality and Character (Habitual Mind States)***

Whatever we frequently ponder on, that will become the inclination of our mind. For example, if we think about serving with compassion or kindness, then our mind will incline in those directions. Similarly, if ill will, cruelty, or sense desires dominate our mind, then these will shape our lives. Our habitual states of mind create grooves in the mind. Neuroscientists are finding what the Buddha understood centuries ago: “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” Our thoughts lead to intentions, which lead to actions, which lead to habits, and from habits we build

character. Clearly then, we need to closely watch our thoughts, and to let them spring forth from love for all beings. Our thought impulses will become set over time, forming our personality and character.

### ***Results of Actions in Future Lives***

Humanly, we cannot work out or verify for ourselves how karma unfolds in the future. It is one of the imponderables in this life.

While we cannot see or understand the results of actions appearing in the future, there are many teaching stories in the suttas relating to this. For example, there was a wealthy man in the time of the Buddha who did not enjoy his wealth. The reason is that in a previous life, he gave to a holy being, but then regretted it because of stinginess.

The Buddha, unlike us, could see the workings of karma – since the range of his mind was vast. Mostly, when people say “I don’t believe in karma” they are referring to this one way of not witnessing how actions create results – the fact that we cannot see the mysterious workings of future karmic results. However, we can observe how karma operates in the first five ways – the fact that actions have definite results in the present.

The wrong action seems sweet to the fool until the reaction comes and brings pain, and the bitter fruits of wrong deeds have then to be eaten by the fool.

*(The Dhammapada: The Fool, 69.)*

A wrong action may not bring its reaction at once, even as fresh milk turns not sour at once: like a smouldering fire concealed under ashes it consumes the wrongdoer, the fool.

*(The Dhammapada: The Fool, 71.)*



**PART 2: PRESENT KARMA**

The mind is fickle and flighty, it flies after fancies wherever it likes: it is difficult indeed to restrain. But it is a great good to control the mind; a mind self-controlled is a source of great joy.

*(The Dhammapada: The Mind, 35.)*

Invisible and subtle is the mind, and it flies after fancies wherever it likes; but let the wise man guard well his mind, for a mind well guarded is a source of great joy.

*(The Dhammapada: The Mind, 36.)*

# Mindfulness

Mindfulness is being aware about our thoughts, words, and actions – and, in the context of this book, it relates to *minding our karma*.

More specifically, mindfulness is a clear awareness of the present moment. A person is open to and accepts the way things are in the present with kindness – without trying to manipulate or change things. The result is a greater ability to dwell in harmony and peace with the present. In daily life, mindfulness contributes to a peaceful, stress-free mind. It is cultivated through personal practice.

To practice in daily life, the first step is to establish a regular, daily meditation practice. We quickly learn that this takes discipline – it's simply not easy to set aside time each day for meditation. Yet, no one can do it for us. With many techniques and traditions available, we can each find one most suitable for us. However, the regularity of practice is what brings about a transformation. Otherwise, we end up continuing to act out the various patterns of our conditioning.

## ***Practicing Mindfulness***

Venerable Thubten Lhundrup describes the practice of mindfulness in this way:<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Thubten Lhundrup, Ven., *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles* (Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004), 45.

By practicing mindfulness we can become discerning about the thoughts we let into our mind. More importantly, we can check our motivation for carrying out an action. What are the consequences of the action? Is it an action that will create happiness or suffering for others and myself? Is the action motivated by the thought of cherishing myself at the expense of others? Is there a more skillful way to handle this situation?

If we can develop mindfulness, we begin to take control of our mind rather than be controlled by it. Less stress, improved concentration and a feeling of more control over our lives are all possible if we make the effort.

### ***Certainty of Karma***

Mindfulness, then, makes us more aware of the certainty of the law of karma – how our positive actions can only produce helpful results, while negative actions can only produce negative outcomes. The reverse is never possible. This awareness, writes Lhundrup, involves "the willingness and motivation to investigate, analyze and identify the positive or negative, constructive or destructive influences and states of mind."<sup>43</sup>

It is crucial, therefore, to be aware of our actions and to understand their consequences. Lhundrup adds:<sup>44</sup>

This is not an easy process. It takes great effort to be diligent and maintain a virtuous mind. It is said it is not possible for a negative thought to be in our mind at the

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



same time as a positive thought. Considering this, we need to consciously cultivate the positive thoughts and swamp the negative ones, outnumber them, rather than fighting them and getting frustrated when they dominate.

With the practice of meditation we can familiarize our mind with appropriate thoughts. Meditation also allows us to contemplate the teachings of Buddha and relate them to our own experience. This is the way to transform mere intellectual knowledge into profound, life-changing realizations.

Thus, through mindfulness, with meditation, we can develop a positive state of mind, marked by peace, happiness, and well being. We can also counteract our own anger, unhappiness, and other negative states of mind.

A positive frame of mind is our responsibility to cultivate and then to maintain. We need to be discerning and discriminating with the input our minds receive via the Internet, television, videos, newspapers, magazines, and other people. Many of the influences are negative; fewer are positive. Continually guarding our minds to minimize the harmful effects is vital.

### ***Karma Mindfulness Checklist***

By glancing at the table found at the end of this section, *Karma Mindfulness Checklist*, we can do a quick spot self-check any time during a day to help maintain an awareness of mindfulness and karma.

Understanding how the law of karma works, together with mindfulness, we can confidently begin to *create the causes* for

future happiness, rather than simply fall prey to continued misery. Lhundrup adds that "while there may be a considerable delay between the action and its karmic result [although there is also an immediate result in the moment of an action], we can experience profound changes in our lives by modifying our actions."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, a more peaceful mind, greater contentment, less worry, less stress, and deeper happiness – all these are possible, as well a more profound love and compassion for those close to us and for all living beings. We thereby create happiness not only for ourselves, but also for all those we come into contact with.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, with mindfulness we become aware when internal, underlying intentions of attachment or aversion arise. These mind states quickly begin to destroy our peace and contentment, like a sudden squall destroying the tranquility of a lake. It would be interesting to observe the mind to monitor how often peaceful or deluded mind states arise.

With mindfulness, external problems no longer have the same power to disturb our mind, unless we react to them with anger, ill will, or hatred. If these are not present, we would have no delusions, and even our enemies could not destroy our peace of mind.

In the *Majjhima Nikaya* it is stated this way:<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Thubten Lhundrup, Ven., *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles* (Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004), 42.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted from Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 21.

Buddha spoke thus once to his disciples: The words of men to you can be of five kinds: at the right time or at the wrong time, true or false, gentle or bitter, profitable or unprofitable, kindly or resentful.

If men speak evil of you, this must you think: 'Our heart shall not waver; and we will abide in compassion, in loving-kindness, without resentment. We will think of the man who speaks ill of us with thoughts of love, and in our thoughts of love shall we dwell. And from that abode of love we will fill the whole world with far-reaching, wide-spreading, boundless love'.

Moreover, if robbers should attack you and cut you in pieces with a two-handed saw, limb by limb, and one of you should feel hate, such a one is not a follower of my gospel.

Finally, it is through our consciousness that we have feelings. And, it is with feelings that we can we experience the ripened effects of actions. Non-virtuous actions result in unpleasant feelings; virtuous actions result in pleasant feelings.

## ***Karma Mindfulness Checklist***

	<i>Non-Virtuous Actions (Causes of misery)</i>	<i>Virtuous Actions (Causes of happiness)</i>
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Delusion?</li> <li>▪ Greed?</li> <li>▪ Hatred?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Wisdom?</li> <li>▪ Generosity?</li> <li>▪ Compassion?</li> </ul>
Body	▪ Killing?	▪ Protecting?
	▪ Stealing?	▪ Giving?
	▪ Sexual misdeed?	▪ Faithfulness?
Speech	▪ Lying?	▪ Truthful?
	▪ Divisive?	▪ Conciliatory?
	▪ Hurtful?	▪ Kind?
	▪ Meaningless?	▪ Needful?
Mind	▪ Covetous?	▪ Thankful?
	▪ Ill-will?	▪ Goodwill?
	▪ Wrong view?	▪ Right view?
Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unpleasant feelings?</li> <li>▪ Sadness, grief?</li> <li>▪ Anger?</li> <li>▪ Fear?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pleasant feelings?</li> <li>▪ Happiness?</li> <li>▪ Patience?</li> <li>▪ Calm, peacefulness?</li> </ul>
Memories	▪ Unwholesome?	▪ Wholesome?
Images	▪ Unpleasant?	▪ Pleasant?

## ***Guarding Our Karma***

Understanding karma (how actions of mind, body, and speech lead to definite consequences), begins to motivate us to exercise care and caution in our behavior. A cautionary approach like this can be described as *guarding our karma*. In other words, we seek to become more alert and mindful of what we are thinking, saying, and doing from moment to moment. We ask ourselves: “What is presently happening in my body and senses, in my heart and feelings, in my mind and thoughts? What is causing me to experience suffering or happiness?”

Mindfulness means recognizing that all our actions, with their underlying intentions, all leave immediate impressions on our consciousness. These impressions or imprints will also ripen at a future time – either in this life, or possibly in future lifetimes. They will then give rise to experiences of either pleasure and happiness, or misery and unhappiness.

The following table, *Mindfulness with the Acronym RAIN*, gives an overview for coming into the present moment. This occurs through **r**ecognizing, **a**ccepting, **i**nvestigating, and **n**ot identifying with what is presently happening.

<b><i>Mindfulness with the Acronym RAIN</i></b>	
Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognize or see <i>what</i> is happening now – softly name or label any bodily sensations, thoughts, and/or feelings noticed (for example, "pain", "tiredness"; "thinking", "judging"; "sadness", "fear").</li> <li>▪ Observe whether the experiences are "pleasant", "unpleasant", or "neutral".</li> </ul>
Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accept <i>what</i> is presently noticed – without any attachment or aversion.</li> <li>▪ Acknowledge this is how things are in this moment – and <i>not</i> react.</li> </ul>
Investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Notice any <i>interpretations</i> of the experiences (also remember their changing nature).</li> <li>▪ Check in with your <i>attitude</i> or motivation – is it rooted in craving (attachment), aversion (hatred), or delusion (wrong views)?</li> </ul>
Non-identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Neither adjust nor accept the interpretations of the experiences – simply notice them.</li> <li>▪ Let any interpretations just pass away.</li> </ul>
<p>Source: The acronym is from insight meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield, and was described in Anne Ihnen and Carolyn Flynn, <i>The Complete Idiot's Guide to Mindfulness</i> (New York: Alpha Books, 2008), 41-42. Adapted by author.</p>	

### ***On Being Mindful***

When tempted with an impatient, angry response on my part, I now try to ask myself: "Do I really want to say that?" If I do, I know I will place negative seeds on my own mind stream. These will yield a harvest later (there is no way around it, because karma is definite) – unless, of course, I sincerely regret the action, resolving not to act that way again.

Additionally, I am now aware that I am responsible for planting negative karmic seeds on another person's mind stream, which will also sprout later.

The irony in all this is that the initial conflict may well remain unresolved if my impatience and anger persist. To angrily respond, therefore, would only create negative karma – with potential negative long-term effects for all!

In our mindfulness, we can observe the temporary nature of our thoughts. Our thoughts typically follow the pattern shown below (the four patterns are synonymous):

<b><i>Impermanent Nature of Thoughts</i></b>			
Birth	Arise	Come	Arrive
Live	Abide	Stay	Visit
Die	Absent	Go	Depart

Mindfulness allows us to live more fully. In their book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Mindfulness*, authors Ihnen and Flynn list the benefits of mindfulness. It will enable you to:<sup>48</sup>

- Gain clarity about your talents and skills.
- See what's really going on around you – with all your faculties.
- Reduce stress and tap into your own inner healing power.
- Work through anger with compassion and clarity.
- Lessen disappointment and frustration.

---

<sup>48</sup> Anne Ihnen and Carolyn Flynn, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Mindfulness* (New York: Alpha Books, 2008).

- Listen deeply to those around you – and to your own inner voice.
- Banish anxiety and transcend fear.
- Breathe with awareness to nourish your body and soul.

From a karma standpoint, these wholesome actions will yield present and future well-being.

The following *Mindfulness Monitor* is a tool to help develop more present moment awareness without constantly judging or evaluating one's own thoughts.



<b><i>Mindfulness Monitor</i></b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Realize that the mind can be like a clear, blue sky, where thoughts and feelings are like passing weather patterns.</li> <li>▪ Let your mind be more open, clear, equanimous, spacious, as well as nonjudgmental and non-reactive.</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Try to simply notice (be aware of) the following, without creating stories of <i>attachment</i>, <i>aversion</i>, or <i>delusion</i>:</li> </ul>		
Body (senses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ sight?</li> <li>▪ sound?</li> <li>▪ smell?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ taste?</li> <li>▪ touch?</li> <li>▪ pain?</li> </ul>
Speech (words)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ timing?</li> <li>▪ truthful?</li> <li>▪ needful?</li> <li>▪ kind?</li> <li>▪ reconciling?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ill-timed?</li> <li>▪ untruthful?</li> <li>▪ unprofitable?</li> <li>▪ unkind?</li> <li>▪ divisive?</li> </ul>
Mind (thoughts and feelings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ past?</li> <li>▪ future?</li> <li>▪ present?</li> </ul>	If <i>thoughts</i> are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ virtuous? → happiness</li> <li>▪ non-virtuous? → unhappiness</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ feelings?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ pleasant? unpleasant? neutral?</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ concepts?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ constructive? ▪ destructive?</li> </ul>

### ***Immediate Karma***

Mindfulness, then, means seeing the mechanism of karma at work in our everyday life – *all the time*. While there may be a time lapse between the harm we produce and the harm that returns to us, some consequences of our harmful actions are

experienced immediately. According to Jon Landaw, co-author of *Buddhism for Dummies*:<sup>49</sup>

The very moment we give into the destructive mind of hatred, we have already lost our peace of mind. We have already contaminated our own mind by allowing it to fall under the influence of this poisonous delusion.

Therefore, . . . we have to be aware of hatred and the other delusions the moment they arise, and apply the appropriate antidote. The most important thing for us to do is set a watch or guard over our actions of body, speech, and mind to make sure that what we are doing, saying, and – most fundamentally of all – what we are thinking is not creating the causes for further suffering. In other words, we want to eliminate from our mental and emotional repertoire such self-destructive attitudes as hatred, greed, jealousy, arrogance, and closed-mindedness.

All these and similarly poisonous states of mind are known as *delusions*. In Buddhist psychology, a delusion (Sanskrit: *klesha*) is defined as a mental state that disturbs our mind the moment it arises. . . . They are states of mind which, when they arise, automatically destroy our peace of mind, creating a sense of dis-ease.

Furthermore, when we are under the sway of these inner disturbances, we are impelled to engage in unskillful and

---

<sup>49</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Subject Area 13: Introduction to Tantra", teachings and meditations by Jon Landaw (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005), 9-11.

destructive actions of body, speech and mind. When the seeds planted by these negative actions eventually ripen, we are exposed to the dangers of future suffering. As the saying goes, “What goes around comes around.”

Immediate karma came to mind yesterday in the writing of this book. My wife received a business reply email from a gentleman who knows the family well and our writing as a husband-wife team. What perturbed me was how he only addressed Eva in his email – without acknowledging or passing on regards to me. Not that I am possessive of our relationship; however, I felt that it is a courtesy to acknowledge the other person in a husband-wife relationship when writing emails over time.

Even though it was a minor issue, I became quite annoyed and regrettably let it turn into anger. I strongly felt that I needed to write the gentleman an email to teach him some email etiquette. In my mind, I began composing an email with an underlying corrective tone. Fortunately, mindfulness returned, and in looking back, I see the power of mindfulness to alleviate suffering. I chose not to react with an irate response. From the moment I made the decision to "drop the charge", an abiding peacefulness returned. I had avoided what could have easily escalated into an unpleasant exchange with the gentleman. Eva congratulated me on passing a "karma test"!

This experience taught me a number of lessons about *immediate karma*: Positive actions of the mind bring positive results. Actions not engaged, will not bring results (similarly, once an action is done, the result will not be lost). Taking responsibility for my thoughts, words, and actions is wisdom and compassion. We do have the ability to transform our mind,

heart, and life for the better – as well as benefitting others. Our situation in life is the result of our actions – and so we must take full responsibility for our lives.

### ***Karmic Creation of Our World***

Furthermore, through mindfulness we come to realize that it is through the activities of body, speech, and mind that we relate to the world. In the words of Landaw:<sup>50</sup>

If the predominant force in our life is hatred, then we shall always be having angry thoughts towards others, which is to say that we shall constantly be creating destructive mental karma.

This will automatically give rise to such destructive verbal and physical activities as lying, stealing, fighting, and killing. As a result, we are continually accumulating negative karma, and this karma itself creates the world of appearances that we shall experience in the future. In other words, the frightening world that appears to the criminally insane person is a karmic vision created by his or her hatred-filled mind of the past, while the world that appears to His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a vision created by his lifetimes of practice of wisdom and compassion.

### ***"We Are in Charge"***

From mindfulness of karma arises a fundamental realization: to a large degree, we are in charge! Drawing on Landaw once more, he elaborates this as follows:<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Subject Area 13: Introduction to Tantra", teachings and meditations by Jon Landaw (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005), 17-20.

The type of world that appears to us is there due to the actions of body, speech, and mind that we ourselves have engaged in the past. In brief, the way our mind operates determines the kind of world we come to experience. The notion that the things that make up our personal universe are self-existent entities waiting somewhere "out there" for us to come along and experience – in other words, that we are merely passive observers of a world that exists independently from ourselves – is completely mistaken.

So if we choose to live a life governed by jealousy, hatred, spite, and arrogance, we are eventually going to find ourselves living in a [personal] universe that reflects these same harmful and ultimately self-destructive qualities. On the other hand, if we rid our mind of all of such defilements and live instead with wisdom, faith, open-heartedness, and even-mindedness, then our experience of the world will be positive and fulfilling.

In sum, mindfulness helps us to understand and to see how karma unfolds. Two facets of mindfulness are critical. The first is *attention to our actions* – that is, being attentive to what we are doing and what is happening. The second is *awareness of our purpose* – that is, being aware of our motivation and also knowing whether our actions are skillful or unskillful. Recognizing these two aspects of mindfulness is vital in that

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

each moment of mind generates an outcome. Goldstein and Kornfield add the following:<sup>52</sup>

When mindfulness is weak, we have little sense of clear comprehension or suitability of purpose. Not only may we be unaware of our intentions, we often are not even paying attention to the action itself, hence we may be propelled by habitual patterns into actions that bring painful results. *The deep understanding that actions condition results creates a compelling interest in what we do.* We begin to pay quite meticulous attention; we begin to *awaken.* *Not only does each action, no matter how insignificant it may seem, condition a future result, it also reconditions the mind.* If a moment of anger arises in the mind and we get lost in it, we are then actually cultivating anger. If we get lost in greed, we are cultivating greed. It is like a bucket being filled with water, drop by drop. We think each drop is so tiny, so insignificant, that it doesn't matter at all. Yet drop by drop the bucket gets filled. In just this way, the mind is conditioned by each experience in every moment, and moment after moment the mind gets filled. *We should have a tremendous respect for the conditioning power of the mind, not only in terms of our present experience, but also in terms of our future direction.*

---

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

## **Karmic Awareness**

Karma plays an ongoing role in the *present reality* of our lives. Often we are unmindful of, or completely oblivious to, how cause and effect continually operates – and we hurt and suffer needlessly. By reflecting on karma, we can understand and live life in a more fulfilling way.

Of course, we can never look at somebody and know what karmic themes are at work in their lives, or why they suffered an apparently random tragedy or disaster. While a person may choose, or not choose, to believe in past and future lives,<sup>53</sup> such metaphysical questions should not detract us from our present, firsthand experience of life – and seeing the active and forceful law of karma working in all aspects of life.

### ***Present Karma***

If we are mindful, we will notice the *immediate effects* of different mind states. With awareness, we will discern how different states of mind – such as love, fear, or greed – will always result in either happiness or unhappiness.

In other words, if we pay attention to our experiences, we will observe how our present actions of mind, body, and speech bring about different and instant results. This is how karma plays out in our lives in the present moment – how we live it

---

<sup>53</sup> Questions about past and future rebirths, and their relation to karma, become complex. Such discussions can become purely speculative and unhelpful. While we can accept the reality of a future existence, the specific details thereof remain a mystery. Perhaps this is not unlike Christians discussing heaven – again, definitive answers are elusive.

experientially. This is, of course, not just Buddhist theory or philosophy (although Buddhism has refined mindfulness and meditation practices over the centuries).

Ask yourself, for example: How do I feel when my mind is truthful, or untruthful? Notice how there is a present, immediate karmic result.

Observe also present karma in how people relate to us as we express different mind states. What responses do we get when we are greedy, or generous? Again, there is an immediate result that we can see in how people respond.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Creating Negative Karma***

When we feel wronged, we may also feel a strong desire to defend ourselves. If we choose to settle the score through vengeance, we automatically create negative karma. If we yield to harboring anger and resentment, we also create negative karma in our mind stream – and which in due time will ripen. There is no escape from the consequences of such an action, and eventually we suffer, because this is how the law of karma works.

On the other hand, if we sincerely regret holding on to anger, and learn from the mistake of it (knowing that it is only harming ourselves more than anyone), then the anger in our mind stream concerning the particular issue is eliminated – and will not ripen in the future.

---

<sup>54</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks (2012-05-02 "Karma") at <http://dharmafeed.org/teacher/96/>



In sum, whenever we inflict hurt on others, we create negative karma for ourselves – both as an immediate unhappy mind state, as well as further unhappiness down the line.

### ***Memories***

It's a wonder to ponder how our mind continuously, throughout our lives and at all times, records and retains all the impressions of our experiences. Then, how often do our memories – these impressions of past actions and events – become the source of either happiness or suffering? When we think of past *wholesome* actions, happiness, joy, and delight inevitably arise in the mind. By contrast, when we think of bygone *unwholesome* actions, unavoidably there is a degree of suffering in the mind.

As an illustration, I recall becoming outraged with an academic advisor in my postgraduate studies – at the time, I felt that the advisor had clearly not acted professionally and I had suffered grievously as a result. Years later, this episode all came flooding back to my mind, vividly, together with much remorse and regret. I felt it very deeply. The impressions were all there.

Furthermore, impressions from the past can also include and take the form of *internalized feelings* that were part of the experience – perhaps rage, unworthiness, fear, grief. These have likewise been imbedded in our mind stream, and can surface at any time in the future.

We all carry both unwholesome and wholesome memories in our mind. These memories can be in the form of thoughts, images, moods, or emotions, and a combination thereof.

When painful memories of the past arise in the mind, rather than reliving these impressions, let them wash through.

As an illustration, we might remember hurtful words, prompted by anger, spoken to us in the past. As these memories arise, a feeling of unhappiness will inescapably occur. This is the law of karma in operation. At such a time, the best course of action is to let the memories simply come, stay, and go – but not to start identifying with them, analyzing the situation, proving that you were "in the right", and so forth. Such thinking only prolongs the state of unhappiness.

In sum, whenever memories arise, sit in a soft and receptive way – and allow them to come up. Be present to them; bring your awareness to these impressions held in the mind. This is part of the purifying or cleansing process – it is karmic unburdening.<sup>55</sup> In time they will pass.

You may wish to reflect for a moment, whether the memories are rooted in wholesome or unwholesome motivations. If we can discern impure motives associated with the memories, the inexorable outcome will be a feeling of unhappiness. Be present to this, and with kindness, accept it as how things are in this moment. Memories linked with pure motives will inevitably be happy memories.

### ***Happiness and Misery***

Through being mindful of our thoughts, words, and actions, we begin to realize that any happiness we experience comes from previously created positive actions. Such

---

<sup>55</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks (2012-05-02 "Karma") at <http://dharmafeed.org/teacher/96/>

understanding encourages us to act constructively in the future – and not to neglect opportunities for kindness and service when they appear.

On the other hand, in one form or another, difficulties and suffering in life will occur. These can be occasions for reflecting on the types of action we may have carried out, and that have now created the causes for our present problems. Additionally, such introspection empowers us to be more aware of what we think, say, and do – thereby leads us to change our unskillful behavior, and in the process plants positive seeds in our mind stream, to then experience pleasing outcomes in the future.

### ***Interacting with Others***

In our interactions with others, as alluded to earlier, we can become mindful not to create further negative karma – both for ourselves and for others. That is, we can be attentive and discerning in not placing ourselves into situations where we generate negative karma. We can also be more aware of our karmic propensities, such as being easily provoked or angered.

A personal illustration of this follows. I recall a cantankerous person who had a tendency to grizzle about a lot of things, especially when circumstances did not go his way. Inside I would get annoyed for him not changing his manner, and my inability to do anything about it. One day, he was especially disagreeable – and my karmic seeds were about to ripen (due to my own karmic propensity toward anger). In the end, it was an unpleasant encounter with anger on my part, then causing anger on his side.

In looking back, I realize that all my angry thoughts were simply placing more negative karmic seeds on my own mind

stream – ready for harvesting later, with increased and worse future outcomes. As a result of this experience, I found that *silence* – after doing all that could be reasonably done – to be the best strategy. In that way, no negative seeds were placed on my mind stream, or on the other person's mind stream.

### ***Cause of Our Unhappiness***

Indeed, the law of karma has immediate, practical value in daily life. We realize that our misery is often *not* caused by others – but may solely be the result of our own karma. "As with all our experiences of suffering," writes Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, "it is the creation of our own deluded mind."<sup>56</sup> If we wish to avoid experiencing suffering, then we need to abandon non-virtuous actions and delusions.

An illustration follows of someone becoming irate or enraged with us, and causes us hurt. Such situations can be viewed from an entirely new perspective with an understanding of karma. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso offers for consideration his rather different view:<sup>57</sup>

When someone becomes angry with us and causes us harm, we serve as the object provoking that anger. If we were not present, his anger would not arise. The harm we receive is the ripening fruit of our own karma, our own actions done in the past, and in relation to it we should practice patient endurance. If we practice patience in this way we shall experience happiness and peace of mind not

---

<sup>56</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Meaningful to Behold: Becoming a Friend of the World* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2008), 239.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-240.

only in this life but in future lives as well. Looked at in this way as an object of our patience, the person who has harmed us is seen as the source of our happiness. If we overcome our narrow-mindedness and take a comprehensive view of the situation, we shall understand that his harmful actions are in fact a source of great benefit.

But what will our attacker experience from generating anger and harming us? Because we provided an object for his anger, he will find unhappiness in this life and plant seeds for a future hellish rebirth [if, for example, his anger persists and even becomes uncontrollable rage]. In fact, therefore, we have harmed him and he has benefited us! If this is so, why should we become angry with him? By giving harm he has allowed us to practice patience, a practice that, if done properly and with the correct motivation, can purify us of accumulated non-virtue and bring us great merit. On the other hand, what we have done for him by serving as his object of anger is allow him to create much non-virtue impelling him towards the lower realms. To become angry with such an unfortunate, ill-destined benefactor is surely the behavior of an unruly, distorted mind.

### ***Reaping the Fruit of Actions***

As we reflect on the law of karma – the law of actions and their effects – we realize that we normally reap the fruit of our own actions. We receive good for good, and evil for evil. Therefore, we can remain inwardly peaceful and calm – even in the midst of adverse circumstances. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso adds a thought to ponder: "We can view the harm we receive with a

sense of relief, seeing our pain as the repayment of a long-standing debt. This is certainly preferable to becoming angry and upset, which only incurs the future debt of more pain and anguish."<sup>58</sup>

With an awareness of the law of karma, dealing with problems, such as anger and retaliation, offers fresh possibilities. We recognize that undesirable situations can be a reflection of our own faults and shortcomings. When someone verbally abuses us, for example, we could muse: "I wouldn't be suffering this harm now, if I hadn't abused someone similarly in the past." The same thinking might be used for sickness, injury, or any other problem.<sup>59</sup> If our misery, such as our antagonism and resentment, is not created by others – but is only due to our own karma – then we can ask ourselves, why direct our anger toward others?

From personal experience, practicing non-retaliation is not easy and feels quite unnatural. It goes against deeply ingrained patterns of behavior. What Geshe Kelsang Gyatso writes bears reflecting on: "Whenever we are harmed, abused, criticized and so forth the opportunity arises to create great accumulations of merit. Our adversary, therefore, should be seen as what he really is: a great benefactor who fulfils all our wishes."<sup>60</sup> Of course referred to here are the encounters of anger, antagonism, and resentment that may occur from time to time on life's journey – not serious cases of bodily abuse and so forth.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 240.

## ***Fairness in a Moral Universe***

The law of karma ensures justice in a moral universe. It means that an in-built justice system operates behind the scenes. No one gets away with anything! This implies that we do not need to retaliate or fight back in personal relationships. Envy and jealousy towards others are also unnecessary. If another person has caused harm, the law of karma will bring its own retribution on the afflicter of harm. Our response ought to be one of compassion – and not smug glee. (In cases of severe abuse or harm, calling on civil authorities such as police and counselors is of course necessary.)

When lived, this understanding brings a deep peace of mind. A recent personal experience highlighted this. My wife and I visited a restaurant, set in a serene part of town and overlooking a lake, as part of a small end-of-year celebration. When our meals arrived, our jaws dropped. Instead of receiving our main meal, it was as though we had been served appetizers – the portions were tiny! Others in our group quietly nodded and agreed in amazement.

Viewing this dining incident through the eyes of karma, a shift occurred in my mental outlook. In the past, I would have felt irate and annoyed with the establishment. Clearly we had been fleeced. Now, rather than feeling overly upset, a compassion welled up within me. There was a calmness and equanimity. Soberly I realized that if the owners of the restaurant are taking advantage of patrons in this manner, unbeknown to them there will be definite karmic consequences at some time in the future – they too will suffer, and to a greater degree than I was in consuming my child's portion meal when I had paid for an adult plate.

I left the restaurant in peace, thanking the waitresses for their service, and was grateful for the splendid setting. Inside I also felt a tenderness and compassion for all those who suffer, and will continue to suffer in ignorance of a law such as karma.

In short, karma affirms the teaching that "what goes around comes around". For that reason, it makes sense to skillfully and wisely live the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as we would have them do unto us", since we will inevitably find ourselves on the receiving end of what we give to others.

At times we will feel regret in life – feeling remorse for actions done in the past. Such regret can be positive when the faults and disadvantages of non-virtuous actions are recognized. However, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso encourages that "we need to develop regret for past negative actions before their effects have ripened. There is no point in feeling regret for non-virtuous actions whose effects have already ripened because it is too late to do anything about them. . . . Developing regret for negative actions that have already ripened only causes us to feel dejected. It is better patiently to accept our misfortune."<sup>61</sup>

In sum, while it is good to patiently endure one's troubles, there is also wisdom in thinking how to protect oneself from hardship or adversity in the future by not accumulating more negative karma in a mindless way.

### ***Dream Analogy***

A dream analogy, together with karmic understanding, can help us to perceive our present "reality" in a deeper and more

---

<sup>61</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Understanding the Mind: The Nature and Power of the Mind* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2002), 256.



profound way. What appears before us is, of course, very real – but the appearances are only real to the waking state of mind to which they are appearing.

The question then arises: Why have these appearances occurred? The answer is because of something we did, said, or thought previously. In other words, the way we perceive appearances has to do with the karma we created in the past – how we acted, spoke, or thought. This determines the type of experiences we have in the present. An example might be that if we have in the past always viewed people suspiciously, critically, and disparagingly, then we will see people this way today.

Our present experiences could be considered as "day dreams"<sup>62</sup> (not in the sense of a visionary fantasy indulged in while awake), while our experience at night might involve "night dreams". Both are mere experiences to our mind only – not to other peoples' minds.

The night dreams we have are also influenced by what occurred previously. For example, if we watched a horror movie during the evening, then we may experience a nightmare – which to us is a very real experience, resulting even in perspiration upon waking up.

---

<sup>62</sup> Jon Landaw uses the contrasting terms "waking dream" and "sleeping dream" in FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Subject Area 13: Introduction to Tantra", teachings and meditations by Jon Landaw (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005), 17-20.

In sum, drawing on the words of Jon Landaw:<sup>63</sup>

What is appearing to our mind at the moment is doing so not because there is something self-existent "out there" totally separate from ourselves, but because of the kind of karma we have created, because of the kind of mind we have cultivated. If we had a different kind of mind, something different would be appearing to us right now.

And all of these appearances would be "true" for the mind to which they were appearing, but they would have no "truth" or "reality" beyond that.

To repeat, things are only true in relation to the mind to which they are appearing. It is to that extent, and only to that extent, that they are true, or real – but that is enough.

So, the choice is ours: What kind of waking dream do we want to have? Do we want a dream governed by self-cherishing, ignorance, and all the various delusions that arise from ignorance – such as, jealousy, hatred, attachment, arrogance, and so forth – or do we want to have the kind of dream that comes from having a completely unencumbered, pure, loving consciousness? Clearly most people would like to have this second kind of dream.

---

<sup>63</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Subject Area 13: Introduction to Tantra", teachings and meditations by Jon Landaw (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005), 17-20.

## *Personality*

The law of karma opens our understanding to how our unique personalities develop. Over time, through habitual modes of thinking, the mind develops habits and patterns of thought. This develops into personality. Some people become loving, kind, and peaceful by nature, while others are known to be angry, cantankerous, or belligerent. These patterns become our characteristic of our way of living – and they are very powerful forces to contend with. It was Ghandi who stated of himself: "My my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him I seem to have very, very little influence." These forces powerfully operate in ourselves and in the world (news broadcasts describing violent acts, war, racism, environmental destruction, and so on, all bear testimony to this).

Personality, then, is *not* a fixed pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that make a person unique. It has been formed and developed through repeated actions. Every time we act a particular way, we're practicing certain qualities. When we are loving, generous, greedy, or angry, then we are practicing those qualities. We are in that process now – and the question is: What are we developing, what are we strengthening in this moment? As a result, we should never underestimate the power of small actions.<sup>64</sup>

In their book, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Goldstein and Kornfield write:<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks (2012-05-02 "Karma") at <http://dharmafeed.org/teacher/96/>

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and

[Personality] comes about because each of us has in our own way, both consciously and unconsciously, cultivated different mind states. If we cultivate loving-kindness, we experience its taste in the moment and at the same time are strengthening it as a force in the mind, making it easier for it to arise again. When we are angry, we experience the suffering of that anger as present karma and are also strengthening that particular pattern of mind. Just as we condition our bodies in different ways through exercise or lack of it, so we also condition our minds. Every mind state, thought, or emotion that we experience repeatedly becomes stronger and more habituated. Who we are as personalities is a collection of all the tendencies of mind that have been developed, the particular energy configurations we have cultivated. We tend not to pay attention to this conditioning factor of our experience, thinking instead that once an experience has passed it is gone without residue or result. That would be like dropping a stone in water without creating any ripples. Each mind state that we experience further conditions and strengthens it.

In sum, over time, the actions we perform become habits, and these habits then form our personality and character. This sequence can be simply illustrated as follows:

Actions → habits → personality and character.

---

Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

## ***Relationships***

Our habits of thinking, speaking and acting (the causes) influence and can transform our interactions with others (the effects). In a way, the law of cause and effect is the true *creator of relationships*. As we relate to others in certain ways, people respond to us according to how we relate to them. In other words, whenever we act, speak or think, we create karma and that karma eventually ripens into painful, pleasurable, or neutral experiences for us, depending on the action. Clearly, karma is ceaselessly involved in how we interact with others.

An example of my email exchanges with Karl illustrates this. Over the years, Karl's emails have always been marked by politeness, respect, and goodwill. As a result, I found myself endeared to Karl which has prompted me to also reply in a gracious manner. By contrast, Neville's emails were blunt, curt, and sent without even a salutation. Regrettably, over time, I found myself feeling a certain aversion toward him.

In sum, in our relationships, as we accept one hundred percent responsibility for what we do, we can also accept what is done to us, because in many ways these two dimensions may be seen as ultimately the same thing!<sup>66</sup>

## ***Health and Well-Being***

At times we may live without awareness of consequences – as though there were none. Or, at least temporarily forget about them. We overwork, skimp on nutritious meals, harbor anxious thoughts, deprive ourselves of sleep, and neglect exercise. Yet, in

---

<sup>66</sup> Timothy Freke, *Encyclopedia of Spirituality: Information and Inspiration to Transform Your Life* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2000), 206.

reality, each one of these actions, however small, results in *immediate* and *future* consequences.

An illustration of awareness of cause and effect in health matters is seen in traditional Chinese traditional medicine. What we *think* and *feel* have great consequences for disease. For example, negative emotions and chronic stress are seen as strong triggers of the lethal conditions that lead to cancer. The reason for this is that our bodies are inseparable energy systems, with all their parts in constant interaction with all other parts – and these whole systems are all part of the immensely larger external universe.

We are comprised of *body*, *mind*, *emotions*, and *spirit*. Each aspect of ourselves needs to be lovingly nurtured. The natural and invisible, but real law of karma has a critical effect on our health and healing. Everything is connected, and everything has an effect on every other thing. Traditional Chinese medicine correctly emphasizes that prevention is critical – that it is important to treat the source (cause), not the symptoms (effects) of illness and disease. It also stresses that each one of us must take full responsibility of our health.

A specific example of how karma (cause and effect) operates in the human body is shown in the table that follows.

<b><i>Karma and the Human Body</i></b>	
Emotions (Cause)	Problems (Effect)
<i>Anger</i> – over a longer time	Liver function affected
<i>Worry</i> – over-thinking	Stomach and spleen function affected
<i>Sadness</i> – chronic	Healthy lung function affected
<i>Fear</i> – continual	Kidney function affected
<i>Happiness</i> – excess	Heart affected through excess joy
Source: Williams, Tom. <i>The Complete Illustrated Guide to Chinese Medicine: A Comprehensive System for Health and Fitness</i> . With a foreword by Dr. Han Liping. Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1996.	

We see a fundamental connection between emotional dysfunction (causes) and physical illnesses (effects). Our emotional states influence our bodies tremendously, manifesting as physical health or disease. Therefore, if we have participated in creating our ill-health, then we can also participate in the re-creation of our health! Our thoughts are real and have energy, and this energy creates.

Ultimately, we are each responsible for ourselves – for the quality of our lives, our attitudes, our beliefs, our emotions, our failures, our successes, and our health.

Apt concluding words are here taken from *The Creation of Health* by Caroline Myss:<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Caroline Myss and C. Norman Shealy, *The Creation of Health: The Emotional, Psychological, and Spiritual Responses That Promote Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 379.

The evidence illustrating the connection between human emotions and the condition of the physical body stands as tangible proof that the energy of our consciousness is real. And more than real, it is a creative force. . . .

At the very least, it suggests that to live unconsciously, that is, unaware of what we are thinking, feeling and thus creating, is threatening to our health, not to mention the other areas of our lives. It is simply not productive to deny one's own power. It is, in fact, self-defeating.

The other option, the higher one, is to learn to live consciously, developing skills of awareness and insight that release a person from having to feel victimized or controlled by life's challenges ever again. This quality of personal power transforms ordinary human consciousness into a force that radiates elegance and grace. . . .

This quality of consciousness is fertile ground for the seeds of unconditional love, an attitude of non-judgmentalism and acceptance of all that has life.



# Responsibility

As we look at people and events in our lives, we recognize a tendency to blame others. This proclivity has primordial roots. For example, in the biblical myth that describes events at the beginning of humanity and dawn of civilization, we read of the first man and woman. In an encounter with their Creator in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, we read of their response when asked about following prior instructions:

The man said, “The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Genesis 3:12-13, NIV).

We, too, we have the inclination to look around for whom to blame for our miseries – and the list is seemingly endless: our parents, siblings, the school system, society, peers, the husband, the wife, and even church (sometimes God is blamed). We replay what almost becomes a mantra in our mind: "If only it wasn't for \_\_\_\_\_, I'd be happy". We can feel stuck in our circumstances – even discouraged and depressed.

The opposite to blaming is taking *responsibility*. Once we understand how karma operates in life, we discover and notice a new sense of freedom and joy as we take responsibility for ourselves and our actions – and this brings renewed confidence and peace in living.

## ***Greater Assurance***

This action-reaction law means that whenever we mindfully take particular actions, we can confidently anticipate certain results – both immediately in the short term, and also in the longer term. And so, with greater assurance, we accept responsibility for our own experiences.

If, for example, I'm fully aware that I spoke a "white lie", then I will immediately begin to feel remorse as I reflect on my deceptiveness. Later consequences will include a haunting fear of being found out, and if found out, a loss of respect and trust toward me on the part of the other party.

A second example is that of facing a personal problem. In such a situation, consider the thought: "Others did *not* create this difficulty for me." Then, reflect on the possibility: "I created this trouble – I created the karma that is now ripening as this problem." Such a perspective can end the cycle of seeking to blame others, and can bring peace of mind.

Prior to our actions, therefore, we need to tune into our *intentions* – to explore what is going on within, and to discern what motivations are influencing us. We should also be informed about actions we plan – especially their possible outcomes – in order to avoid creating bad karma, both immediately and in the future.

Before making important decisions, wait for inner harmony – for clarity and wisdom. Any inner turmoil should be left to settle. In this way, our level of skillful action will be developed with greater assurance.

## ***Creating Right Causes***

We may cherish noble hopes and expectations in our mind and heart. However, to accomplish them, it is not enough to simply aspire for them. We must *create their causes*, or it will be impossible to experience the desired results.

This is well illustrated in the words of the Buddha:

The ripening result of an action  
Does not occur to the earth,  
To the water,  
To the wind, or  
To the elements.

It occurs to the one who created the cause.<sup>68</sup>

While it is true that karma is continually ripening, it is also constantly being generated by our present actions. And, day by day, most of us have the wonderful liberty to exercise our free will to shape our own future karma. May we take upon ourselves this essential obligation as part of accepting personal responsibility.

## ***The Law of Abundance***

I would like to suggest that the law of abundance is a part of the law of karma. To a large degree, a person reaps what they sow. With a mentality of scarcity, we are blind to opportunities for extending ourselves in the service of others. We become self-absorbed with our time, talents, or treasures. Additionally, if we are bent on being negative and pessimistic, we are even less

---

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in: Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 161.

inclined to reach out to others in a loving way. With such a mindset, little is sown, and little will be reaped – in terms of joy, well-being, and even material benefits. Instead, loneliness, misery, and suffering will be more apparent in our life.

By contrast, an abundance mentality produces opposite results. As we give of ourselves to others, even give some things away, our whole energy state alters. We feel expansive, not constricted, and open to creative expression. With an abundance view, we see the plenty that surrounds us, rather than to obsess on what we don't have. All this inevitably yields a more joyful, healthy, and fulfilling life. Abundance includes being joyful, regardless of what we possess or don't possess, or what our circumstances are. It also entails being willing to be positive and to work hard.

Finally, in the Christian New Testament scriptures it is also written: "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6, NIV). We always reap according to what we sow – and far more than we sow!

### ***The Law of Attraction***

When reflected upon, I would like to further suggest that the universal law of attraction is also a part of the law of karma. In the law of attraction, there is an important interplay between what the conscious mind desires, and what the subconscious mind desires. And, it is the *subconscious mind* that most influences what results in our lives. The following explanation by Carmen Harra in her book *The Eleven Eternal Principles* shows

the interplay between the law of attraction and the law of karma:<sup>69</sup>

The only way to end any pattern of attracting negative situations into your life is to become conscious of it and change your karma so that you change your subconscious intention. Remember, your subconscious holds all the memories of your past experiences . . . Your right brain, the seat of your subconscious, is aware of all your unresolved karma that needs addressing. Although you cannot completely resolve all of your psychological issues and heal all your karma in this lifetime, the more you are aware of them and actively working to resolve them, the better your chances of changing your vibration and attracting what you consciously desire. . . .

The moment you work on your own unresolved karma, you change your vibration at a cellular level, emptying your energy field of some of the toxic residue that slows it down. However, if you haven't completely cleansed yourself of that residue, it will start to grow again, like a cancer. You will think you are over your anger about how your parents neglected you in your childhood, and then your boss will be too preoccupied to assist you on an important project and you will overreact because neglect is still an issue for you. It takes constant work to clear your karma. It's like keeping up with the dust in a large house! But little by little, you change what your subconscious attracts,

---

<sup>69</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 144-145.

bringing it more in line with what your conscious mind desires.

Furthermore, our attitudes work according to the law of attraction. Like attracts like. Caroline Myss writes that "a belief that life is full of rich opportunities that can change the course of our lives in a flash brings exactly those types of opportunities into your life."<sup>70</sup> By contrast, a firmly held belief in "bad luck" creates bad luck.

Finally, at a personal level, beliefs about oneself, such as being unlovable or lovable, create relationship dynamics in which being unloved (rejected) or loved (accepted) is indeed experienced. The beliefs act like a magnet. Our character is then developed from the attitudes, values, and ethics to which we hold.

### ***The Law of Manifestation***

The force of our consciousness creates physical reality. In other words, we *manifest*, or bring about, circumstances through our thoughts, feelings, and actions – again, I suggest that this is the law of karma (cause and effect) in operation. For example, "if we generate positive thoughts and emotions, and act in productive and creative ways," writes Carmen Harra, "we will change our lives for the better. . . . We do have the power to

---

<sup>70</sup> Caroline Myss and C. Norman Shealy, *The Creation of Health: The Emotional, Psychological, and Spiritual Responses That Promote Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 117.

consciously choose better thoughts and beliefs in order to help us manifest a better reality."<sup>71</sup>

In other words, physical reality is a reflection of thoughts, feelings, and actions – the reality reflects what the mind projects. We, therefore, need to especially remain aware of such thoughts as anger, jealousy, and ill will, since these are destructive to our own well-being and those around us. Physical health and happiness begin in the mind. We do indeed help create our physical reality; we influence all that we experience.

In sum, Carmen Harra gives a vivid example of changing our consciousness in relation to well-being and comfort:<sup>72</sup>

In working with people who have cancer, I find that often they have a disagreement with themselves. They do not experience inner harmony. There is a part of themselves they cannot integrate into the whole. This is reflected in the manifestation of cancer, which attacks the body from within. It's as if they are attacking themselves for being inadequate or making a mistake in the past. By letting go of destructive beliefs about themselves, they change their energy and begin manifesting health.

### ***Interfering with Others' Karma?***

Desiring to help others, as well as being aware of the law of karma, is a delicate balance that calls for both *wisdom* and

---

<sup>71</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 184-186.

<sup>72</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 203.

*compassion*. While our intentions to help a person may be loving, we need wisdom to know whether our help will interfere with the results of their karma, and whereby the person then avoids resolving their personal issues. Two risks are involved: creating needless misery for ourselves and causing the person to create more negative karma.

An example is where we help to prevent a person from experiencing the consequences of their behaviour (a compassionate act on our part). However, later this enables them to continue their irresponsible conduct with its resultant suffering (a lack of wisdom on our part).

We may need to realize that we cannot "fix" the problems of others through our willpower – we cannot rescue people from themselves. Moreover, we may need to let go of our need to be well thought of, and the desire to have the person treat us kindly at all costs.

Wisely and compassionately not interfering with a person's karma, allows them to experience the fruit of their own actions. This may be the kindest thing you can do because, among other things, you may also stop feeding that person's illusion that you are the problem in their life.

Finally, Carmen Harra gives the following counsel:<sup>73</sup>

Whenever we choose to engage in someone else's narrative about being a victim, we enable them to avoid looking honestly at themselves, which is the first step in healing

---

<sup>73</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 60. I am also indebted to Carmen Harra for the ideas in this section.



their own karma. Choosing not to play the part in their drama is good for you and for them. Remember that when you help others, you should be aware of your own issues so you don't fall into the trap of trying to rescue them and then feeling victimized yourself. Accept that the other person is where he is on his spiritual journey, but have the wisdom to recognize what you can and cannot change, and accept the limits of your power.

### ***Alert and Watchful***

Needless to say, the universal law of cause and effect ceaselessly continues to operate in our lives – whether or not we believe it, whether or not our culture accepts it, whether or not our religion teaches it. Actions *always* have consequences – impacting both ourselves and others, because we are all part of the web of life. Moreover, as the *Dhammapada* states, our life is the creation of our mind.<sup>74</sup> From a pure mind, happiness and peace will follow. Unwholesome motivations will inescapably lead to sadness and unhappiness.

The law of karma teaches us to be heedful of what we think, say, and do in order to minimize hurting others and leaving harmful seeds or imprints in our own mind stream. We realize that actions are skillful or unskillful depending on the *intention* or motivation behind them. Wholesome motives include generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom – the roots of skillful actions. Unwholesome motives include greed, hatred, and delusion – the roots of unskillful actions.

---

<sup>74</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 35.

When we understand the enormity and extent of what karma affects, the need to accept personal responsibility becomes more paramount.

Thubten Chodron shares a mind-expanding thought:<sup>75</sup>

Karma can affect our future rebirths, that is, the kind of life-form we will adopt. It has some bearing on what we experience during our lives: how others treat us, our wealth, social status, and so forth. In addition, karma affects our personality and character: our talents, dominant personality traits, and habits. Even the kind of environment we're born into is influenced by karma.

Conviction in the law of karma is an important basis for accepting personal responsibility, ensuring our future happiness, and guaranteeing peace of mind. Or, in the words of Goldstein and Kornfield: "The great inspiration of the Buddha's teaching is that we must each take ultimate responsibility for the quality of our lives. . . . When we understand that our lives are the unfolding of karmic law, that we are the heirs to our own deeds, then there grows in us a deepening sense of responsibility for how we live, the choices we make, and the actions we undertake."<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Thubten Chodron, *Buddhism for Beginners* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 61.

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

And, as a result of our own self-directed efforts, we can work toward building new and better circumstances, here and now. Both individually and collectively, we are free to produce fresh karma that leads to progress in this life.

A fitting conclusion for this section comes from Caroline Myss in her book *The Creation of Health*:<sup>77</sup>

Any decision in which the individual is taking more responsibility for the quality of his or her life *inevitably will lead to a heightening of that person's awareness*. The process of cause and effect has an intelligence of its own, leading a person continually toward greater dimensions of personal choice and self-empowerment.

This process is at work in millions of people's lives. Each person who has done even one simple thing, such as releasing sugar from a daily diet or quitting smoking, has placed himself or herself on a path of greater awareness. . . . Inevitably, once you take even the slightest degree of personal responsibility for yourself, you cannot move backwards. The thought form of personal responsibility becomes firmly planted in your consciousness and, from that moment on, it will call to you at every possibly opportunity. This is the way that change is unfolding on this planet – person by person, choice by choice. . . . It is gradual, but the effects are indeed dramatic [because of the law of karma!].

---

<sup>77</sup> Caroline Myss and C. Norman Shealy, *The Creation of Health: The Emotional, Psychological, and Spiritual Responses That Promote Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 376-377.

"Karma can change life like the swish of a horse's tail."

(Jack Kornfield)

"Karma means you don't get away with anything."

(Jack Kornfield)

# Mental Health

At different times in life, we inevitably suffer – physically, mentally, and emotionally. We suffer through sickness, aging, and the facing of death. Much of our suffering occurs in our mind. Mental health, therefore, is of importance. The mind is our most precious possession.

## *Problems Not External*

Often we are convinced that external events or people make us sad or happy. When things go wrong and difficulties are experienced, we view the situation itself as the problem. Our focus lies almost constantly on our *external* troubles, and in seeking solutions that remain outside of ourselves. As a result, we fall prey to a *victim mentality*, believing that undeserved things happen to us, or worse still, that we are being inexplicably punished.

Interestingly, in the past century, humanity's control and understanding of the *external world* has increased dramatically, with corresponding material progress. However, as Geshe Kelsang Gyatso concludes:<sup>78</sup>

. . . There has not been a corresponding increase in human happiness. There is no less suffering in the world today, and there are no fewer problems. Indeed, it might be said that there are now more problems and greater unhappiness than ever before. This shows that the cause

---

<sup>78</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Understanding the Mind: The Nature and Power of the Mind* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2002), 4.

of happiness and the solution to our problems do not lie in knowledge or control of the external world. Happiness and suffering are states of mind and so their main causes are not to be found outside the mind. If we want to be truly happy and free from suffering we must improve our understanding of the mind.

In reality, therefore, the causes of happiness lie completely within our own mind. Whatever obstacles or setbacks we experience come from the side of our mind. The problems are *not* external – but are in the mind.

For instance, if we could view our present difficulties as real opportunities for personal growth and development – then our mindset would become positive and peaceful. By contrast, troubles seen with a negative state of mind become problems in our mind.

Consequently, to be free from problems, we need to control our mind. Freedom from suffering simply cannot be found outside of our minds.

### ***Ripening of Karmic Seeds***

To understand the nature of the mind, we need to consider whether or not the continuum of the mind ceases when a person dies. If the stream of consciousness continues beyond this life, then one implication is the existence of future (as well as past) lives. Furthermore, if we have a *beginningless mind*, then over innumerable lifetimes, we have produced countless karmic seeds in our mind stream (or consciousness). These seeds will continue to ripen, and thereby continually produce more seeds that may well result in future suffering – particularly if a mind is swayed by delusions, such as greed, hatred, and ignorance.

However, how we activate our karmic seeds is totally up to us – regardless of how we are born into the world. In all conditions, *we* can and must be in charge of our own fate. As an analogy, while we cannot stop it raining, we can control our physical, emotional, and mental reaction to the fact of rain.<sup>79</sup> In the final analysis, it is we who control whether or not we create the *causes and conditions for our karmic seeds to ripen* – and whether or not we purify our mind and practice a path of perfection. In this way, we can safeguard ourselves from unnecessary further harm through the ripening of karma.

### ***Thought Transformation***

As mentioned earlier, to understand karma means to accept absolute, one hundred percent personal responsibility. Unfortunately, some mistakenly view karma as a predominantly fatalistic idea – where all circumstances are simply accepted in a resigned way. Karma, however, is not a fatalistic concept. It is a dynamic principle which can allow us meaningful choice in every moment of our human life. While this may be difficult to accept, karma – the law of cause and effect – remains completely logical.

Our mind, therefore, is the starting place for the solutions and remedies to our problems. By being mindful of averting non-virtuous actions, and by performing virtuous actions, we *change the potentialities of karmic seeds* or imprints in our mind. This is thought transformation – transforming life's problems into precious spiritual insights, improving relationships, and bringing greater patience and compassion

---

<sup>79</sup> Christmas Humphries, *The Buddhist Way of Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 85.

into our daily life. Thought transformation requires daily internal discipline – it is hard work.

We transform our thinking patterns through *mind training*. The goal is to radically reorient our thoughts, attitudes, and habits toward ourselves, our fellow human beings, and events around us. Typically, we cherish the welfare of ourselves at the expense of others. In mind training we seek to reverse this process. This involves coming to understand others as friends, and to recognize that our real enemy lies inside of ourselves, not outside.

One type of mind training comes from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in the form of the *lojong* teachings. These are based on a set of aphorisms formulated in Tibet in the 12th century by Geshe Chekhawa. This training involves about fifty-nine or so slogans that are designed to change undesired motivations and attitudes.

In her book, *Start Where You Are*, Pema Chödrön writes that lojong teachings present the possibility of an entire change of attitude. For example, we learn to relate compassionately with what we prefer to push away, and we learn to give away and share that which we hold most dear. Working with the lojong slogans can be the beginning of learning what it really means to love. It is a path of unconditional compassionate living, designed especially for people who find themselves living in times of darkness.<sup>80</sup>

Slogans explained by Pema Chödrön in her book include:

---

<sup>80</sup> Pema Chödrön, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1994), xi.



- Always maintain only a joyful mind.
- Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment.
- Be grateful to everyone.
- Don't act with a twist.
- Don't be frivolous.
- Don't be jealous.
- Don't bring things to a painful point.
- Don't be swayed by external circumstances.
- Don't expect applause.
- Don't malign others.
- Don't misinterpret.
- Don't ponder others.
- Don't wait in ambush.
- Don't wallow in self-pity.
- Liberate yourself by examining and analyzing.
- Whatever you meet unexpectedly, join with meditation.

Another form of mind training is based on one of Buddhism's much-loved teachings entitled *Eight Verses of Training the Mind*, written by Geshe Langri Tangpa (1054-1123). These verses are also in the mind training tradition.

The practice of such lojong teachings in daily life trains the mind to embrace reality in a wise and compassionate way, explained as follows:<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Naljor Prison Dharma Service, "Eight Verses for Training the Mind" by Geshe Langri Tangpa" (PO Box 1177, Mount Shasta CA 96067), found at <http://www.naljorprisondharma.org/index.html>. Accessed December 1, 2012.

These excellent practices help us purify our negativity and awaken the heart by giving us a way to transform adversity, conflict, and hardship into a direct opportunity for spiritual growth. In this way, rather than perceiving difficult people or adverse circumstances in our lives as an obstacle, tragedy, or punishment, we now meet these experiences with deep compassion, wisdom, and skill – using them as our actual practice on the path to enlightenment.

By way of these treasured practices we eliminate our competitive, selfish, and emotionally reactive nature, as well as our false and exaggerated concepts of self (also called self-grasping and self-cherishing). It is important to understand that the greed, jealousy, anger, pride, selfishness, and attachment, which cause us so much suffering, are actually misperceptions of reality, not inherent conditions of our mind. Therefore, these precious lojong practices can purify our misperceptions and delusions completely, revealing the natural radiance, clarity, wisdom, and compassion of our true nature.

The eight beautiful verses that comprise "Eight Verses of Training the Mind" have been translated by Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and expounded upon in his book entitled *Eight Steps to Happiness: The Buddhist Way of Loving Kindness*. Based on this poem, he shows practical ways how we can begin to transform life's difficulties into spiritual insights – and so find meaning and happiness in our modern lives.<sup>82</sup> The verses have

---

<sup>82</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Eight Steps to Happiness: The Buddhist Way of Loving Kindness* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2012).

also been explained and expanded on by Kathleen McDonald in *Awakening the Kind Heart: How to Meditate on Compassion* and are presented from her book as follows:<sup>83</sup>

### **The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation**

With the thought of attaining enlightenment  
For the welfare of all beings,  
Who are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel,  
I will constantly practice holding them dear.

Whenever I am with others  
I will practice seeing myself as the lowest of all,  
And from the depth of my heart  
I will respectfully hold others as supreme.

In all actions I will examine my mind  
And as soon as a disturbing emotion arises,  
Endangering myself and others,  
I will firmly confront and avert it.

Whenever I see beings of bad nature  
And those oppressed by intense negativity and suffering,  
I will practice holding such rare ones dear,  
As if I had found a precious treasure.

When others, out of jealousy,  
Mistreat me with abuse, insults, and the like,  
I will practice accepting defeat

---

<sup>83</sup> Kathleen McDonald, *Awakening the Kind Heart: How to Meditate on Compassion*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010).

And offering the victory to them.

Even if someone I have benefited  
And in whom I have placed great hopes  
Hurts me very badly,  
I will practice seeing that one as my sublime teacher.

In short, I will offer directly and indirectly  
Every benefit and happiness to all beings, my mothers.  
I will practice in secret taking upon myself  
All their harmful actions and sufferings.

May all these practices be undefiled by the stains  
Of the eight worldly concerns,  
[pleasure/pain, gain/loss, praise/blame, honor/dishonor]  
And by perceiving all phenomena as illusory,  
May I be released from the bondage of attachment.

### ***Resolve to Change***

To be convinced of the validity of karma is to remember the definite, inevitable link between our actions and their results. This strengthens our determination and resolve to change our poor habitual patterns. We realize that karma is the foundation for our behavior and the quality of our life.

In other words, karma is not just a nice theory or concept, but a vital law in a moral universe. We come to know that wholesome and life-affirming actions bring benefits and well-being, while unwholesome and negative actions undeniably bring penalties and suffering.

Conviction about karma, and our resolve to change, is reinforced when we deeply consider the following:<sup>84</sup>

Karma is directly related to our *intention* or *motivation* while doing an action. Very simply, we receive what we give; we harvest exactly what we plant. Our actions, whether they are positive or negative, virtuous or non-virtuous, leave imprints or seeds in our minds, and these imprints ripen into our life experiences when the appropriate conditions come together. Karma is the universal law of cause and effect. The seeds of our actions continue with us from one lifetime to the next and do not get lost. Our relationship to karma is very simple – we are the actual product of our karma. We are the product of every thought, feeling, word, and action from our past and we will be the product of our karma in the future as well.

Life is a seamless continuum, uninterruptedly weaved together with the threads of our karma; our volitional (intentional) actions. Whether it is good or bad, our karma follows us everywhere, in this life and the next. If we are compassionate, wise, honest, and skillful, we create positive and harmonious circumstances in this and future lives. Committing cruel, dishonest, and other unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind, we will certainly not escape the consequences of these deeds, either in this life or in the future. Whatever happiness and good fortune we experience in our lives comes from our own positive

---

<sup>84</sup> Naljor Prison Dharma Service, "Karma: The Possession That Follows Us Everywhere" (PO Box 1177, Mount Shasta CA 96067), found at <http://www.naljorprisondharma.org/index.html>. Accessed December 1, 2012.

actions. Our problems and conflicts also arise from our own negative and destructive actions. Karma is our only true property – for better or worse, it follows us everywhere. Therefore, the Law of Karma teaches that responsibility for unskillful actions is born by the person who commits them. Again, karma is our only true property.

As an illustration, within our everyday ethical framework, we may think that not returning too much change given to us in a shop is a fairly forgivable sin. However, understanding karma, we are more precise, more aware. We realize that without fail, that particular karma is going to ripen, that it will be definite, and that it will be heavier. Also, it will be related to its cause: we will probably lose money in a bigger way at some point in future lifetimes. Therefore, without having to think twice, we give the money back, adding to the positive potentials growing in our mind.<sup>85</sup>

### ***Uncertainty of Life***

For all of us, life is unbelievably uncertain. It rises and falls beyond our control. We experience pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, honor and dishonor. Anything can happen, at any time. A car accident, a friend's betrayal, a financial reversal, a natural disaster, a terminal illness, an untimely death. Understanding karma offers a way to comprehend and deal with life's unpredictability.

---

<sup>85</sup> This illustration was taken from FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Module 6: All About Karma", teachings by Renate Ogilvie, meditations by Ven. Yeshe Khadro and Kendall Magnussen (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005, 2006), 12.

However, one of the difficulties in discerning or comprehending karma is due to the fact that it often does not ripen in one lifetime (if one considers the possibility of rebirths). This is aptly expressed as follows:<sup>86</sup>

Our largest obstacle to understanding or even believing in karma may be the factor of time. Most often, the results of our actions will show up after a delay of time. As ordinary human beings, who have not developed the omniscient eye of wisdom, we cannot see into past lives. Thus, it is difficult to discern which action caused which result. We must realize that we are only looking at a very small period of time in this one life. Many of the experiences we have in this life are the inevitable results of actions done in previous lives. In addition, the seeds of our actions in this life will ripen in future lives.

Consequently, we do not know what karmic causes we have produced in the past, and we do not know what karma will ripen in the future. For this reason, our spiritual practice needs to fortify ourselves against the uncertainty of life. This remains true whether or not we entertain the idea of rebirths.

While we have no ultimate control over our lives, each of us has control over our own mind.

---

<sup>86</sup> Naljor Prison Dharma Service, "Karma: The Possession That Follows Us Everywhere" (PO Box 1177, Mount Shasta CA 96067), found at <http://www.naljorprisondharmaservice.org/index.html>. Accessed December 1, 2012.

## ***Peace amidst Problems***

Finally, to maintain a healthy and positive outlook, we can consider the fact that while our mental suffering and pain purifies us, it also hurts the person who inflicts it. Again, never is there a need to resort to resentment, holding a grudge, or seeking revenge. When someone harms us, the law of karma can set our mind at rest (hopefully under no circumstances in a gleeful way) in that the other person creates the cause of their own suffering. Pema Chödrön clarifies this:<sup>87</sup>

They do this by strengthening habits that imprison them in a cycle of pain and confusion. It's not that we are responsible for what someone else does, and certainly not that we should feel guilty. But when they harm us, we unintentionally become the means of their undoing. Had they looked on us with loving-kindness, however, we'd be the cause of their gathering virtue.

What I find helpful in this teaching is that what's true for them is also true for me. The way I regard those who hurt me today will affect how I experience the world in the future. In any encounter, we have a choice: we can strengthen our resentment *or* our understanding and empathy. . . . The troublemakers in our lives harm themselves, but benefit us by provoking us to practice patience. We can be grateful to whomever or whatever shows us we're still "provokable". In any given situation,

---

<sup>87</sup> Pema Chödrön, *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*, ed. Helen Berliner (London: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 185-186.



whoever justifies getting enraged loses and whoever uses that same situation to develop tolerance wins. . . .

If someone is continually angry with us – a family member, for example – it occurs to us that we have tools to work with this intelligently and kindly [such as understanding the law of karma]. But, what about our parents or siblings? Although *we* may have a long way to go, they may not have a clue that they're causing themselves unnecessary pain. What's in store for them if they keep strengthening the habit of anger? Remembering this can make us more compassionate toward them and motivate us to practice patience.

In addition to experiencing peace amidst difficult situations, such understanding and insight help ensure that our mental outlook will remain a healthy one.

### ***An Elegant Spirit***

The law of karma supports the vision of an elegant spirit<sup>88</sup> – a person who has awakened to realization that he or she is a creator and, therefore, acts to honor that power through living with love, wisdom, and compassion. Caroline Myss in *The Creation of Health* writes:

Becoming an aware human being is a full-time job. At times, you might regret your ever having stepped foot on this path because awareness does not necessarily make

---

<sup>88</sup> I am indebted to Caroline Myss for this term and the notes that follow which are taken from: Caroline Myss and C. Norman Shealy, *The Creation of Health: The Emotional, Psychological, and Spiritual Responses That Promote Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 379-383.

your life easier. . . . To see clearly, to have the inner vision clear enough to penetrate the illusions other people still maintain, can be very discouraging.

Likewise, to choose a path of awareness is not an intellectual exercise. It is a living, breathing, constant discipline. If you choose to believe that you create your own reality, that perception does not include any vacation time. You must always live in that perception, no matter what the situation, no matter what the challenge. . . . Your challenges will come from your emotions. It is your emotional warehouse that holds your fears, insecurities and lesser qualities. Healing these inner limitations will be your challenge, again and again.

A word of caution is also required here. Spiritual power is not earned casually. Regardless of what information you may pour into your brain, and how well you may intellectually understand Buddhism, Zen or the Christian mystical traditions, the intellect is no match for the soul. Your life will most certainly change if you direct it toward spiritual awakening. The wisdom of your soul will take over the driver's seat of your life, and your lesser needs, those coming from fear or illusion, will ride along like hitchhikers until you are ready to drop them off.

And finally, there is no turning back. Once you accept the journey to become whole, to become an elegant spirit, you cannot go backwards. You cannot become "unaware" ever again. You can take a detour or two, but you cannot release awareness once it is your own. It is yours for all eternity.

The following suggestions are offered for those who may wish to embrace the path to become an elegant spirit. The rewards are worth the effort required – the fruits of health, wisdom, compassion, and becoming an instrument of peace:

- Personal values must be based upon the truth of your origin. You are spirit. You command energy to take form according to your thoughts, feelings and words, and you are responsible for the quality of that which you contribute to the creation of life. It is, therefore, in your own best interest as well as that of others to create with love and wisdom. Keep your words, thoughts and emotions clear and honest.
- Universal principles serve as guidelines for creation: cause and effect, what is in one is in the whole, manifestation is the result of intention. These, and all other universal principles, are your power tools. The more you know and understand universal principles, the more empowered you become.
- Each person who enters into your life is a reflection of some aspect of your own being. Likewise, you are a reflection for each person also. Whether you are drawn to their positive qualities, or repelled by their negative traits, you are only seeing yourself. This reflection is often difficult to see clearly because the depth of the reflection is usually disguised by the personality of the individual. If you can look beyond the personality traits, you will see yourself in the depths of a person's motivations, fears, strengths and compassion. Blaming others, therefore, serves no purpose.

- All artificial barriers that separate the essential oneness of life should be disregarded. Boundaries between nations which maintain that certain people are different than others are obsolete, meaningless and serve only to separate people from one another. Allegiance belongs to life itself. Life has no boundaries. It thrives anywhere there is love.
- Likewise, the boundaries that are now present among all of the other kingdoms of life – animal, mineral and plant – are also artificial barriers that prevent respect, inter-species communication and emotional bonding. All life has consciousness.
- What is in one is in the whole. Apply this teaching to your life and all that you create, realizing that every positive and negative action you put into motion affects the whole of life.
- Time and space are nonexistent in the dimension of thought. Thoughts travel in an instant. Therefore, learn to think in terms of your thoughts as a multi-level communications system in which such activity as healing at a distance can be accomplished.
- Because thoughts are power, develop a quality-control checkup on yourself on a regular basis. When you feel that too much negativity is present in your system, do something to heal yourself immediately. Pay attention to the law of cause and effect, and study the consequences of your actions, words and thoughts, realizing at all times that *you* are the creator behind that which you are studying.

- Heal your own addiction to violence in any and every form: actions, attitudes, words, habits and thoughts. Our violent natures create our violent politics, weapons, and all violent human actions and interactions. We all have violence in us. Our world is a violent world, and these proclivities have entered into us through the very air we breathe. Remember that violence breeds disease and destroys the human emotional system.
- Study those desires in your life that control you, and strive to release yourself from anything artificial that exerts power over you: drugs, alcohol, negative habits, fears – anything that causes you to lose power.
- Remember at all times that you are constantly healing. The process of healing is a *verb and not a noun*. Your body is reacting every second to your thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences. Health is not a permanent condition unless you create it so each day.
- When you must take time to heal, do it gently. Healing through force of will alone, through determination without self-compassion, is a form of self-inflicted violence. Don't resent your body for breaking down; learn from the experience so that it does not have to be repeated. Trust the process of healing. It has an intelligence of its own. Learn to listen to what your body needs and to what your spirit needs. Above all, value your health and your well-being as your first priority. Honor thyself.
- Clearly define in your heart your spiritual principles. Know and be clear about what you believe. Do not accept

beliefs without question. Keep your focus on yourself and not on others.

- Set time aside each day for your spiritual practice. Meditation and prayer are essential. Learn to be still and hear the inner voice of your soul.
- Above all, practice loving. Unconditional love requires the ultimate of efforts and it reaps the ultimate of rewards.

# Compassion

Karma is never a reason for our not caring for or cherishing someone. Our action in benefitting somebody does *not* mean that we are interfering with their karma. Rather, by serving them with loving kindness and compassion we benefit them, as well as ourselves. In fact, it is essential for the spiritual path – we need to help those around us, otherwise how can we ever generate good karma? Paradoxically, those who need our help are helping us.

## *Response to Enemies*

If someone causes you harm, a compassionate response includes realizing that the person is also causing harm for themselves – in the immediate future and in the longer term. Our suffering may be the exhausting of negative karma, provided we do not retaliate out of ill will. The person, however, will continue to suffer for a time – this is a cause for sadness and compassion.

There are times we know that we need to accept our suffering as the ripening of past karmic seeds. Through such experiences, we also begin to free ourselves of future suffering in a particular situation.

An example is of a father who realizes that when his children were small, he placed his business interests above his wife and family, and even his own health. During the precious years of the children growing up, he was often away on business ventures. His son, now in his twenties, carries anger and resentment toward his father's neglect and rarely visits the

family. Their relationship remains strained. This acutely hurts the father.

When we recognize that we have created our own suffering by past behavior, then our present distress and anguish become more bearable. Having such insight means we're in a better position to address the problem – perhaps calmly taking steps to correct it, and apologizing to the other person if needed. Furthermore, we can feel compassion for those who have similar misery and agony. This type of compassionate loving attitude yields a peaceful mind, not a disturbed mind.

### ***Accepting Others***

Moreover, we need to accept and respect others, even if they are in a bad circumstance. *Respect* comes from realizing that they have good qualities that we can admire and learn from. *Acceptance* arises from understanding the pressures they too have – and being bound to a large degree by their own karma. For these two reasons, we can empathize with them and have heartfelt compassion.

The table on the following page highlights what *accepting* others entails.



<b>A.C.C.E.P.T.</b>	
Allowing	Allowing the person to be themselves with all their giftedness, background, weaknesses and strengths
Clearing	Clearing the mind of one's demands, perceptions, judgments and expectations of the person
Compassion	Carrying the heartfelt desire to help in whatever way possible to alleviate the person's suffering
Empathy	Empathizing or feeling <i>with</i> the suffering of the other person
Patience	Patiently forbearing whatever difficulties one has with the other person
Taking In	Taking the other person into one's heart as part of opening the heart to them; not excluding them

In accepting others, there is likewise a need for *self-acceptance*. Joseph Goldstein, in an article entitled "Here, Now, Aware", writes:<sup>89</sup>

Through the practice of meditation, we begin to see the full range of the mind's activities, old unskillful patterns as well as wholesome thoughts and feelings. We learn to be with the whole passing show. As we become more

---

<sup>89</sup> Joseph Goldstein, "Here, Now, Aware", in *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*, ed. Barry Boyce and the editors of the Shambhala Sun (London: Shambhala, 2011), 25-26

accepting, a certain lightness develops about it all. And the lighter and more accepting we become with ourselves, the lighter and more accepting we are with others. We're not so prone to judge the minds of others once we have carefully seen our own. The poet W. H. Auden says it well: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart." Spacious acceptance doesn't mean that we act on everything equally. Awareness gives us the opportunity of choosing wisely: we can choose which patterns should be developed and cultivated and which should be abandoned.

From a karma point of view, self-acceptance is a critical causal factor with great potential to create well-being. In his book, *Holistic Health Secrets for Women*, Mark Atkinson<sup>90</sup> writes that self-acceptance is the inner acceptance of who and what we are, just as we are. When we *unconditionally accept* ourselves, we see all the different aspects of ourselves – thoughts, feelings, images, behaviours, appearance, and life situation – clearly, with a welcoming attitude of non-judgement and non-attachment. People with a high level of self-acceptance see the following effects (karmic fruit) in their lives in that they:

- Feel healthier, happier, and more at peace.
- Are present, awake, and aware in the moment.
- Experience a deep gratitude and reverence for life.
- Experience a deep connection to life, God, or spirit.
- Are able to express joy and freedom in most circumstances.

---

<sup>90</sup> Mark Atkinson, *Holistic Health Secrets for Women: Discover Your Unique Path to Health, Healing, and Happiness* (London: Piatkus Books, 2009), 113-116.

- Are much less likely to have depression or mental health problems.
- Are more likely to treat other people with respect, care, and kindness.
- Are less likely to experience addictions or have problems with friendships and relationships.

### ***Responsibility toward Others***

Equally important in dealing with others is to recognize our responsibility, to a degree, for what happens to them. This means taking care to do what we can so that they create less negative karma for themselves, meaning fewer negative consequences for themselves in the future.

For instance, consider a person given to angry outbursts. From their past actions driven by anger they have accumulated propensities toward anger in their mind stream. If we're aware of their tendency toward anger, we can be caring toward them, thereby helping them to subdue their negative mind and to lessen the negative karma they would otherwise create.

Once karmic fruit starts to ripen, to stop the result from continuing is difficult. An analogy is to try chopping down a huge tree – it takes much effort, and even then new branches continue to sprout from the stump. Far better, therefore, is to prevent negative karma from being created in the first place.

And so, in dealing with others, we seek to be patient and not to create new causes for suffering. We draw on our wisdom that understands karmic cause and effect in order to gain both short-term and long-term peace and happiness. This is a part of being compassionate.

## ***Care and Consideration of Others***

Through the law of karma, we understand that negative actions produce suffering, positive actions bring healing to ourselves and the world. The idea of judging or blaming others – either positively ("good") or negatively ("bad" or "evil") is needless – and only creates negative karma!

Rather, karma teaches us to be non-judgmental and to have compassion for ourselves and others. Being non-judgmental includes forgiving people when they fall short. Each person has their own unique path with lessons to learn and karma to resolve. Additionally, we learn at our own pace and level of ability. Karma, with its inherent justice, helps to bring us to our highest level of being – that is, the end of our spiritual path.

As we tread what may be variously described as the path of truth, the path of life, the path of perfection, or the path of God, we are not in competition with anyone. A parallel can be drawn with competency-based learning.

In competency learning, students are not expected to perform tasks better than others, or be in competition with others. The focus is on learning, not student grades. Students seek to do a task or activity well enough to be seen as proficient or competent – having mastered certain skills. The relationship between teacher and students also changes as they understand that working with standards requires that they take ownership of learning. Teachers provide appropriate support for learning.

In sum, when things go wrong, there is no need to blame others, or ourselves. Rather, we treat ourselves kindly, and we see others with compassion – even if we don't understand or like

their behavior. Then we concentrate on what we can do to change or transform the situation for better.

### ***Avoiding Indifference***

When some people see a person suffering, they rationalize and erroneously think it is the person's fault. They conclude that since the person created their own suffering, they can turn their back on them. This is *indifference* – it is not compassion. Indifference closes off the heart of compassion and care. It is an unwholesome state, even though it looks like equanimity.

Understanding karma and the way our lives have unfolded, we realize that if we do unwholesome actions, we cannot expect good results. Moreover, from observing others, we might remark: "They're a good person" or "Life right now is difficult for them". We see how their choices have been a key factor, and we see karma lived out. Such reflections should prompt compassion, not indifference – both for ourselves and for others.

In sum, we can never say that anyone is deserving of their suffering. Such a notion of deserved suffering is also not in the Buddhist teachings. Compassion always wants to address the cause of suffering – regardless of the reason behind the suffering.

### ***What Is Needed: Compassion***

We tend to feel uncomfortable around difficult people. A kinder alternative is to try to discern their situation. To ask ourselves: What would it be like from their perspective? If we're aware of weighty negative karma through disturbances in their mind, or heavy delusions influencing their perspective on every situation, we can only feel heartfelt compassion.

Compassion and universal responsibility are important for our own spiritual development. And while people may have created the causes for experiencing their difficulties, it never matters whose pain or problem it is. We have a duty to try to relieve others' suffering out of empathy and compassion, knowing what it is like to feel desolate and miserable.

In sum, understanding karma becomes an avenue for compassion, never an avenue for indifference or relishing revenge. Or, worse still, erroneously thinking that people who suffer have to work off their karmic debt, and if anyone helps them, then they would have to be re-born and suffer further in order to finish working off their debt!

Goldstein and Kornfield in their book, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* correctly describe karma and compassion as follows:<sup>91</sup>

*Compassion*, as well as insight, arises *from understanding karma*. When we understand that unfair, harmful, or hateful actions rebound in suffering to the person committing them as well as to the recipient, we can respond to *both* with compassion rather than with anger or resentment. This in no way means that our response is weak or indecisive. In fact, seeing people act out of ignorance in ways that cause themselves or others great pain can inspire a very strong and direct response to that ignorance, but it is a response of compassion.

---

<sup>91</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

In this way, karma is not anti-humanitarian. Instead, it generates social compassion. When we feed the hungry, when we invite the stranger, when we provide clothes for the poor, when we look after the sick, and when we visit the prisoner, we are working with the law of karma – never against it.

An enemy can hurt an enemy, and a man who hates can harm another man; but a man's own mind, if wrongly directed, can do him a far greater harm.

*(The Dhammapada: The Mind, 42.)*

A father or a mother, or a relative, can indeed do good to a man; but his own right-directed mind can do to him a far greater good.

*(The Dhammapada: The Mind, 43.)*





**PART 3: FUTURE KARMA**

For that deed is not well done when being done one has to  
repent; and when one must reap with tears the bitter fruits of the  
wrong deed.

*(The Dhammapada: The Fool, 67.)*

But the deed is indeed well done when being done one has not to  
repent; and when one can reap with joy the sweet fruits of the  
right deed.

*(The Dhammapada: The Fool, 68.)*

## Karma and Rebirth

To further understand karma, I would suggest as a Western writer that the idea of rebirth is interesting to consider. One can entertain it as a possibility. Rebirth refers to a person's mind taking one body after another. At death, our body and mind separate – the body becomes a corpse, and the mind continues on to take another body.<sup>92</sup> The karmic pattern of one life carries itself forward and then results in a new life.

On the other hand, even without rebirths, we are in a sense born again each morning. Each day is a rebirth after our sleep (symbolic of death). Moreover, even during the course of a day, we experience the arising (birth), abiding (life), and passing away (death) of thoughts, feelings, and actions. Mystery surrounds our being human.

In some Eastern religions, karma and rebirth are profoundly interwoven. The concept of rebirth is inherent in the understanding of karma. This is based on the premise that when the effects of karma continue across lifetimes, these cause rebirths.

The question of rebirth enters the metaphysical realm. Some imply that the Buddha's teachings were free from

---

<sup>92</sup> Thubten Chodron, *Buddhism for Beginners* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 54.

metaphysics. For example, Juan Mascaró, in his book *The Dhammapada*, shares the following accounts:<sup>93</sup>

It is said that once a man of arms undertook a long journey to see a holy follower of Buddha, and asked if the message of Buddha could be taught to him. The answer was: 'Do not what is evil. Do what is good. Keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of Buddha.' 'Is this all?', said the man arms; 'Every child of five knows this.' 'It may be so, but few men of eighty can practice it', he was told. . . . As to metaphysical questions he is silent, suggesting the metaphysical fact that the Supreme is beyond words. When asked whether a man lives after death, he might well have given the answer of one of his disciples: 'We do not know whether he is the body, or in the body, or other than the body whilst alive; how can we know whether after the death of the body he is dead?'

Others writers may hold other views. *The Dhammapada*, for example, states:<sup>94</sup>

There is no path in the sky and a monk must find the inner path. All things indeed pass away, but *the Buddhas are for ever in Eternity* [emphasis mine].

What follows is intended for the personal reflection of each reader, and not an attempt to influence or convince in any way regarding the matter of rebirth. The section is written with an

---

<sup>93</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 21-22; 27-28.

<sup>94</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 72.

open-minded view by a writer that is willing to consider the possibility of rebirths.

For some, however, the question of rebirths is seen to deal with speculation and the unsolvable – and not matters of direct experience.

And so, perhaps questions such as "Did I exist in the past?", "What was I in the past?", "Shall I exist in the future?", and ""What shall I be in the future?" can be best left for each reader and seeker of enlightenment to ponder and muse over in his or her own heart.

### ***Karmic Consequences***

From a logical point of view, we know that the karmic consequences of some, or even many, of our actions are not experienced in this life. As a result, it can be suggested that one's karmic fruition be divided into three time periods. Results may be experienced:

- In this lifetime
- In the next lifetime
- In other, future rebirths

The Buddhist scriptures, for example, show that most of our actions will ripen and bear fruit in future rebirths.

In other words, the retributive process of karma can span more than one lifetime. We accumulate immaterialized karma, and then it is in the next, or in a future lifetime, in which the accumulated karma will take form.

## ***Why Take Rebirths?***

Over the course of taking many rebirths on earth, we move toward achieving purity and perfection. In each lifetime, we have opportunities to further develop love, compassion, and wisdom – thereby creating good karma, instead of bad. We transform the dark energies of negativity.

In resolving negative karma, one way is to choose to develop love and compassion. As we thus create positive karma, and so resolve negative karma, the result is greater peace and joy, as well as gaining wisdom.

In *The Eleven Eternal Principles*, Carmen Harra writes:<sup>95</sup>

Rather than get upset about challenging situations, we can choose to look at them as opportunities to be more loving and compassionate toward ourselves and others, and to learn our lessons so that we can stop attracting hardships and difficult people. . . . Once a soul has let go of all its negative karma, which can take many, many lifetimes, it is able to achieve nirvana, or perfection. In nirvana, we are at the highest state of consciousness.

Our troubles and tragedies occur because of karma – the law of cause and effect. In a universe characterized by intelligence, design, harmony, and love, all pain has a purpose. For this reason, we must learn and grow from our suffering – to recognize karmic causes, rather than suffer fruitlessly and in vain. We can see our afflictions as vital opportunities to end suffering that may have been experienced lifetime after lifetime.

---

<sup>95</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 45.

Then, ultimately, we will no longer take rebirths in a world where there is crying, pain, mourning, and death.

Carmen Harra writes further:<sup>96</sup>

Karma is so powerful that unchecked, it will grow like a weed. If you have good karma, created by treating others well, being grateful and loving, and generously giving to the world, it will increase like a carpet of lovely violets. However, if you create negative karma, it will become like a cancer, rapidly multiplying. You can't ignore it forever. Negative karma, left unresolved, will lead to disease and disaster. . . . The pain in your life is meant to wake you up to your negative karma so that you will resolve it rather than remain ignorant of it and let it accumulate and get worse, drawing you further into anger, depression, envy, or greed.

Finally, an essential part of karma is *intentionality*. If a person harms someone accidentally, they have not created negative karma. Also, *how* we respond to a situation is crucially important. If we respond with hatred and anger, followed by holding on to a grudge, we create bad karma for ourselves.

### ***Candle Analogy for Rebirth***

What exactly is rebirth? Gill Farrer-Halls in her book, *Working with Karma*, gives an insightful answer by drawing on the analogy of the flame of a dying candle:<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>97</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 42.

The Buddhist texts illustrate rebirth with an analogy: the flame of a dying candle is used to light a new candle and then peters out. The new candle is alight, but is it the same flame? It is neither the same nor a different flame; there has simply been a transference of energy from one object to another. Only the subtlest consciousness goes from one life to the next – the individual person, with their personality and characteristics, is extinguished at death. This subtle consciousness carries with it all the karma created in the life just finished, together with any karma from previous lives that has not yet come to fruition. These karmic imprints determine the quality of the next life, and some of the karma carried over will also come to fruition in this next life when it meets the appropriate conditions.

### ***Sleep Analogy for Rebirth***

A further starting point for understanding rebirth is to consider how the mind and the body are different entities. At death, the body disintegrates. However, the continuum of the mind does not cease – rather the continuum of the mind remains unbroken. At death, the mind does not cease, but leaves its present body and goes on to the next life.

To understand the existence of past and future lives, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso offers the following analogy drawn from sleep:<sup>98</sup>

One way to gain an understanding of past and future lives is to examine the process of sleeping, dreaming, and

---

<sup>98</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism: An Explanation of the Buddhist Way of Life* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2002), 17-20.



waking, because this closely resembles the process of death, intermediate state, and rebirth. When we fall asleep, . . . our mind becomes progressively more and more subtle until it transforms into the very subtle mind of the clear light of sleep. While the clear light of sleep is manifest, we experience deep sleep, and to others we resemble a dead person. When the clear light of sleep ends, our mind becomes gradually more and more gross and we pass through the various levels of the dream state. Finally, our normal powers of memory and mental control are restored and we wake up. When this happens, our dream world disappears and we perceive the world of the waking state.

A very similar process occurs when we die. As we die, . . . our mind becomes progressively more and more subtle until the very subtle mind of the clear light of death becomes manifest. The experience of the clear light of death is very similar to the experience of deep sleep. After the clear light of death has ceased, we experience the stages of the intermediate state, or *bardo* in Tibetan, which is a dream-like state that occurs between death and rebirth. After a few days or weeks, the intermediate state ends and we take rebirth. Just as when we awake from sleep, the dream world disappears and we perceive the world of the waking state, so, when we take rebirth, the appearances of the intermediate state cease and we perceive the world of our next life.

The only significant difference between the process of sleeping, dreaming, and waking and the process of death, intermediate state, and rebirth is that after the clear light

of sleep has ceased, the relationship between our mind and our present body remains intact, whereas after the clear light of death this relationship is broken.

### ***Larger Time Frame***

As we progress on a spiritual path, and also as we grow older, we realize that we are engaged in a process that we may well not finish in this lifetime. For some this becomes disheartening. They look back on their life and see that they have not made giant leaps forward. A personal example illustrates this. My wife, Eva, and I have been peacefully and contentedly married for almost four decades. Only the other day she pointed out a possessive tendency that I still have for "things that are mine" after all these years. Logically speaking, it's a trait that should have been rooted out years ago! We simply don't seem to make tremendous progress in our lifetimes. Additionally, our progress is not linear – we continue to have good days and then bad days. "If we think in terms of rebirth," comments Berzin, "then it helps us to have a longer perspective and we don't get so uptight that 'I'm not really making fantastic progress now.'"<sup>99</sup> He adds further:<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Berzin, "The Buddhist Explanation of Rebirth" (Morelia, Mexico, June 2000; edited course transcript, supplemented with material from courses given in Munich, Germany, October 2000 and Berlin, Germany, February 2001).

[http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level4\\_deepening\\_understanding\\_path/rebirth\\_karma/buddhist\\_explanation\\_rebirth/part\\_place\\_rebirth\\_buddhism\\_topic\\_m.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level4_deepening_understanding_path/rebirth_karma/buddhist_explanation_rebirth/part_place_rebirth_buddhism_topic_m.html) (Accessed on September 9, 2012.)

<sup>100</sup> Alexander Berzin, "The Buddhist Explanation of Rebirth" (Morelia, Mexico, June 2000).

If we can continue having what Buddhism calls 'precious human rebirths,' then eventually, with enough hard work, we will reach our ultimate goals of liberation and enlightenment. A precious human rebirth is one in which we have a respite from all situations in which we would have no freedom to practice the Dharma and one in which we have all the enriching factors that give us the fullest opportunity to practice. Therefore, the provisional goal we need to aim for first is ensuring that we continue to gain precious human rebirths in all our lifetimes until we become liberated beings.

### ***Different Realms of Rebirth***

As alluded to earlier, in our Western culture, the ideas of rebirth and other realms of existence may be regarded with scepticism and perhaps treated with derision. Given our strong cultural conditioning, these views are understandable and a healthy "prove all things" approach is valid. This book considers the possibility of rebirths, knowing that each reader can meditatively ponder the idea and explore the truth of the teachings for themselves.

The Buddha taught that there are six realms or planes of existence: three lower realms of suffering and three higher planes of existence. These realms have both a *present* element and a *future* dimension – all determined by our karma.

Goldstein and Kornfield present their understanding as follows:<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and

These six realms are the manifestations of strongly developed patterns of mind. They refer to the different realities we experience from moment to moment, and also to the actual planes of existence in which beings are reborn according to their karma. . . . The lower realms are conditioned by intense anger, hatred, greed, and delusion, and when we cultivate these states, developing them as a pattern of response to situations, they become a strong force in the mind. Not only do we then experience the present karma of the painful feelings in the moment, but we also create the conditions for possible rebirth in realms of terrible suffering. . . . These six realms are all karmically created. There is no one who judges, condemns, or elevates us to different realms, just as there is nobody who decides which mind states we are to experience in each moment.

In their book *Buddhism for Dummies*, the authors further clarify as follows, giving this perspective:<sup>102</sup>

Although Buddhist mythology depicts these realms as having an objective existence, they're just as often used to refer to human beings who are stuck in a particular mind-state. For example, someone who never gets enough – someone who's never satisfied with the amount of material possessions he or she has – is often called a hungry ghost, and someone who's consumed with hatred is generally regarded as inhabiting the hell realm. By contrast, people

---

Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann, *Buddhism for Dummies*, 2d ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 260.

may refer to someone who lives a life of wealth and ease but has little concern for spiritual matters as being stuck in the god realm. . . . These various realms of experience, or states of existence, aren't places awaiting your visit. They're not pre-existing destinations to which you're sent as a reward or punishment. You create the causes for experiencing the pleasures and pains of these realms by what you do, say, and think.

In other words, our mind creates karma and then experiences its results – regardless of where we may be living. A particular state of mind (realm or state of existence) can be described as "higher" or "lower" depending on the amount of suffering experienced. Therefore, beings who are experiencing less suffering and more happiness would be in a higher realm when compared with beings who are suffering much (lower realm). When a person dies, the karmic seeds that ripen determine the kind of rebirth that the person will take in their next life. This depends on the state of mind in which the person breathes their last breath. For example, if a person dies with a peaceful mind, this fosters a virtuous seed, and the person will experience a fortunate rebirth. By contrast, if person dies in a state of anger, this type of agitated mind will stimulate a non-virtuous seed, and the person will have an unfortunate rebirth. Virtuous (or wholesome) actions are the main cause for rebirth in the higher realms, and therefore of future happiness. By contrast, non-virtuous (or unwholesome) actions are the main cause for rebirth in the lower realms, and therefore of future suffering. The six realms in which a person may take rebirth, either literally (in a future rebirth) or symbolically (experientially in this life) are shown in the table that follows.

## ***Six Possible Realms for Taking Rebirth***

Three Lower Realms	Three Higher Realms
The ripened effect of <i>negative</i> actions is rebirth in one of the three <i>lower</i> realms.	The ripened effect of <i>positive</i> actions is rebirth in one of the three <i>higher</i> realms.
<p>1. <i>Animals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is a realm of constant struggle: searching for food, while trying to avoid being eaten up.</li> <li>▪ Characterized by being driven by instincts, and is a reflection of the type of behavior that is largely responsible for rebirth as an animal.</li> <li>▪ People living in desperate circumstances or having limited intelligence, forcing them to live not much different from animals.</li> </ul>	<p>1. <i>Humans</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is a realm filled with the suffering of sickness, old age, and death.</li> <li>▪ Characterized by the frustration of not getting what one wants and the anguish of being separated from what one likes.</li> <li>▪ People in this realm are very fortunate: One has enough suffering to be motivated to break free from cyclic existence, and enough leisure to do something about it.</li> </ul>
<p>2. <i>Hungry ghosts (pretas, or wandering spirits)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is a realm of continual frustration, thwarted desire, and unsatisfied craving.</li> <li>▪ Characterized by unrelieved hunger and thirst, caused by miserliness.</li> <li>▪ People who hold on to their possessions in a miserly fashion that all joy is banished from their lives.</li> </ul>	<p>2. <i>Demigods (the asuras)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is a realm of existence similar to the god realm, but inhabitants can't fully enjoy their pleasures.</li> <li>▪ Characterized by tremendous jealousy, provoking war against their more powerful neighbors.</li> <li>▪ People, not so rich and famous, who experience problems of jealousy and competitiveness.</li> </ul>
<p>3. <i>Hell-beings</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is the lowest of the realms within cyclic existence.</li> <li>▪ Characterized by intense suffering, caused by committing extremely harmful actions (e.g. murder).</li> <li>▪ People who endure intense forms of physical or mental agony.</li> </ul>	<p>3. <i>Gods (also called devas, or celestial beings)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is the realm occupying the highest position within cyclic existence.</li> <li>▪ Characterized by beings living in sumptuous surroundings.</li> <li>▪ People who live the lifestyle of the rich and famous.</li> </ul>
<p>Source: Adapted from Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann, <i>Buddhism for Dummies</i>, 2d ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley &amp; Sons, 2011), 257-259.</p>	

## ***Human and Animal Rebirths***

Some ask how it is karmically possible for people to reborn as animals, and animals as people. Thubten Chodron offers this explanation:<sup>103</sup>

Based on our actions, our minds are attracted toward certain types of rebirth when we die. It may seem difficult to imagine that a human being could be reborn as an animal, but if we consider the fact that some people act worse than animals, it doesn't seem so far-fetched. For example, animals kill only when they are threatened or hungry, while some human beings kill for sport, fame, or power. If someone's mind habitually goes in a certain direction, it makes sense that his or her body could correspond to that mental state in a future life. . . .

Ordinary people have both positive and negative karmic imprints on their minds. What rebirth we take is not a sum total of all of our past karma. Rather, certain seeds ripen while others remain dormant. Thus, if someone is angry at the time he dies, some of the negative imprints could ripen and he could be reborn as a dog. However, the positive imprints still remain on his mind stream and when causes and conditions come together, they could ripen, causing him to again be reborn as a human.

## ***Giftedness of People***

While in Western culture, the idea of rebirth is not easily accepted, there is one aspect of life that may provide insight as

---

<sup>103</sup> Thubten Chodron, *Buddhism for Beginners* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 66.

far as karma passing on from one lifetime to another. This aspect is the occurrence and observable fact of talent. Some people with outstanding talent in a field, such as exceptional musicians, describe their ability and giftedness as if they already had it when they first started. They learn and express their talent quickly from an early age. This could be accounted for through special training received in a previous life which created karma for the talent to be carried over into a new life.

### ***A Wise and Compassionate System***

The continuing cycle of life and death as a reality provides a foundation for believing that this universe is a fair, just, and compassionate system. Author Caroline Myss states that not only has this reality been repeatedly verified through her work but also that "whatever it is that we are and the circumstances that we find ourselves in, we have earned. The option that we are born only once to circumstances beyond our control, meaning that we thrive or starve without reason, is unacceptable to me."<sup>104</sup>

Karma can be more fully understood in the context of rebirth. Since time immemorial – ancient beyond any memory or record – we have gone through a cycle of uncontrolled death and rebirth. Depending on the karma we produced through our mindless actions, we were propelled into the various realms of *samsara* (the cycles of uncontrolled death and rebirth, sometimes known as "cyclic existence"). And, in our present human realm, it is our karma and delusion that continue to

---

<sup>104</sup> Caroline Myss and C. Norman Shealy, *The Creation of Health: The Emotional, Psychological, and Spiritual Responses That Promote Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 124.



produce suffering. When a person becomes enlightened, they are liberated from the bondage of continued cyclic existence and its associated suffering.

Karma, therefore, offers a coherent understanding for the function of the world and its beings. It also points a way forward from the suffering experienced in the creation – to the means of liberation and timeless freedom.

In sum, karma can be seen as a system of universal justice. It can account for our present situation as the outcome (reward and/or punishment) for our skillful ("good") and unskillful ("bad") actions in the past, both in this life and in previous lifetimes. This removes the notion of arbitrary results of capricious and totally unpredictable fate – or of living in a Kafkaesque world where life occurrences and situations are totally bewildering, bizarre, or illogical.

"Thoughts lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in action;  
actions form habits; habits decide character; and character fixes  
our destiny."

(Tryon Edwards)

"Our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds."

(George Eliot)

## **Actions and Results**

Each action performed leaves an imprint, or sows a seed, in our mind – and each seed or imprint (now a new cause) then gives rise to its own effect in the future, given the right conditions.

### ***Ten Non-Virtuous Actions***

Virtuous actions (positive deeds coming from wholesome intentions) sow seeds of future happiness. On the other hand, non-virtuous actions (negative deeds arising from unwholesome motivations) sow seeds of future suffering.

As mentioned, these karmic seeds can remain dormant in our mind until the conditions for them to ripen occur – and then they produce their effect. When future lives are considered, the imprints may ripen many lifetimes after the original action!

Having observed or directly experienced that good karma (virtuous action) is a cause for happiness and good fortune, then one may conclude that if things are going well for a person in life – such as having fine health, secure living conditions, loving relationships – this could be a result of previous good karma now ripening.

By contrast, if a person experiences sickness, a dangerous living environment, and conflict, then this may be a result of their own past negative karma. However, this should *never* be a cause for us to judge others harshly.

If we accept the idea of past lives in eternity, then we can conclude that we ourselves have created every possible type of karma, both positive and negative, since time without end!

Accordingly, to be protected from suffering as much as possible, and to prevent experiencing a lower rebirth, we need to strive *not* to produce negative karma, as well as purify the harmful karma already created (covered later in the book).

Ten main non-virtuous actions, and their *possible* consequences, are described in three tables that follow. Three actions of the body, four of speech, and three of the mind are presented:

*Bodily actions:* killing, stealing, sexual misconduct

*Verbal actions:* lying, slander (divisive speech), harsh speech (hurtful words), and gossip (idle chatter)

*Mental actions:* covetousness (greed), harmful intent (hatred), and holding wrong views (ignorance)

Ten virtuous actions and their potential outcomes are also presented.

Again, karma is not a simplistic matter. It cannot be described in a straightforward, linear manner. There are many variables involved, as well as other causal factors apart from the law of karma. Something immensely mysterious surrounds our lives.

The Buddhist teachings have many stories, some of them describing the outworking of karma and previous lives. The content of the following tables reflect some of these stories. These stories, I believe, can be interpreted in more than one way.

First, there is the *literal* sense of a narrative – taking a passage at face value. Second, there can be an *allegorical* sense of an account – seeing the symbolic meaning. Such an interpretation does not deny the importance what may have happened in history. Rather, it discerns a deeper meaning beneath the surface of the historical event. Third, there is a *moral* sense of a story – discerning a meaning which concerns the conduct of the practitioner.

Therefore, whether one believes the stories literally or not, is of secondary importance. Important are the timeless principles behind the narratives. One such principle is that we do form patterns of behavior through our thoughts, words, and actions.

The tables presenting non-virtuous actions show three kinds of result or effect: (1) a ripened effect; (2) an effect similar to the cause; and (3) an environment effect.

The *ripened* effect is the rebirth; the *similar to the cause* effect is both a tendency similar to the cause and experiences similar to the cause; the *environmental* effect refers to the environment in which the rebirth takes place.

"The degree of suffering we experience as a result of any negative action," writes Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, "depends upon the power of the action, and its power is determined by six factors: (1) the nature of the action; (2) the intention; (3) the

method; (4) the object; (5) how often the action is committed; and (6) the application or non-application of an opponent."<sup>105</sup>

Some actions by their nature are more non-virtuous than others, such as killing compared to idle chatter. As far as intention, to kill in a violent rage is more negative than an accidental killing. A person's method for inflicting harm also determines the severity of the non-virtuous action – killing swiftly is less severe than killing through slow torture. A non-virtuous action is more negative if the object, for example, is someone who has been particularly kind to us. The frequency of a non-virtuous action determines its negativity – indulging in gossip at a party one time, for example, is less powerful than continually gossiping. Finally, the severity of a non-virtuous action would be lessened if a virtuous action was performed as well.

Finally, the following tables give only *general guidelines* about the results of various actions as described in Buddhist teachings. For example, from the teachings (*sutras* or *suttas*) we learn that killing causes a short life, while generosity brings about wealth. Goldstein and Kornfield elaborate further:<sup>106</sup>

Non-killing results in long life. The result of taking the lives of other beings is that in the future one's own life will

---

<sup>105</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 246.

<sup>106</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

be shortened. Why is it that some people are healthy and others sickly? Non-harming is the karmic force for health, while hurtful actions create the condition for disease. Anger and hatred are the conditions for ugliness, and loving care, gentleness, and kind speech are the conditions for beauty. When someone is very angry, we can see what anger does to his or her expression. The energy that we see clearly manifesting in that moment has a continuing force and power. Previous actions motivated by generosity are the karmic conditions for wealth, and those motivated by greed create the conditions for poverty. Why are some people wise and others dull? The mind that inquires, investigates, and explores conditions wisdom. The minds of those not interested in understanding and insight become dull.

However, only an omniscient mind could fully piece together the specific details of how karmic actions ripen. For instance, normally it is impossible for humans to know who a certain wealthy person was in a past life, to whom they were generous, and what they gave to be affluent in this life. Also, there is a measure of flexibility in how actions and their results function – dependent on the motivation involved.

<b><i>Results of Non-Virtuous Bodily Actions</i></b>		
Effect in Rebirth	Effect Similar to the Cause	Effect Ripened in Environment
<i>Killing</i>		
One of the lower realms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Having a life full of sickness and disease</li> <li>▪ Experiencing a short life</li> <li>▪ Born possessing an intuitive sense to kill</li> <li>▪ Having a tendency to kill</li> <li>▪ Engaging in multiple killings (e.g. mercenary)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Barren, hostile area; or war zone</li> <li>▪ Place is poor; hard to find food and other necessities</li> <li>▪ Food and drink may be unable to nourish one's body</li> <li>▪ Medicines may be ineffective in curing illness</li> <li>▪ Possible untimely death</li> </ul>
<i>Stealing</i>		
Hungry ghosts ( <i>preta</i> realm)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Poverty; lacking wealth</li> <li>▪ Losing possessions through theft</li> <li>▪ Difficulty amassing wealth despite effort</li> <li>▪ Living in a crime situation and endlessly repeating stealing acts</li> <li>▪ Inclination to steal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Environmental problems (e.g. plagued by frost or hailstorms that destroy crops)</li> <li>▪ Place in which person lives is barren; plants and crops do not flourish</li> <li>▪ Person lives where there are sparse crops and little fruit</li> </ul>
<i>Sexual Misconduct</i>		
Hungry ghosts ( <i>preta</i> realm)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationship problems; loneliness</li> <li>▪ Quickly separated from friends and family</li> <li>▪ Partner abandons person for someone else</li> <li>▪ Employees soon resign</li> <li>▪ Relationships with people who betray</li> <li>▪ Sexual misconduct repeated (e.g. rape)</li> <li>▪ Tendency for sexual misconduct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Muddy, filthy and unclean environment, which also breeds disease</li> </ul>



<b>Results of Non-Virtuous Verbal Actions</b>		
Effect in Rebirth	Effect Similar to the Cause	Effect Ripened in Environment
<i>Lying</i>		
Animal realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Nobody believes person even if telling the truth</li> <li>▪ Person is deceived, lied to</li> <li>▪ Person is misunderstood and reviled</li> <li>▪ People do not listen to person's advice</li> <li>▪ Deceitfulness tendency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Living in filthy, unclean places, among people one cannot trust</li> <li>▪ Person lives in a place where they are surrounded by people trying to cheat and deceive them</li> </ul>
<i>Slander (Divisive Speech)</i>		
Hell realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Person suffers heartache from being separated from loved ones</li> <li>▪ Person finds it hard to develop harmonious relationships</li> <li>▪ Person is separated from those they like or love by some dispute</li> <li>▪ Tendency to slander</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Extremely isolating, inhospitable environment</li> <li>▪ Life is difficult due to problems of communication</li> <li>▪ Person lives in a place that is rugged and mountainous, and there is little transport</li> </ul>
<i>Harsh Speech</i>		
Hell realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Person suffers people abusing and insulting them</li> <li>▪ Others speak badly about them (baseless gossip)</li> <li>▪ Tendency to be harsh and critical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bleak desert region</li> <li>▪ Person lives in a place where there is dense undergrowth, or plants that sting and tear one's flesh, causing discomfort</li> </ul>
<i>Gossip</i>		
Animal realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Person suffers indignity brought about by their own verbal indiscretions</li> <li>▪ People do not take seriously what person says, regard them as foolish, and do not pay attention to their comments or opinions</li> <li>▪ Tendency to talk non-stop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Frustrating environment with droughts and floods</li> <li>▪ Person lives where fruit and crops do not grow properly, or at the right time, and so they are wasted</li> <li>▪ Rain comes at the wrong times</li> </ul>

<b>Results of Non-Virtuous Mental Actions</b>		
Effect in Rebirth	Effect Similar to the Cause	Effect Ripened in Environment
<i>Covetousness (greed)</i>		
Hungry ghosts ( <i>preta</i> realm)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Person experiences only dissatisfaction, as well as constant failure</li> <li>▪ Desires not fulfilled</li> <li>▪ Person unable to achieve their aims</li> <li>▪ Attachment increases and with it also dissatisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Living in an isolated place without resources</li> <li>▪ Person lives where material resources are easily destroyed or lost, or where their bodily strength and beauty quickly degenerate</li> <li>▪ Rebirth in a place where a person does not enjoy pleasant things even when they experience them</li> </ul>
<i>Harmful intent (hatred)</i>		
Hell realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Person suffers isolation and despair</li> <li>▪ Person is constantly prone to fear and they panic in dangerous situations</li> <li>▪ Person is terrified of their surroundings</li> <li>▪ Person is forced to harm others and anger will increase</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Living in a violent place</li> <li>▪ Person is reborn in a place that is ravaged by war and disease, or where there is continual conflict</li> <li>▪ Rebirth in a place where there is war, sickness, and famine</li> </ul>
<i>Wrong view (ignorance)</i>		
Animal realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Person is unable to gain realizations</li> <li>▪ Person has great confusion and finds it difficult to develop wisdom</li> <li>▪ When person hears or reads Dharma, they are full of doubt</li> <li>▪ Person is blind to the correct view</li> <li>▪ Person continues to draw wrong conclusions, and ignorance increases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Life lacks any precious things in the shape of resources, works of art, valuable treasures, scriptures, or spiritual guides</li> <li>▪ Person is reborn in a place that lacks water and where resources are quickly exhausted</li> <li>▪ Rebirth in a place where water and precious things are sparse</li> </ul>

## ***Ten Virtuous Actions***

The table below shows a correlation between virtuous actions and their outcomes:

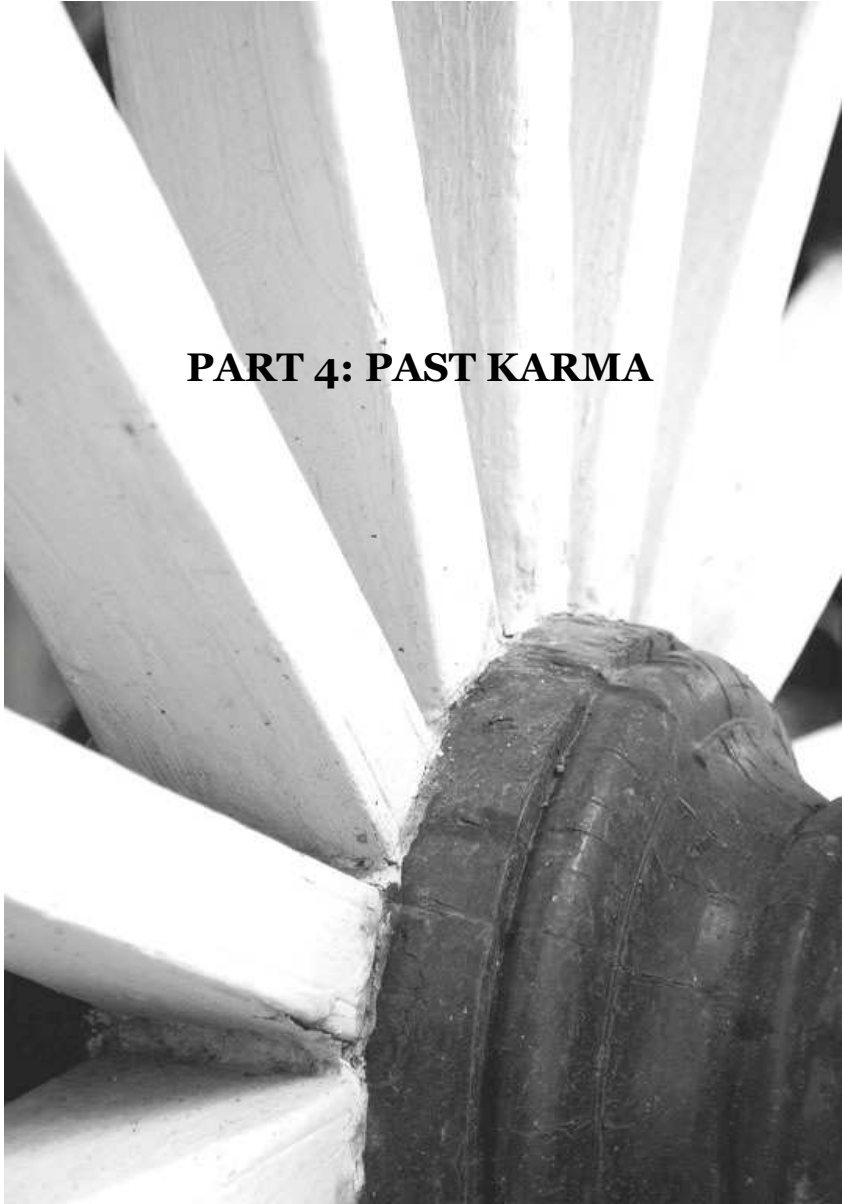
<b><i>Virtuous Actions and Their Results</i></b>		
	Actions	Results
<b>Body</b>	Abandoning killing	One experiences long life without sickness and disease
	Abandoning stealing	One finds that material wealth comes easily
	Abandoning sexual misconduct	Harmonious relationship with one's partner that endures a lifetime, and harmonious relationships with friends and relatives
<b>Speech</b>	Abandoning lying	One finds that people have a sense of trust
	Abandoning divisive speech	One never lacks friends, and one develops pleasant characteristics that naturally attract the company of others
	Abandoning harsh speech	One has a good reputation and people always speak well of one
	Abandoning gossip	One develops powerful speech, and people listen to whatever one has to say and value it
<b>Mind</b>	Abandoning covetous mind	One will easily be able to accomplish whatever one wishes for
	Abandoning ill-will	One will experience fearlessness and great confidence
	Abandoning wrong views	Whatever one studies will only help to expand one's mind to encompass a wider understanding of the world
<p>Source: All tables have been adapted from Yangsi Rinpoche, <i>Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo</i> (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 176-178.</p>		

Neither in the sky, nor deep in the ocean, nor in a mountain-cave, nor anywhere, can a man be free from the evil he has done.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 127.)*

Let a man avoid the dangers of evil even as a merchant carrying much wealth, but with a small escort, avoids the dangers of the road, or as a man who loves his life avoids the drinking of  
poison.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 123.)*



If a man does something wrong, let him not do it again and again. Let him not find pleasure in his sin. Painful is the accumulation of wrongdoings.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 117.)*

If a man does something good, let him do it again and again. Let him find joy in his good work. Joyful is the accumulation of good work.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 118.)*

## Dealing with the Past

In understanding karma, we may feel weighed down or overwhelmed when we reflect on the mountain of past negative karma we have inevitably enacted (without even considering past lives!).

The question arises: Is a person bound to reap all that he or she has sown, in just proportion? Quoting the Buddha, Ven Mahasi Sayadaw gives the following answer:<sup>107</sup>

If anyone says that a man or woman must reap in this life according to his present deeds, in that case there is no religious life, nor is an opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow. But if anyone says that what a man or woman reaps in this and future lives accords with his or her deeds present and past, in that case there is a religious life, and an opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of a sorrow (Anguttara Nikaya).

Sayadaw adds the following comment: "Although it is stated in the Dhammapada that 'not in the sky, nor in mid-ocean, or entering a mountain cave is found that place on earth where one may escape from (the consequences of) an evil deed',

---

<sup>107</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012

yet one is not bound to pay all the past arrears of one's karma. If such were the case emancipation would be impossibility."<sup>108</sup>

Fortunately, a method exists for dealing with past karma: purification.

### ***Good and Bad News***

All our actions of mind, speech and body sow seeds in our consciousness which have karmic potential. This karmic potentiality stays in our mental continuum – until the right conditions develop for the karma to come to fruition.

The good news is that all negative karma, no matter how negative, can be purified before it bears fruit – whether created in this lifetime or in one of many previous lifetimes. Through purification, we may prevent negative karma from ripening. It requires effort, but it can be achieved, and we must start as soon as possible.

However, if a person does not purify past negative karma, then he or she is destined to experience its effects in the future.

### ***Discovering Our Karmic Issues***

Escape from karma is impossible. However, only when we recognize what our karmic issues are, can we begin to resolve them. This requires discernment. We don't remember many of our past experiences, not to mention past lives. Our long-forgotten memories are buried in the subconscious. Nevertheless, several ways to discern karmic patterns exist.

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



One way we can identify karma at work is whether we are operating from *fear* – and thereby creating the very situations we wish to avoid.

Another way is to be aware of any *repeating patterns* in life that may well be the result of karma. For instance, a person may have been a victim of child abuse, only to find themselves perpetuating further child abuse.

Finally, karmic issues can also be uncovered through *counselling* and therapy.

Carmen Harra also offers this advice:<sup>109</sup>

To help yourself discover your own karma, keep in mind that whenever a situation feels familiar or painful, you are probably caught in the wheel of karma. Do not focus on what role you are playing or how that role is different from anything that happened in the past. Instead, reflect on the situation, and notice what feels familiar. Are you once again dealing with boundary issues, financial problems? Once you identify the issue you will be able to see how your karma is playing out in your life, even if the issues show up in a different arena than they did before.

### ***Clearing Accumulated Karma***

Each day, our thoughts, words, and actions create new karma – good or bad. In addition, we have accumulated karma from the past. By *becoming aware of our past karma*, the easier

---

<sup>109</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 54.

it is to change our present karma and to resolve the accumulated karma. Carmen Harra explains:<sup>110</sup>

When you let go of anger, hatred, jealousy, resentment, negativity, and despair you begin to think and behave in a more positive way. These three types of karma – past, present, and accumulated – can all be resolved by creating good karma and learning the lessons from your past so that you are able to finally let go of the negativity you've been carrying with you. It's only natural that we experience grief at a loss, or anger when we feel betrayed. But the moment we realize that we are . . . creating thoughts that perpetuate negative feelings and actions, we need to stop ourselves in order to avoid creating unwanted karma. Accumulated negative karma makes it very difficult to change our patterns, but we must.

### ***Healing Our Karma***

To heal our karma, we need to reflect on our thoughts, words, and behaviors. Sometimes cognitive behavioral therapy can help to identify and analyze distorted thinking. Our unclear thinking only creates suffering for ourselves. For instance, we may somehow think that everyone should like us – since we think of ourselves as quite likeable. We get upset if someone doesn't treat us well, especially a significant other person. We don't realize that the other person has their problems to contend with and may be unable to treat us acceptably and agreeably.

---

<sup>110</sup> Carmen Harra, *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009), 50-51.

When we recognize patterns of thought in ourselves, such as recurring sadness, anger, or fear, which predictably lead to hurtful actions, we need to gently and compassionately seek to understand ourselves. This is not the time for judging or "beating ourselves up" with guilt.

New habits of thinking take time to establish. Yet, as we become aware of old modes of thinking, and alter them, we will create good karma. Our actions will then assuredly yield good outcomes.

### ***Changing Our Karma***

In his book, *Path to Bliss*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama mentions that some people totally misunderstand the concept of karma. They think that the law of cause and effect means that all is predetermined – and that there is nothing a person can do. However, the Sanskrit word *karma* means "action" and action is a phenomenon that is performed by a person. This in itself indicates that future events are within our own hands.

With this understanding, we have the ability to transform our life for the better. This has been aptly described as follows:<sup>111</sup>

Changing our karma is not difficult. However, this change does require a very sober realization and acknowledgment – simply that our situation in life is the result of our own actions! According to Buddhist teachings, there is nobody

---

<sup>111</sup> Naljor Prison Dharma Service, "Karma: The Possession That Follows Us Everywhere" (PO Box 1177, Mount Shasta CA 96067), found at <http://www.naljorprisondharma.org/index.html>. Accessed December 1, 2012.

in the universe who is distributing rewards and punishments. We ourselves create the causes of our life experiences by our own thoughts, speech, and actions, and we experience the results. In this way, we can learn to be accountable. We can take full responsibility for our lives. Once we acknowledge that our situation in life is the result of our own actions, we can begin to change our karma.

To change our karma, we need to understand the unwholesome, negative, and non-virtuous actions that bring pain, unhappiness, and suffering. We also need to understand the wholesome, positive, and virtuous actions that bring benefit and happiness. The rest is diligent practice. . . . By cultivating positive, virtuous thoughts, feelings, words, and actions, exercising compassion, loving-kindness, and wisdom in our daily lives, we will transform our karma. By way of this practice, we will change the entire course of our life experience and move swiftly toward liberation.

The Buddhist teachings of all lineages offer many excellent practices for training the mind, purifying the heart of defilements, and transforming our karmic tendencies. It is wise for us to truly contemplate the workings of karma so that we are not influenced by deluded views of reality.

### ***Purifying Negative Karma***

There are four remedies – or opponent powers – available for purifying negative karma.<sup>112</sup> Even though these four remedies

---

<sup>112</sup> These four remedies have been taken from the Buddhist tradition (Vajrayana).

exist, we should not think that they give us license to do whatever we wish and then to use them to purify. "This is like breaking your legs on purpose," writes Yangsi Rinpoche, "thinking that they can be fixed later on. Between a leg that's fixed and a leg that was never broken, it's better to have an unbroken leg from the very beginning."<sup>113</sup>

While these remedies lessen or eliminate the resultant suffering, the four opponent powers do not totally and completely purify negative karma. All negative actions always have consequences on some level, even if purified. For example, memories will remain in our mind. Nevertheless, even the smallest amount of purification is meaningful – otherwise, suffering would be more continuous and extensive.

Purification not only lessens or prevents future suffering, but also relieves crippling guilt. Our minds will be cleansed, and we will have a more peaceful outlook on life.

The four opponent powers, explained in the three tables that follow, are used to purify negative seeds or imprints:

- Power of regret (sincere admission of negative action)
- Power of remedy (remedial action or antidote)
- Power of resolve (determining not to repeat an action)
- Power of reliance (taking refuge; generating altruism)

The purification practices have some similarities with those in many other religions. Two of the most essential factors required are *sincerity* and *honesty* with oneself.

---

<sup>113</sup> Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 190.

Finally, we need to mindfully engage in future actions with right intention and motivation. Understanding the law of karma enables us to create and fashion our lives as an artist imaginatively produces his artwork.

## ***Purifying Negative Karma***

### Four Remedies (Opponent Powers)

#### Power of Regret

- Regret empowers the other three remedies, and is most important.
- Regret should be supported by:
  - (1) Being mindful and aware of physical, verbal, mental actions
  - (2) Understanding the consequences of actions (karmic results)
- A strong sense of regret is like the person who has eaten poison by mistake – and will do everything possible to get the poison out, and neutralize its effects as quickly as possible.
- Regret is different from self-recrimination and guilt, which keep one bound up in anxiety.

#### Power of Remedy

- Practices that function as the power of the remedy (antidote, or remedial action), may be any positive action and can include:
  - (1) Listening to Dharma teachings
  - (2) Reading a Dharma book
  - (3) Reciting *sutras* (for example, *Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom*) – this includes reading, reflecting on, and memorizing from these texts
  - (4) Meditation on *emptiness*, which can include meditation on the:
    - a. Selflessness of persons
    - b. Selflessness of phenomena
    - c. Emptiness of the "I" that has accumulated the negative karma
    - d. Emptiness of the negative karma itself
    - e. Emptiness of the action that was done to accumulate it
    - f. Basic innate nature of the conventional mind which is luminous, clear, and knowing
    - g. Fact that one's non-virtuous karmic imprints are temporary pollutions obscuring the mind, and that they do not exist innately in the nature of the mind itself
  - (5) Recitation of *mantras*
  - (6) Making offerings
  - (7) Offering service in the community

- In sum, any virtuous activity one undertakes physically, verbally, or mentally can be dedicated as a means of the power of the remedy (antidote) for purifying negative karma. [This could be viewed in terms of positive energy replacing negative energy.]

#### Power of Resolve

- The resolution not to engage in certain non-virtuous actions again is based on faith in karma and understanding the ripening results of one's karmic actions.
- The determination must be realistic so that one can do what is promised.

#### Power of Reliance

- Also referred to as the power of the basis, the power of reliance involves two aspects: (1) taking refuge, and (2) generating *bodhichitta*
- One can take refuge in the safe place of the Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Being perfect in nature, they are the only perfect refuge.
- *Bodhichitta* (the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings) should be the bedrock of all of one's actions. For the purification of karma it is essential. If one generates *bodhichitta*, the poisons of karma will be purified and rendered harmless.
- To restore a good relationship with others, one can generate an altruistic attitude towards them by aspiring to become a Buddha so that one can best benefit them.

Source: Adapted from Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 186-187. Also referred to: Thubten Chodron, *Buddhism for Beginners* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 63-64.



Two more basic summaries of purifying karma are given as follows.

<b><i>Purifying Harmful Karma</i></b>
<u>Regret</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing and admitting mistakes made; feeling remorse.</li> <li>• Not confusing honest admission of error with <i>guilt</i>, which traps one in the past and creates an identity of being a "bad" person.</li> <li>• Having the motivation to take care of oneself and others by changing behavior – now and in the future.</li> </ul>
<u>Resolve</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determining not to repeat a destructive action.</li> <li>• Realistically vowing not to commit the harmful action again.</li> </ul>
<u>Reliance</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminating negativity by depending on refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.</li> <li>• Eliminating negativity through being dedicated to others, reminding oneself of the compassionate intention to win enlightenment for their sake (which is <i>bodhichitta</i> motivation).</li> </ul>
<u>Remedy</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking specific positive actions to counterbalance whatever negativity was created.</li> <li>• Example: Doing something completely contrary to the negativity being purified – acting out of love rather than hate, generosity rather than miserliness, compassion rather than aversion, and so on.</li> <li>• Some generally recommended activities to counterbalance negativity include: serving the poor and needy, visiting people in hospital, saving the lives of animals about to be killed, making offerings to monasteries and other religious organizations, reciting passages from traditional Buddhist texts (as well as meditating on their meaning and putting them into practice).</li> </ul>
<p>Source: Adapted from Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann, <i>Buddhism for Dummies</i>, 2d ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley &amp; Sons, 2011), 245-248.</p>

## ***Four Powers of Purification***

### **Reliance (Protection)**

- Remember and think of all sentient beings you may have hurt.
- Generate compassion for all sentient beings.
- Take *refuge* in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

### **Regret (Pain)**

- As you examine yourself and your actions, recognize that the negative actions done in the past were unwise (“What I did was wrong”).
- Regret having committed the actions and feel this regret in the heart – a deep remorse for the past negative deeds.
- This regret should *not* be senseless guilt, self-recrimination, or criticism – which are unhelpful emotional torture.

### **Resolve (Promise)**

- Promise not to repeat the negative actions and apply yourself diligently to doing virtuous actions – in order to counteract the negative ones.
- Commit yourself to avoid the negative behavior for a realistic, specific period of time – not being honest at this stage makes the practice useless or even harmful to yourself.
- You can also rely on and pray to the Buddhas and Bodhistsavas for the purification of the negative actions you regret.

### **Remedy (Practice)**

- Essentially any positive actions with good motivation can be used.
- Traditionally in Buddhism one can use practices such as prostrations (to destroy pride), making offerings (to counteract greed), reading Buddhist texts (to counteract ignorance and negative thoughts), and acts of kindness (to cultivate a heart of compassion).
- Through applying these four powers of purification and dedicating yourself to the path of perfection, you can purify the karma of negative actions and completely transform your life!

Considerably adapted from pdf file entitled "Karma: The Possession That Follows Us Everywhere" found at <http://www.naljorprisondharmaservice.org/index.html>.

In sum, a person's thoughts, words, and deeds return to them sooner or later – with astounding accuracy! Indeed whatever a person sows, that will also be reaped. Nevertheless, all negative karma, whether created in this lifetime or in a previous lifetime, can be purified. The task entails using the four powers of purification to counter the results of non-virtuous actions.

The four powers of purification need to be performed more than just once, but regularly. The reason is that we have all acted destructively many times – and so cannot expect to counteract all the negative seeds at once. It is also effective to purify oneself using these four opponent powers each evening in order to counteract any negative actions done during the day.

### ***Letting Karma Burn Out***

Sooner or later, karma burns itself out. When we experience problems – when we suffer the results of karma ripening in our lives – we immediately have a choice. We can accept the present outcome with patience and seek wisdom for best handling it; or, we can respond with impatience and anger. If we choose to bear the effects with patience and wisdom, the negative karmic cause will burn itself out. This means that we do not have to experience the particular effects again.

Often, however, when difficulties arise, we feel annoyed and aggravated. This adds to the karmic possibilities of the situation. The negative thoughts, as well as any resulting actions, mean that there will be further ripening of karma in the future, in a more pronounced way – making it harder to deal with at that time.

A superior approach is to let the karma ripen and exhaust itself. This means accepting the situation with a calm and rational mind, yet having done all we can reasonably do under the circumstances. In this way, self-pity and anger do not arise and the negative karma has been released without the potential to return.

Sometimes we just need to sit with our negative feelings and accept them. This is in place of struggling to get away from them, being reactive, or developing aversion toward them. For example, we may be experiencing anger, envy, or guilt. To patiently sit with our suffering (provided we have done all we could under the given conditions), can be one of the best ways to work through it – and thereby not create future negative karma by blaming or seeking revenge on others. We might say, "Yes, I feel anger . . . jealousy . . . guilt; I accept my part in the karmic equation." In this way, the negative karma will burn itself out and we will experience peace of mind in due time. During such times, a friend to confide in can also be wonderfully helpful.

On the other hand, if we act on our feelings of anger or resentment to seemingly get away from our pain, we end up back where we started – and around and around we go! (In some severe cases, such as clinical depression, professional guidance in the form of counseling, psychotherapy, or medication may be necessary.)

### ***No Longer Blaming Others***

"When you check your own mind properly, you stop blaming others for your problems. You recognize that your mistaken actions come from your own defiled, deluded mind"

states Lama Thubten Yeshe.<sup>114</sup> To become angry and infuriated with others only increases our own suffering! Pema Chödrön writes that "it's like eating poison seeds and wondering why we get sicker."<sup>115</sup>

Rather, consider the law of karma as you reflect on being harmed. Remember, what goes around comes around. If you habitually steal, you can expect to be taken advantage of at some future time. If you freely indulge in gossip, you can expect that sooner or later you will be the one slandered. "When we ponder the multiple factors coming together to cause an unfortunate event," writes Chödrön, "we should at least consider that one of them is our former deeds."<sup>116</sup>

Recognizing how the law of karma works in our life, gives us freedom to participate in shaping our own future. When difficult people or challenging things arise, we no longer need to think we're fundamentally bad or, worse still, being punished. Preferably, we realize that while the words or actions of others wound us, *both* their words/actions *and* my reactivity are equally responsible for my pain. Pema Chödrön explains it in this way:<sup>117</sup>

A remark that provokes me may not affect you at all. We all have to work on our side of the equation. We can't

---

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Thubten Lhundrup, Ven., *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles* (Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004), 62.

<sup>115</sup> Pema Chödrön, *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*, ed. Helen Berliner (London: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 182.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-183.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-185.

stop others from saying mean words, but we can work on developing patience. . . . How sad it is that we, like children who don't know any better, continue doing the very things that cause us suffering. Moreover, we love these causes – the addictions, the gossip, the overwork, the feeding of our critical mind. We associate with them with comfort, satisfaction, and well-being. Why don't we get angry with ourselves for hurting ourselves, rather than blaming others? . . . The hells in which we find ourselves are a projection of our mind. Our pain is for the most part self-inflicted. The good news is that once we see this, we might be motivated to free ourselves from our misery-producing ways.

### ***Urgency of Purification***

When we bear in mind that the results of actions increase over time, purification becomes a vital and even urgent task. It means diligently seeking to purify the mind of the karmic potential from past negative actions. Otherwise, the negative karmic fruit only increases and manifests more strongly (just as a seed potentially grows into a tree).

An example is a person who is easily angered – a proclivity that is a karmic consequence of previously repeated angry behavior. Without seeking to purify this negative conduct, the person will continue to give in to the impulse of anger which will only create more and more negative karma for themselves.

Another pressing aspect of purification is to develop positive karma from skillful actions – in contrast to the negative karma from the unskillful actions. For instance, a person who

has grown very miserly in his outlook on life, needs to cultivate positive karma by acts of generosity and giving.

### ***Pitfalls of Purification***

A potential pitfall in purification is falling prey to *low self-esteem* and feeling hopeless with despair. Farrer-Halls shares this essential counsel:<sup>118</sup>

However, you do not have to self-identify with your negative behavior. If you start feeling depressed about your previous bad actions and their consequences, then you can recall the many positive actions you have also done. The essence of purification is simply to let go of your problems and mistakes by seeing them as temporary blips on your stream of consciousness, not as an intrinsic part of your nature. By not identifying with your problems and mistakes, and by seeing their transitory nature, you will find them less difficult to deal with and easier to let go of and purify.

Another danger in looking at past karma is becoming overwhelmed with feelings of *guilt* for past non-virtuous or unwholesome actions. In their book, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Goldstein and Kornfield counsel the following:<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>118</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 98.

<sup>119</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

Guilt is a manifestation of condemnation or aversion toward oneself, which does not understand the changing transformative quality of mind. It solidifies a sense of self by being non-forgiving. *Understanding the law of karma leads us to reflect wisely on the skillfulness or unskillfulness of our actions.* In the infinite time of our births, through all the realms of existence, we have done so many different kinds of actions, wholesome and unwholesome. In view of karmic law, guilt is an inappropriate feeling, and a rather useless burden. It simply creates more unwholesome results. Coming to an understanding of karma is the basis for a very *straightforward* development of the wisdom to know whether our actions will lead to happiness and freedom, or to further suffering. When we understand this, it allows us to take responsibility for past actions with an attitude of compassion, appreciating that a particular act may have been unwholesome or harmful, and strongly determining not to repeat it. Guilt is a manifestation of condemnation, wisdom an expression of sensitivity and forgiveness.

### ***Further Strategies***

We all look back on our lives and at times regret actions that we have taken. It is helpful when we can recognize patterns of behavior and conditioning – and acknowledge their painful karmic consequences.

An example might be of a person recognizing a thread of deep-seated distrust between family members, and the resultant lack of respect and intimacy. The heartbreaking, distressing cause-and-effect relationship involving suspicion and lack of respect can perpetuate itself for an entire lifetime. Other



examples may be agonizing financial struggles where a family never makes ends meet, intense sibling rivalries, or child abuse.

When we recognize karmic patterns at work in our lives, here are strategies for coping:

*Break the cycle of cause and effect.* If, for example, you realize that a mindset of scarcity, or miserliness, is clearly a causal factor for experiencing lack of abundance and financial struggle, focus on the meaning of generosity. The essence of generosity is a boundless openness of heart and mind, an unconditional love, and a giving which is free from attachment and expectation.

*Accept responsibility for your sorrow and grief.* When in anguish, it is easy to look for someone or something to blame. The law of karma suggests another view to at least consider: Is there a causeless curse? Such a stance may be difficult to accept. Nevertheless, in honest introspection, you may catch sight of personal causes resulting in suffering. To accept the outcomes of your behavior will help bring tranquility and peace.

*Start where you are and do what you can, however small.* As long as you begin planting good karmic seed through skillful and virtuous actions, with right intentions, you can have confidence in future positive outcomes – even though the returns may take time. This is why we must all not become weary of well doing.

*Practice patience.* We live in an age of seeking quick or instant solutions. However, changing strongly conditioned behavioral patterns takes time. Habits, developed since childhood, cannot be radically or rapidly transformed. Yet, to introduce small, positive changes will in time make a remarkable difference. Also, we may have to wait for suitable conditions to arise. An example

of required patience is reversing long-term effects of smoking. Cigarette smoking narrows and blocks blood vessels which reduce blood and oxygen supply to one's extremities (feet, legs, hands, arms). Over time, this may result in pain, open sores that don't heal, and gangrene leading to amputation. Much patience is needed to reverse such conditions.

*Be self-compassionate.* Having recognized and accepted your limitations, be gentle and kind toward yourself. Patiently, little by little, implement positive karmic actions. Avoid attempting to force unrealistic changes which only leave one feeling defeated and disheartened.

*Practice a spiritual path.* The discipline in following a spiritual path results in many positive actions, sowing the seeds for future happiness. Regarding spiritual paths, Lama Thubten Yeshe once commented: "If your path teaches you to act and exert yourself correctly and leads to spiritual realizations such as love, compassion and wisdom then obviously it's worthwhile."<sup>120</sup>

These strategies, faithfully applied over time, will bear fruit and good results will shine forth.

### ***A Story of Purification***

Goldstein and Kornfield describe the story of the great 12th-century Tibetan Buddhist yogi and poet, Jetsun Milarepa,

---

<sup>120</sup> Found on the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) website at <http://www.fpmt.org/>

who illustrates how past unskillful actions can be purified, leading to transformation and enlightenment:<sup>121</sup>

Milarepa was born into a wealthy, landed family. When he was still a young boy, his father died and his aunt and uncle took control of the family's property, treating him and his mother as outcasts. Over the years a tremendous resentment and outrage grew in him, and when he was older he went off to study black magic. He proved to be an adept, and he returned home to put a powerful curse on his aunt and uncle, and on the land itself, causing great suffering. After achieving his revenge, he gradually began to reflect on the law of karma. He realized that because of his powerful, hate-motivated actions, he had accumulated much unwholesome karma, which would bear fruit over many future lives. Because of this he felt compelled to purify and free his mind in that very life. He came to recognize the preciousness of having the opportunity to practice the dharma, and it inspired him with an extraordinary sense of urgency. He sought out a teacher, and when he found one in the person of Marpa, he began years of remarkably strenuous and committed practice, which led him to a deeply liberating wisdom and compassion.

In sum, the life of Milarepa, though briefly described, nonetheless shows the power of purification practices to transform even grievous negative karma into dedication to

---

<sup>121</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

following a path that leads to full and perfect awakening. He is well-known for his songs of joyous inspiration on the Buddhist path.

### ***Prayers and Affirmations***

The recitation of prayers creates good karma. In some ways, affirmations are a modern equivalent of traditional prayers. Both prayers and affirmations develop positive thoughts and deter negative ones. Thus they assist to purify negative thinking and to train the mind in positive thinking.

The following prayers and affirmations, drawn from traditional Buddhist texts, have been taken from Gill Farrer-Hall's book, *Working with Karma*.<sup>122</sup> They can be recited at the beginning or end of a meditation session – or read and reflected upon at any time.

Through each virtuous action I undertake may I quickly purify my negative karma, and through being of benefit to other beings may I quickly create positive karma.

If I practice unselfishness and generosity, greed and avarice will become less and I will create good karma. If I practice love and kindness, anger and hatred will vanish and I will create good karma. If I develop wisdom and knowledge, ignorance and delusion will gradually disappear and I will purify my negative karma.

Restraining myself and loving others creates positive karmic seeds that will bear fruit in this life and beyond.

---

<sup>122</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 108-109.

The mind that is free from the delusions of desire, hatred, anger and ignorance knows instinctively when and how to act for the greatest good. Therefore, I will cultivate a mind that is free of these delusions, in order for good karma to blossom and for negative karma to fade away.

I believe in universal responsibility to all other living beings. I know that whatever I do matters and has a karmic effect on the rest of the world.

To give meaning to my life and create good karma, I envisage my heart as a temple of love from which I reach out to others with compassion and wisdom. My moral values are to love and respect all others, whoever they may be.

### ***Purification in a Nutshell***

We have all generated bad karma, both in this life, and in previous lives as many believe. Therefore, the reality is that our bad karma will cause, or ripen as, unpleasant effects, both in this life, and in future lives.<sup>123</sup> Fortunately, there is a way to prevent negative karma from ripening, as has been shared – and this is through purification.

Purification involves the following *realizations*:

---

<sup>123</sup> Most religions teach about an afterlife which is influenced by the kind of life that the person led. While this differs from the idea of rebirths, nevertheless the thoughts, words, and actions of this life influence the future life.

- Understand clearly that you have acted and behaved unskillfully.
- Accept and take one hundred percent responsibility for your unwise behavior – and avoid the strong temptation to blame others.
- Sincerely and wholeheartedly regret your unskillful actions.
- Resolve, and be fully determined, to only perform virtuous actions from now on.

In her book *Working with Karma*, Gill Farrer-Halls adds the following comment about purifying bad karma:<sup>124</sup>

A useful way to think about purifying negative karma is in terms of its effect on your consciousness. If you have done something you know is wrong – even if it was a long time ago – feelings of guilt will lurk somewhere in the unconscious depths of your mind and cause discomfort and suffering to arise from time to time. To put it simply, what you do, you remember. When the memory of a negative action surfaces in your consciousness, the fear, anxiety and worry that simultaneously arise are a karmic result of this unenlightened behavior.

So if you do something kind, generous or compassionate, the memory makes you feel happy, but if you do something mean and nasty, you also have to remember that and the memory will make you feel quite different. Because the latter memories are unpleasant, you try to

---

<sup>124</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 96-97.

repress them or run away from them, or get caught up in other unskillful behavior; this is part of the karmic result too. So it is not only your negative actions that you purify, but also the state of mind underlying the mistaken action – in other words, you purify your negative thinking.

A man may find pleasure in evil as long as his evil has not given fruit; but when the fruit of evil comes then that man finds evil indeed.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 119.)*

A man may find pain in doing good as long as his good has not given fruit; but when the fruit of good comes then that man finds good indeed.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 120.)*





**PART 5: MISUNDERSTANDING KARMA**

As a man who has no wound on his hand cannot be hurt by the poison he may carry in his hand, since poison hurts not where there is no wound, the man who has no evil cannot be hurt by evil.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 124.)*

The fool who does evil to a man who is good, to a man who is pure and free from sin, the evil returns to him like dust thrown against the wind.

*(The Dhammapada: Good and Evil, 125.)*

## Misconceptions

A number of misconceptions about karma have arisen in western society. In fact, karma is one of the most misunderstood Buddhist teachings. This chapter briefly looks at several errors in understanding.

### *Fate or Predetermination*

When people have the wrong impression of karma, they fall prey to thinking that *all* happiness and suffering (even in the future) arises from previous karma. They think that humans are without free will to affect their future. This can be labeled past-action determinism.

Such thoughts of fate inevitably hinder motivation and effort, as well as encourage inaction. More detrimentally, they weaken the fact that humans *can* change for the better – no matter what their past. In other words, if our present life is completely conditioned or controlled by our past actions, then karma would indeed be equivalent to fatalism or predestination. Also, free will would be meaningless.

Karma, however, is not inflexible or set in concrete – it does *not* mean fate or predetermination. To think that the poor are suffering because of their own miserliness in past lives, and that there is therefore no need to help (since one would be interfering with their karma), is a cruel and callous misconception. Moreover, such misunderstanding of cause and effect should not be used to rationalize one's own smugness, laziness, or apathy.

Finally, not everything that happens in the present, or that affects us, is the result of karma. Many physiological and environmental factors influence us. These include physical laws, biological laws, spiritual laws, and laws of mental activity. Karmic causality is only one variable among others!

### ***Theistic Determinism***

When karma is overlooked, some hold the belief that *all* happiness and suffering are the result of the will and directions of a supreme Being – a God who controls our destinies and predetermines our future. They claim that God is responsible for and orchestrates all our circumstances. Such a view would negate all personal responsibility, and life would be mechanistic (not different from a machine). This is *theistic* determinism.

This view also holds that rewards (blessings and happiness) and punishments (curses and misery) are assigned to a person for their good or evil deeds by an omniscient, ruling power who controls the destinies of the human race. Typically, such a stance focuses only on the present temporal life and an eternal future life – while ignoring the past.

### ***Indeterminism***

Alternatively, there is a conviction that *all* happiness and suffering are random and by chance, without any cause or causes. This is indeterminism or accidentalism.

### ***Reward and Punishment***

Many think that the law of cause and effect (actions and reactions) involves a system of punishment and reward, or *moral* justice. However, the law of karma does *not* involve this type of judgment. We, humans, create the causes by our actions,

and then we live through or are subjected to their results or consequences. The authors of *Buddhism for Dummies* express it succinctly: "If you act with aversion, you'll experience negative results in the future. If you act with love, you'll experience a positive outcome."<sup>125</sup>

The Buddha described what he observed to exist around him (he did not invent the law of karma). Sometimes, however, translations of Buddhist materials into English incorrectly use terminology from other religions, and as a result the misconception that happiness and pain are rewards and punishments in a system of moral justice has arisen.

When referring to karma, actions are not inherently good or bad – but are only designated as such according to the results or fruits they yield. If an action brings about pain, misery, and unhappiness, then it is called negative, destructive, or non-virtuous. If it produces joy, peace, and happiness, then it is called positive, constructive, or virtuous.

In sum, karma is a theory of cause and effect, or, of action and reaction. It is a natural law and therefore is not linked with ideas of justice, or, reward and punishment. Similarly, the terms "good" and "bad" (or "evil") would be better understood if substituted with the words "wholesome" and "unwholesome". Wholesome actions arise from compassion, loving kindness, and wisdom. Unwholesome actions come to pass from greed, hate, and ignorance.

---

<sup>125</sup> Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann, *Buddhism for Dummies*, 2d ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 234.

## ***Mystical Fate or Fortune***

Another common misconception is that karma refers to a type of mystical or supernatural fate, or fortune – a "cosmic karma" under the direction of either a God or gods who exert control over humans (not unlike that found in ancient Greek and Roman mythology).

Included here is the myth that karma is some kind of luck. For example, a person suffers a serious setback, and then someone remarks, "How unfortunate; what bad luck; it must be their karma". While there may have been some outworking of karma, the misfortune has nothing to do with luck.

In sum, karma is not fate inflicted upon us by a mysterious unknown power to which we have to helplessly submit ourselves. Rather, our lives are our own doing reacting on ourselves – and in which we have the possibility to divert the course of our karma. In fact, in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha stated: "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."

## ***Grace Transcends Karma***

Some on a spiritual path believe that a law of grace, or forgiveness, transcends the law of karma. They may support their claim with a phrase such as "under grace, and not under law". Furthermore they state that law of grace frees a man from the law of cause and effect – the law of consequence.

In looking at the law of grace and the law of karma, both operate and are upheld in life.

In relation to grace, having a precious human life in which we are able to pursue enlightenment is, in itself, great grace. The four immeasurable qualities described in Buddhism – loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – are sublime qualities of love and expressions of grace. When we practice love, compassion, and forgiveness towards ourselves and others, we extend grace.

On the other hand, we live in a universe where we can still hold respect for laws that have led to our survival – including karma, the principle of cause and effect. Nonetheless, the idea of a simple, law-abiding, and controllable universe has been modified. Quantum physics also describes a universe that is complex, chaotic, and uncertain.<sup>126</sup>

The following example may illustrate, in part, the interplay between grace and karma. A person is at an end-of-year office party and makes hurtful remarks to a colleague. Sometime later the person sincerely regrets the comments made and resolves never to fall prey to making such mindless remarks. He asks God for forgiveness. Such heartfelt regret means that the karmic seeds or imprints in the person's mind will not ripen in the future.

However, the regret and consequently the grace received (as far as karmic seeds not ripening in the future) may not have completely freed the person from the law of cause and effect. In the meantime, the colleague could turn bitter and plan to retaliate. The person would then have to patiently endure whatever suffering will ensue for him – hopefully without

---

<sup>126</sup> Scientists realize that instead of a dichotomous *either/or* universe, we have a paradoxical *both/and* universe.

resorting to anger toward his colleague, or self-hatred and guilt toward himself (both of which would produce further suffering in the future).

In sum, we see that a person is not completely freed from the law of cause and effect. Consequences follow, albeit the future karmic fallout (that is, ripening of seeds and their results) can be minimized through the power of regret. There is grace.



## Misinterpretations

This chapter shows how the law of karma itself can be misinterpreted.

### *Cosmic Justice*

A flawed interpretation of karma quickly appears when the idea of karma as cosmic justice lessens a person's care for others. In such instances, peoples' misfortunes are callously regarded as retribution for some sinful past actions.

Rather, the appropriate spiritual response is to do all that we can to alleviate others' suffering with heartfelt concern and compassion.

Furthermore, the Buddha taught and emphasized compassion. We need to recognize that other people's sufferings are as real to them as ours are to us, and therefore need to relieve suffering whenever we can. In the Dhammapada it is written:<sup>127</sup>

All beings fear before danger, life is dear to all. When a man considers this, he does not kill or cause to kill.

---

<sup>127</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 54. *The Dhammapada* is a collection of 423 aphorisms which, in Pali verse form, are revered by southern Buddhists as illustrative of the Buddhist *dhamma* or moral system.

## ***Socially Disempowering***

Some criticize the teaching on karma as being "capitalist opium" for people. They argue thus:<sup>128</sup>

You are born poor in this life on account of your past evil karma. He is born rich on account of his good karma. So, be satisfied with your humble lot; but do good to be rich in your next life. You are being oppressed now because of your past evil karma. There is your destiny. Be humble and bear your sufferings patiently. Do good now. You can be certain of a better and happier life after death.

In other words, karma has been used to rationalize racism, oppression, and even birth defects. It has justified excessive political authority, and the subordination of the under privileged and deprived. Additionally, it is argued, since there is a perfect cause-and-effect relationship between actions and results, there is no need to work toward social justice – in that justice is built into the moral structure of the universe.

However, karma teachings do *not* uphold such fatalistic or defeatist views. It does not support social passivity or acquiescence in the face of repression and tyranny of various kinds. The law of karma does not protect the rich and powerful in this life, and console the poor by only promising happiness in a future life.

Rather, the teachings on karma provide a meaningful explanation for suffering and loss in which people can take

---

<sup>128</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.

consolation and reassurance. Instead of focusing on judgment and blame, we *all* (both individually and collectively) have the freedom to work toward creating new positive karma that will lead to more favorable circumstances and environments in this present life.

### ***Fundamentalism***

Some think that karma operates in a simple straight line or linear fashion – all past actions shape the present; present actions all shape the future. With such linear thinking, they inadvertently equate karma with fundamentalism, where all present experience is simply attributed to past karma. An instance of this is how the Holocaust is explained. The victims are viewed in terms of their karmic outcomes and their fate is rationalized.

However, karma is *not* a closed mechanistic system. Rather, it is non-linear and complex. *Both* past and present actions influence the present moment. Furthermore, present actions shape not only the future but also the present. Every action we do in the present, feeds into the stream of our actions. We are influencing, even in the present, how we will experience the fruit of our past karma. It is all very fluid.

As a result, instead of powerlessness, karma has a *liberating potential* regarding what the mind can do in every moment. While the past may explain inequalities seen in life, the measure of a person is never the hand they have been dealt, but how well they play the hand they have received. Crucial is what the person is doing right now – not who they are, or where they have come from.

## ***Judging Others***

Some misinterpret the law of karma when they mix their understanding of karma with attitudes of judgment, blame, resignation, or indifference. As a result, they may blame a victim, commenting on misfortune with words like: “That’s their karma.” We can also unwisely judge ourselves when unpleasant situations arise in our own lives.

Rather than becoming a vehicle of blame, karma should be a *vehicle of compassion*. We realize that all situations have causes and conditions behind them – the law of cause and effect. Our present suffering, or that of others, is not a cause for blame and judgment. Instead, we understand that all are in this human predicament; all are subject to cause and effect. We can let such understanding give rise to great compassion, whereby we have a heartfelt motivation to relieve the pain, sorrow, and suffering of others.

Furthermore, with mindfulness, the suffering of others can lead us to a greater level of *acceptance and responsiveness*, instead of blame, judging, resentment, or pride. We understand that what arises in people's lives is as a result of past causes – it comes out of past actions. We also accept changing conditions, without simple passivity and resignation. All this allows us to respond appropriately to what is arising. Such responses come from wisdom, not reactivity.

Finally, our own suffering and that of others can lead to a more *mature level of responsibility* that we take for the actions in our lives. We begin to take a longer range view of things – not just immediate gratification. We see how our lives are unfolding – and we take a stronger interest in what we’re doing, and our

motivations behind the actions. Rather than blaming and criticizing, which only add to the misery; where possible, we respond with compassion and help those suffering, so that ultimately all will benefit.<sup>129</sup>

### ***Blaming Past Karma***

When people find themselves trapped in old, destructive patterns of behavior, they sometimes attribute it to karma of the past. They believe that they are stuck because of their bygone, older karma. In reality, however, they may be re-creating the same old behavior patterns with their present thoughts and attitudes.

To change our karma, and therefore our lives, we need to change our minds. We can do this because the cause (what we do) and the effect (what happens to us) are closely related. And while past karma does impact our present life, change on our part always remains possible.

### ***Passive Resignation***

Moreover, others fall victim to an attitude of passive resignation, seeing their unhappiness and suffering only as an unavoidable process of paying off their debt of "bad karma". It is their retribution for past crimes.

Regrettably, this view hinders them from fully embracing the opportunities that life brings which would enable them to discover their essential goodness and to grow.

---

<sup>129</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks (2012-05-02 "Karma") at <http://dharmafeed.org/teacher/96/>

## ***Karma as Rear-View Mirror***

Some people ask whether everything that happens in life, both pleasant and painful, comes from past actions – including from past lives. To speculate in this way is unhelpful, since everything does not occur simply due to our own past actions. There are other kinds of causes, such as genetics, diet, illness, climate, and accidents.

As a specific illustration, a person has an illness, or setback. They ask: What did I do in the past to bring this on? We do *not* know if it has anything to do with a past action. Bodies break down for their own reasons. We inherit tendencies of mind from our parents. Furthermore, karma is only one law of causality in the universe. There are other laws, such as those of chemistry, physics, or biology.

We should not use karma, then, as a rear-view mirror. To look at something in the present, and to ask: “What did I do in the past?” only leads to endless speculation. We simply cannot accurately see into the past and therefore are unable to interpret the past.

Karma is useful when it is used as a map to drive down the right path into the future. We face important choices in the present. These are the ones to make based on our understanding of karma. Thus, we should use karma going forward – that is the skillful way!<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>130</sup> I am indebted to Guy Armstrong for the insights in this section, given in his presentation entitled "Emptiness and Karma " (2012-12-04) at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. <http://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/79/> Accessed December 17, 2012.

## ***Coveting "Good Karma"***

Some who understand karma as a universal and irrevocable law allow their spiritual practice to suffer and degenerate when they simply allow it to become a way to accumulate "good karma" or "merit", and thereby get an easier passage through life.

Mystic and philosopher, Timothy Freke, elaborates: "Actually this sort of self-centered acquisitive attitude only generates more bad karma, because bad karma is always and only a consequence of self-orientation."<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Timothy Freke, *Encyclopedia of Spirituality: Information and Inspiration to Transform Your Life* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2000), 206.

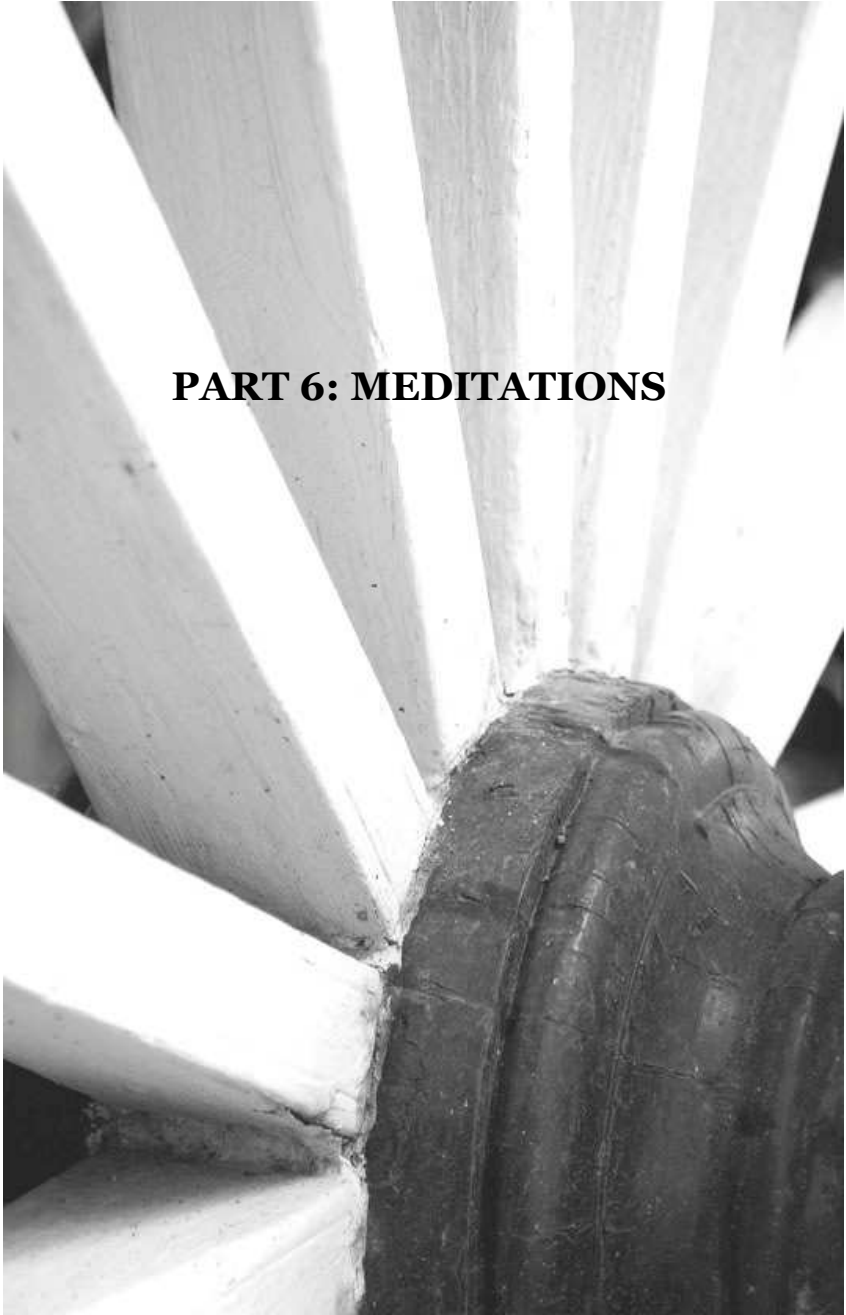
He who in early days was unwise but later found wisdom, he  
sheds a light over the world like that of the moon when free from  
clouds.

*(The Dhammapada: Arise! Watch, 172.)*

He who overcomes the evil he has done with the good he  
afterwards does, he sheds a light over the world like that of the  
moon when free from clouds.

*(The Dhammapada: Arise! Watch, 173.)*





He who for the sake of happiness does not hurt others who also want happiness, shall hereafter find happiness.

*(The Dhammapada: Life, 132.)*

Never speak harsh words, for once spoken they may return to you. Angry words are painful and there may be blows for blows.

*(The Dhammapada: Life, 133.)*

## Basic Meditation Guidelines

For meditation, the following seven points are widely accepted as important. They help the subtle energies in the body to flow freely, and to reduce the chances of distraction. However, they are not compulsory. The main concern is to be comfortable, in order to avoid moving around or being distracted by discomfort – yet not too relaxed that one falls asleep or experiences dullness.<sup>132</sup>

### *Seven Tips*

- Cross your legs if sitting on a cushion – sitting on a chair is also fine.
- With your palms facing upwards, place your right hand on top of your left with the tips of your thumbs gently touching – and hands resting in your lap.
- Hold your back comfortably straight – not so rigid that you experience discomfort or tension during the session.
- Relax your jaw and allow your tongue to rest behind your front, top teeth.
- Tilt your head slightly forward.

---

<sup>132</sup> The guidelines have been taken from Thubten Lhundrup, Ven., *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles* (Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004), 11, 24.

- Have your eyes closed – although this can increase the chance of falling asleep. Or, have your eyes open – but have them only slightly open, gazing downwards without focusing.
- Hold your shoulders level and keep your elbows slightly away from your body.

### ***Breathing Meditation***

Begin with a few minutes of breathing meditation. The following is a simple breathing meditation taught by the Buddha. By placing your thought on the breath, it is possible to quiet the 'monkey-mind' and improve concentration:<sup>133</sup>

The aim is to become aware of the breath as it enters and leaves your body by concentrating on the rise and fall of the abdomen or the sensation of the breath passing through your lips or nostrils.

With the exhalation of each breath, count one, two, three, etc. Set yourself an achievable target of say seven to begin with. When sensations of quietness, stillness, and peace eventually occur, hold them as best you can and experience them as fully as possible. When you are distracted or lose that sensation, return to the breath.

This meditation whereby we watch the breath, as taught by the Buddha, develops *mindfulness* – that ability of the mind which helps to maintain attention on an object of meditation.

---

<sup>133</sup> Thubten Lhundrup, Ven., *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles* (Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004), 11.

Four meditations relating to karma are now described as follows.

## **"Four Laws of Karma"**

Use the basic breathing meditation to quiet the mind. Gradually your mind will become more still and peaceful. Then, with a calm and clear mind, set the motivation for the meditation session – such as the desire to be able to realize the essential point of the meditation in order to benefit all living beings.

Next, begin the meditation on the "four laws of karma". The purpose is to deepen your awareness of karma, to understand its power, and to develop conviction to create virtue and to avoid non-virtue.

### ***Karma Is Definite***

Think how non-virtuous actions (such as anger and pride) undeniably bring unhappiness, and how virtuous actions (such as patience and humility) unquestionably ripen in happiness.

### ***Karma Increases***

For both virtuous and non-virtuous actions, once a deed is performed, and the imprint or seed left on the consciousness, it will continue to increase in its strength. In view of that, while an action may seem small and insignificant, because of this characteristic of increasing, it can ripen as a strong result. Fortunately, with purification, the power of non-virtuous actions can be weakened – but, without purification, they continue to increase.

### ***Karma Is Specific***

There is no effect without a cause. Recall examples of happiness you have experienced in the past. While it may seem that external conditions or other people brought about this happiness, reflect on how it would *not* have been possible to experience these unless you had created the causes. In the same way, bring to mind some experiences of suffering or unhappiness that you have had in the past. This third characteristic of karma means that you have control over your future. Reflect on the happiness and positive conditions you hope to experience in the future, and how it is impossible to experience these unless you create the causes.<sup>134</sup>

### ***Karma Is Never Lost***

A karmic seed or imprint is never lost, regardless of the time between an action and the ripening or experiencing of the result. Whenever suitable conditions coincide, the results will be experienced – either in this or some future lifetime. Unless purified, whatever non-virtuous actions have been performed, the seeds will remain in one's mental continuum until they sooner or later bring forth their results.

Conclude the meditation by dedicating the merit of the meditation. For example: "May this action be a cause of enlightenment so that I can help lead all living beings into their enlightened state."

---

<sup>134</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Module 6: All About Karma", teachings by Renate Ogilvie, meditations by Ven. Yeshe Khadro and Kendall Magnussen (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005, 2006), 49.

## Ten Non-Virtues/Virtues

Use the basic breathing meditation to quiet the mind. Your mind will become calmer and clearer; then set the motivation for the meditation session.

### *Sincere Regret*

Now begin the meditation on the ten non-virtues and their opposites. However, avoid feelings of guilt regarding past actions. Rather, to develop sincere regret, and the desire to purify non-virtuous actions, is far more beneficial. For this meditation, Thubten Lhundrup writes:<sup>135</sup>

We need to accept that we have faults and are not perfect. By contemplating past actions and associated motivations, we can intelligently admit that we were not so skillful, but given a similar situation in the future we now have the insight to act differently.

To stop negative actions is beneficial, but to take the further step of avoiding committing them in the future is more so. To then take up the opposite, positive actions, is extremely skillful and beneficial, resulting in not only less suffering in the future but also creating the causes for great happiness.

---

<sup>135</sup> Thubten Lhundrup, Ven., *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles* (Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004), 23.

### ***Checklist of Actions***

Use the following two lists as a guide to review your actions in order to recall specific non-virtuous actions you have performed. Reflect on the various results of suffering that can ripen. Then, generate the *four powers of purification* to purify those actions.

Also, take time to review virtuous actions you have accomplished.

Finally, dedicate the merit of this meditation. For example: "May this action become a cause of enlightenment so that I can help lead all living beings into their enlightened state."



<b><i>Ten Non-Virtuous/Virtuous Actions</i></b>	
<i>Actions of Body</i>	
Killing	Protecting life
Stealing	Giving – being generous to others
Sexual misconduct	Faithfulness – responsible sexual behavior
<i>Actions of Speech</i>	
Lying	Truthfulness – being truthful
Divisive speech – using words to harm others or cause conflict between them	Reconciliatory speech – creating harmony and reconciliation among others
Harsh words – using harsh language such as swearing	Kind words – talking pleasantly
Meaningless talk / idle gossip	Meaningful talk – having useful, meaningful conversations
<i>Actions of Mind</i>	
Covetousness	Gratitude – being content with what one has
Malice – thinking ill of people	Goodwill – being kind to others
Wrong views	Right views
Source: Adapted from Gill Farrer-Halls, <i>Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma</i> (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 14.	

<b><i>Ten Non-Virtuous Actions</i></b>	
<i>Actions of Body</i>	
Killing	Intending to take another person's life Hatred often motivates killing
Stealing	Intention of taking what is not given Desire generally motivates stealing
Sexual misconduct	Any intentional irresponsible use of sexuality Examples: rape, adultery, promiscuity, sexual addiction
<i>Actions of Speech</i>	
Lying	Misleading others by saying something that is not true Purposely intending to misinform or deceive others
Divisive speech	Intending to break up a friendship between people Wanting to prevent reconciliation between people
Harsh words	Desiring to hurt someone else's feelings Intention to belittle, embarrass, or upset someone
Idle gossip	Includes all types of frivolous speech Chattering about things of no consequence
<i>Actions of Mind</i>	
Craving	Desiring to possess what one doesn't have A discontented, dissatisfied state of mind
Aversion	Taking delight in the misfortune of others Actively wanting others to suffer
Delusion	Actively denying the reality of things that are true Example: Denying the karmic law of cause and effect
Source: Adapted from Jonathan Landaw, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann, <i>Buddhism for Dummies</i> , 2d ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 237-244.	

# Compassion and Karma

Although the focus is on equanimity, the meditation that follows also touches on compassion and karma.

## *Heirs to One's Own Karma*

In understanding karma, we know that all beings are *heirs to their own karma* – that they act, and then receive the fruits of their actions. To deeply recognize this fact will then generate a *compassionate heart*.

## *Equanimity*

The following meditation is from Goldstein and Kornfield:<sup>136</sup>

To cultivate equanimity as a quality, sit in a comfortable posture with the eyes closed. Bring the attention to the breath until the body and mind are somewhat calm. Then begin by reflecting on the benefit of a balanced and equanimous mind. Let yourself feel an inner sense of balance and ease.

You may repeat such phrases as "May I be balanced and at peace. May I be undisturbed by the comings and goings of all the events of the world. May I be peaceful." Acknowledge to yourself that all created things arise and pass away; joys and sorrows, pleasant events, unpleasant

---

<sup>136</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

events, people, buildings, animals, nations, even whole civilizations. "May I learn to see the arising and passing of all nature with equanimity and balance. May I be open and balanced and peaceful."

Acknowledge that all beings are heirs to their own karma, that their lives arise and pass too, according to conditions and deeds created by them. "May I bring both compassion and equanimity to the events of this world. May I find balance and equanimity and peace."

As you reflect on others, once more realize that all beings receive the fruit of their own actions. To free your heart from their struggles and to love them with equanimity and peace, add these additional equanimity phrases: "Your happiness and suffering *depend on your actions* and not my wishes for you. May you find openness and balance and peace." Likewise in relation to yourself: "My happiness and suffering *depend on my actions* and not only on my wishes for myself. May I find openness and balance and peace."<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Jack Kornfield, *A Lamp in the Darkness: Illuminating the Path through Difficult Times*, with a foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2011), 61.

# The SourcePoint Practice

This is an innovative, simple and effective meditation for empowering the heart (as well as reducing stress and promoting health). In tending the garden of our heart, a transformation of the heart occurs – the fruits of which are purer intentions, leading to satisfying karmic results.

## *Background*

Ancient, modern and revolutionary, the SourcePoint Practice<sup>138</sup> is derived from 2,600 year-old wisdom teachings and is supported by modern medical research. Using the SourcePoint Practice will help create a shift in perception and way of life by cultivating the enlightened qualities of the heart. Paradoxically, the peace, wisdom and fulfillment we look for are within the heart, waiting to be experienced.

## *Description*

The SourcePoint Practice can be used anytime, anywhere:

- Take a few deep, full breaths. Relax your mind and body, letting stress and tension dissolve. Move your attention down

---

<sup>138</sup> Developed by Neil Steven Cohen. Information located at <http://www.sourcepointglobaloutreach.org/> Accessed December 25, 2012. Note: SourcePoint Global Outreach is a nonprofit organization founded in 2001. Through their outreach projects, they are dedicated to serving the welfare and upliftment of their local and global community. As part of their outreach, the SourcePoint Practice is offered as a simple yet effective method for reducing stress, creating optimal health, and empowering the heart. By using the SourcePoint Practice, the intent is for people to gain access to their most important and valuable resource – the heart.

from your head, into the area of the heart. Gently focus your awareness and feeling into the center of your heart, located in the middle of the chest. Breathe slowly, naturally and evenly. This simple practice will create an immediate shift from cognitive processing into a more relaxed, heart-centered feeling and perception.

- With your awareness and feeling gently focused in the heart, be present and attentive; breathe slowly and evenly. Feeling deep into your heart, let the protective walls come down. Let your chest and heart soften and relax. This is the most important part of the SourcePoint Practice: Allow yourself to feel a sense of openness, tenderness, peace and wellbeing. Feeling and sensing these qualities naturally opens the door of your heart. Be present and attentive with your experience moment to moment, breath by breath.
- During this practice, if you become distracted, simply return your attention and feeling back into the center of your heart and relax. If you need a visual image to help focus your attention, imagine your heart as a golden lotus flower fully open. Move your awareness and feeling deep into the center of the lotus. Breathe naturally and relax into the experience of openness, tenderness, peace and wellbeing.
- If you encounter unpleasant thoughts or emotions, there is no need to indulge in them or push them away. Embrace your moment to moment experience without trying to change it in any way. Maintain gentle awareness and feeling in the center of the heart. Embrace any experience that may arise with acceptance and compassion. Unpleasant thoughts or emotions

are a natural form of purification that will give way to a deeper, more authentic experience of the heart.

- Use the SourcePoint Practice for five, ten or twenty minutes, once or twice a day. With patience and consistency, your experience of heart-centered feeling and perception will gradually deepen and stabilize. The physical and psychological benefits from this practice will influence your life in many wonderful ways. A shorter version of the SourcePoint Practice may also be used: At any time, in any situation, wherever you may be, relax your mind and body, move your attention down into the center of your heart, breathe slowly and naturally. This will create an immediate shift into heart-centered perception, greatly reduce stress, and bring a deeper sense of peace, relaxation and clarity. Your heart is always the SourcePoint!

- To continue cultivating the enlightened qualities of the heart, practice embracing the world around you with compassion and a vision for a healthy, peaceful and sustainable future. Make a determined effort to care for, cherish and bring benefit to all living beings. Engaged and selfless acts of kindness and charity are a natural expression of a compassionate heart and a natural extension of the SourcePoint Practice.

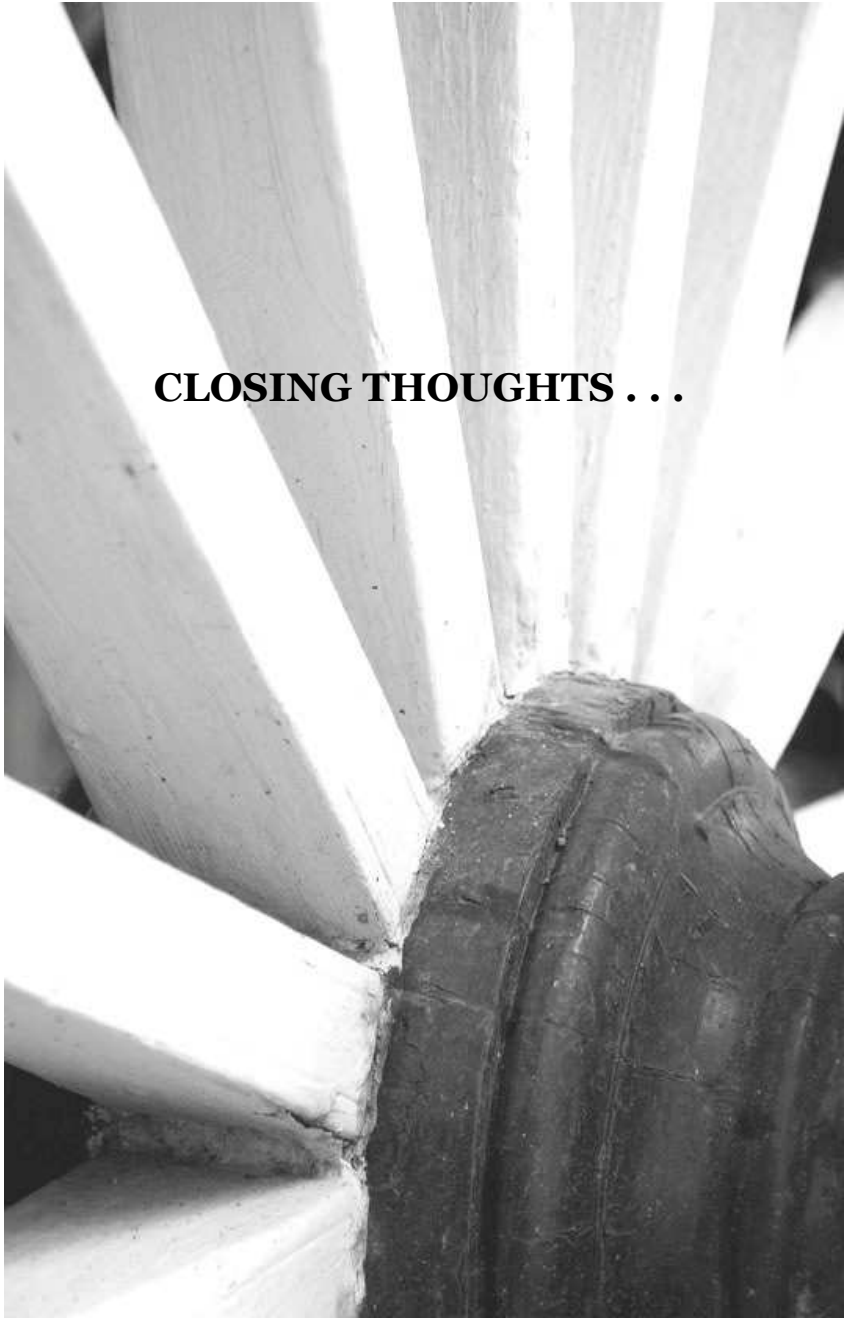
When a fool does evil work, he forgets that he is lighting a fire  
wherein he must burn one day.

*(The Dhammapada: Life, 136.)*

Is there in this world a man so noble that he ever avoids all  
blame, even as a noble horse avoids the touch of the whip?

*(The Dhammapada: Life, 143.)*





It is easy to do what is wrong, to do what is bad for oneself; but very difficult to do what is right, to do what is good for oneself.

*(The Dhammapada: Self-Possession, 163.)*

By oneself the evil is done, and it is oneself who suffers: by oneself the evil is not done, and by oneself one becomes pure. The pure and impure come from oneself: no man can purify another.

*(The Dhammapada: Self-Possession, 165.)*

## Conclusion

Having seen how karma, the principle of cause and effect, works in life, we realize that this indeed is a law, not unlike the law of gravity. To ignore it, we do so at our own peril. To have believing faith in the law of karma will result in health and happiness.<sup>139</sup>

### *Conviction about Karma*

Whenever we perform an action, mentally, verbally, or physically, it creates a potentiality within our mind. This potentiality will ripen whenever the future conditions are right – in the same way that seeds ripen in the spring when they receive adequate sunlight, heat, and moisture. The potentiality may be virtuous or non-virtuous, and therefore it will ripen as happiness or unhappiness. It all depends on the initial action.

Drawing on the words of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso:<sup>140</sup>

If we understand the law of karma we shall understand how we can control our future experiences by abandoning harmful actions that are the causes of misery and by practicing virtuous actions that are the causes of

---

<sup>139</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 386.

<sup>140</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 228.

happiness. Meditating on the law of karma is like looking into a mirror that shows us what to abandon and what to practice. It reveals the causes of our present experiences and the prospect for our future lives if we do not gain mastery over our habitual negativities. Even if we understand the law of karma intellectually, we still need to meditate on it again and again to develop deep conviction. When we have conviction we shall naturally dread our own negativity and make a strong resolution to practice moral discipline. Without real conviction we shall not generate enough energy to train our mind and so we shall continue compulsively to perform the harmful actions that cause rebirth in states of misery.

In sum, at times we may not be fully persuaded about the law of karma and it may be difficult to have conviction. We see perplexing and inexplicable situations – a newborn baby with physical disabilities, the untimely death of a young father, or the good fortune of an unscrupulous business tycoon. We forget, however, that we only have a limited perspective. For example, people may seem to get away with their crimes, but they never actually do so – either they will yet suffer in this lifetime, or they will experience suffering in another time.

### ***Source of all Suffering***

If we contemplate the possibility of rebirths – having had past lives and awaiting future lives – we can have a glimpse of a broader perspective than our present life. Often we assume that good and bad experiences simply arise due to conditions and circumstances in this life. Yet, at the same time, we may also feel that a number of our experiences are inexplicable or undeserved – and that there is no justice in the world. Some people conclude

that life is unfair. However, within the framework of rebirths, we might ask ourselves whether many of our experiences in our present lifetime are caused by actions committed in past lives.

"We need to understand," comments Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, "how the quality of our present actions determines the quality of our future experiences. Without knowing this we ignorantly create all the wrong causes."<sup>141</sup> In view of this, we can aspire to be mindful moment by moment about the actions of our body, speech, and mind – because it is in the present where karma is continually ripening, and where future karmic results are being sown. Ultimately, it is indeed our mind that is the source of all our suffering or happiness.

### ***Peace beyond Understanding***

Lama Zopa Rinpoche once said, "You are responsible for your own problems just as you're responsible for your own liberation and enlightenment."<sup>142</sup> This affirmation of the law of karma is greatly liberating.

When understood, and convinced thereof, the law of karma yields a far-reaching peace of mind – a deep-seated peace beyond human understanding. Such peace inevitably brings healing to the body, spirit, and mind. The reason is that we no longer need to continually search for where to place the blame for our life's circumstances – which only fuels anger and frustra-

---

<sup>141</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 231.

<sup>142</sup> Found on the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) website at <http://www.fpmt.org/>

tion toward others, aggravated by the fact that we're also powerless to force others to change in the way we desire them to.

The words of Gill Farrer-Halls bear reflecting upon, and on the surface not all may agree with her comment:<sup>143</sup>

This explanation of karma makes one thing very clear: it is we ourselves who are responsible for whatever occurs throughout our lives. The person who has happiness, health and success created the causes for a pleasant life by performing positive actions in previous lives. Those who suffer illness, poverty and so forth likewise created the causes for their unpleasant experiences by committing negative actions in previous lives. Most people have a mixture of good and bad experiences throughout their lives, reflecting the different karma they created in earlier lives.

### ***Power of Karma***

The *power* of karma is that actions *do* bring results. Knowing this, we start to take greater care in what we do. We also know what actions lead to a joyous state of mind. In any given situation, therefore, we can pause for a moment and perhaps be able to confidently say to ourselves, "This appears a good thing to do – it will be a cause for my well-being, and others, too." The opposite discernment is also true.

We no longer underestimate the power of small actions. Rather, we are mindful of the words found in *The Dhammapada*:<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 17.

Hold not a deed of little worth, thinking 'this is little to me'. The falling of drops of water will in time fill a water-jar. Even so the wise man becomes full of good, although he gathers it little by little.

Karma, then, is not only Buddhist theory or philosophy. It is about our lives – and what undeniably brings happiness and suffering. In a moment of volition or intention, if we're mindful we can reflect whether we may, or may not, feel good about a deed. We can think for a minute and ask: In looking back, will I regret having done this? Or, will this action bring no regret? Normally, no action is good that we regret having done. By contrast, an action is good that we appreciate having done.

Understanding karma has been compared to having the light of the world. It shows us what unquestionably leads to misery or happiness – we don't have to muddle around. It illuminates our lives. We realize that intention, plus motivation (wholesome or unwholesome), is the power that gives shape our lives.<sup>145</sup>

### ***Bringing It All Together***

We are neither fully the *servants* nor the *masters* of our karma. However, to understand karma gives consolation, hope, and moral courage. When the unexpected happens, and we meet with difficulties, failures, and misfortune, we realize that we may

---

<sup>144</sup> Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 52.

<sup>145</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks (2012-05-02 "Karma") at <http://dharmafeed.org/teacher/96/>

be reaping what we have sown, and that we are wiping off a past debt.

Nevertheless, instead of resigning ourselves to leave everything to karma, we can make energetic effort to pull out weeds and sow useful seeds in their place, for the future is in our own hands.

The law of karma helps to explain the problem of suffering, and the inequality of mankind. However, we do not condemn even the most corrupt, for they, too, have their chance to reform themselves. Though bound to suffer in woeful states, they have hope of attaining eternal peace. By their own doings they have created their own hells, and by their own doings they can create their own heavens, too. We become kind, tolerant, and considerate of all.

We know that we can work for the well-being and happiness of all. Our belief in karma validates our efforts and kindles our enthusiasm, because it teaches *individual responsibility*.<sup>146</sup>

### ***Our Most Precious Gift***

Life indeed remains a mystery. Even though we may somewhat understand karma, we will never know about the karmic causes we may have produced in past lifetimes. We have no idea, therefore, of what karma yet lies in store for us. Given this inscrutability of karma, each of us must fortify ourselves against the uncertainties of life. All humans face this task and

---

<sup>146</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.



challenge, regardless of their spiritual path. And so, while we have no ultimate control over life, we can have control over our mind – our most precious gift.

A closing thought: Unfortunately, many of us grow up and develop a mindset that does not seriously consider that all of our actions – of mind, speech, and body – do in fact bring results, both immediately and in the future. We tend to live "happy" and "carefree" lives, thinking that life unfolds arbitrarily or by chance – at least until we might receive a wake-up call through an unexpected sobering turn of events. The immediate gratification of the senses, so often influenced by the media, only further denies the cause-and-effect relationship.

May we step back, ponder for a while, and begin to see clearly in a remarkably new way that we truly are the very heirs of our own motives and actions. Again, no wonder that in the Buddha's teachings the law of karma is called "the light of the world" because it illuminates how our lives unfold and why many things are the way they are!<sup>147</sup>

### ***Karma in a Nutshell***

The working of karma and the consequences of karmic actions are fittingly summarized below:<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> Joseph Goldstein, *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 36.

<sup>148</sup> Adapted from: Naljor Prison Dharma Service, "Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind Toward Dharma" (PO Box 1177, Mount Shasta CA 96067), found at <http://www.naljorprisondharmaservice.org/pdf/FourThoughts.htm> Accessed December 1, 2012.

It is wise for us to contemplate that the quality of our life is fully determined by the quality of our behavior. Our thoughts, speech, and actions – both virtuous and non-virtuous – create the intricate patterns of our life experience. We ourselves create the causes for our own happiness or our own suffering. When we understand the unwholesome, non-virtuous actions that cause suffering, we can eliminate those causes. When we understand the wholesome, virtuous actions which bring happiness and benefit to ourselves and others, we can cultivate those causes. We must begin by acknowledging that our situation in life is, to a large degree, the result of our own actions.

Karma and its results are certain and unfailing. Karma is the inevitable results which come directly from specific causes. Positive actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the positive result of some form of happiness and benefit. Negative actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the negative result of some form of suffering.

Karma and its results are exactly like a seed and its fruit. If we plant the seed of a sweet fruit, this is exactly what the seed will produce. If we plant the seed of a poisonous fruit, this is exactly what this seed will produce as well. Karma works in the same way. If we act negatively, the seeds of our actions will produce the fruit (experience) of their kind. If we act in kind and virtuous ways, the seeds of these actions will also produce the positive fruit of their kind.

Even a very small seed can grow into a large tree. In this same way, just a small negative action can bring a large

amount of suffering if it is not purified. An apparently small and insignificant positive action can bring a great amount of happiness. A specific action leads to a specific result.

Actions not engaged, will not bring results. If the cause has not been created, the effect will not be experienced.

An action done is not lost and will definitely ripen and bring a result.

Negative actions to be abandoned are killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle gossip, covetousness, malice, and wrong views of reality.

By understanding karma, by purifying our delusion and negativity, and by engaging in virtuous behavior, we change the entire course of our life experience and move swiftly toward liberation. If we use adversity as an opportunity for developing compassion, wisdom, and love, the purification of our karma will be rapid and profound.

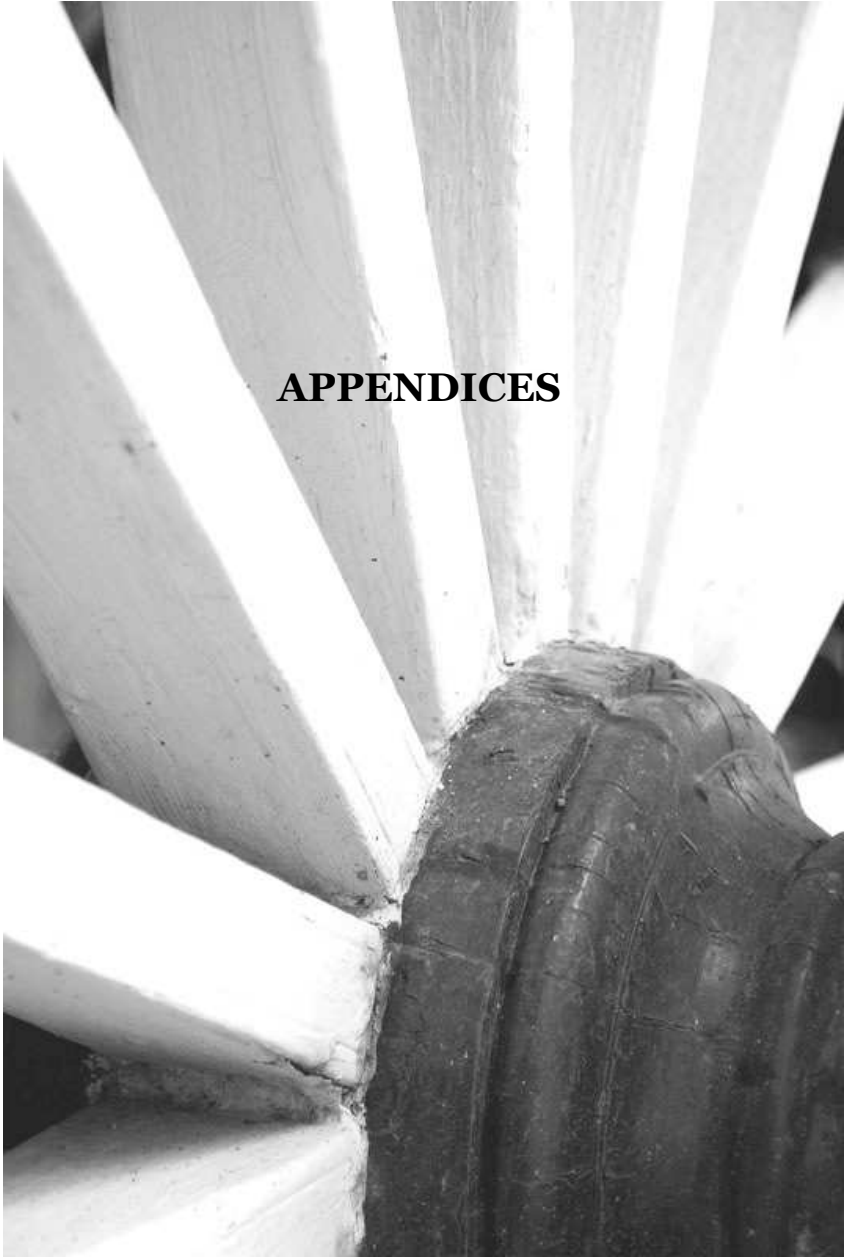
Closely examine the karmic circumstances in your life. Consider deeply the possibility that there is a continuum, an interconnection between your present life, your previous lives, and your future lives. Observe your present thoughts, speech, and actions. Use this observation as a precise indication of what you are creating for your future experience.

He sorrows in this world, and he sorrows in the next world: the man who does evil sorrows in both worlds. 'I have done evil', thus he laments, and more he laments on the path of sorrow.

*(The Dhammapada: Contrary Ways, 17.)*

He rejoices in this world, and he rejoices in the next world: the man who does good rejoices in both worlds. 'I have done good', thus he rejoices, and more he rejoices on the path of joy.

*(The Dhammapada: Contrary Ways, 18.)*



Arise! Watch. Walk on the right path. He who follows the right path has joy in this world and in the world beyond.

*(The Dhammapada: Arise! Watch, 168.)*

Follow the right path: follow not the wrong path. He who follows the right path has joy in this world and in the world beyond.

*(The Dhammapada: Arise! Watch, 169.)*

## Appendix 1 – Types of Karma

Karma has been described and classified in a number of ways. This chapter explains several of them.

### ***Mental, Verbal and Bodily Karma***

Karma may be broadly categorized under a threefold division: *mental* karma (created by the mind), *verbal* karma (created through speech), and *bodily* karma (created through physical actions). Of these three, mental karma, involving volition and intention, is the weightiest because it is the origin of the other two types of karma – in other words, what we think determines what we say and do.

### ***Skillful and Unskillful Karma***

Furthermore, karma may be seen as *skillful* (beneficial, positive) or *unskillful* (harmful, negative). Whether karma is skillful or not depends on the degree of wisdom and mindfulness used in an action – that is, whether the action has been well thought-out and the likely consequences taken into account. This in turn is governed by our intention or motivation.

Skillful actions will, of course, produce happiness; unskillful actions, unhappiness. In this way, we can avoid using the labels "good" and "bad". Rather, we realize that we can have skillful or unskillful thoughts; we can speak skillful or unskillful words; and we can act in either skillful or unskillful ways.

Renata Ogilvie gives the following example of skillful karma in her lectures:<sup>149</sup>

A very old lady I know, who lives in a retirement home, decided she still wanted to be useful even though she is very frail. Every day she spends one hour with her dying neighbor, feeding her and reading to her from the Bible, giving both of them much pleasure. This is clearly an action that will result in positive karma for the old lady in the future. Of course, in the situation there is very good karma ripening for the dying neighbor, suggesting that she in turn must have helped others in the past.

Unskillful actions are the opposite of skillful actions. Such actions are prompted or motivated by delusion (ignorance), attachment (including desire and avarice), or aversion (including anger and hatred). Whenever any form of delusion, attachment, or aversion is present, it blurs the view and increases the likelihood of unskillful karma for an individual or group.

Imagine, for example, an elderly relative who suffers a stroke. As a result, his personality changes from being a peaceable person to one who is quickly angered, especially in the initial stages after the stroke. For us to retaliate with anger and resentment at his words would be an unskillful action on our part, and would result in negative karma (effects) ripening for us in the future, being directly connected to the exact nature of the cause.

---

<sup>149</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Programme*, "Module 6: All About Karma", teachings by Renate Ogilvie, meditations by Ven. Yeshe Khadro and Kendall Magnussen (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005, 2006), 18.



Understanding unskillful karma and its consequences should not paralyze us, but rather inspire us to carefully watch our thinking, speaking, and acting.

### ***Results-Based Karma***

There is another classification of karma based on the results achieved. The two basic categories are: (1) "black karma, black result" (involving harmful actions of body, speech, and mind); and (2) "white karma, white result" (involving virtuous actions).

Furthermore, there is "black and white karma, black and white result". This describes actions that are mixed in their intent – that is, partly harmful and partly helpful (such as appearing to give a gift with a pure motive, but in reality greatly desiring the person's approval).

### ***Individual and Collective Karma***

Additionally, karma is both *individual* and *collective*. Since we do not live in isolation, but within families in communities comprising a society, then we are also involved in creating and experiencing shared or collective karma – in addition to our individual karma.

For instance, if a group of people are guided by worthy intentions, then their actions will have beneficial outcomes. This is seen in the work of human-aid organizations assisting in developing nations to relieve suffering. By contrast, some businesses have exploited certain areas of the world, as evident in deforestation or overfishing.

From these two examples, we see a mix of negative and positive collective actions. These will result in mixed collective

karma – and this helps to account for why societies experience problems, as well as fine results from successful ventures that in turn benefit all citizens.

On a personal level, if we approve of the intentions and actions of others, we then also share in their karmic results. In other words, if we mentally endorse, support, or agree with what someone else is doing, then karmic seeds are planted in our own mind stream, and will ripen in the future.

To illustrate this, consider a time of war. Some people will fully support a war effort, but will then also share in that karma. On the other hand, those not approving of the war will then also not share in the results of collective karma. An example to consider is that of a family in Europe during the Second World War who opposed the war effort of their country. During the long war years, the whole nation suffered severe food shortages. However, for this particular family, somehow or other they always had enough food.

In short, drawing the words of Thubten Chodron, "karma may be either collective or individual. Collective karma are the actions we do together as a group. For example, soldiers use weapons, a group of religious practitioners pray or meditate. The results of these actions are experienced together as a group, often in future lives. Yet each member of a group thinks, speaks, and acts slightly differently, thus creating individual karma, the results of which each person will experience him or herself."<sup>150</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Thubten Chodron, *Buddhism for Beginners* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), 62.

Finally, we may be puzzled when we see some people experience all kinds of happiness, while others seem prone to a lifetime of trouble, much pain, and a great deal of suffering. This leads to descriptions of *four types of karma operating in our lives*. These may be described as follows:

<b><i>Four Types of Karma Operating in Our Lives</i></b>	
Type of Karma	Description
Reproductive or Throwing Karma	Causative karma (weighty karma that operates at the time or moment of death, and determines the circumstances of rebirth) There are <i>three other kinds of karma</i> that can operate at the time or moment of death: (1) proximate karma, (2) habitual karma, or (3) random karma.
Supportive or Completing Karma	Sustaining karma (that which keeps something going)
Counteractive Karma	Counteractive karma (that which works against something)
Destructive Karma	Destructive karma (that which puts an end to something)

### ***Reproductive or Throwing Karma***

The force of certain actions has the power to determine the plane of existence of a person's rebirth – whether reborn in the human realm, in one of the lower realms, or in a heavenly realm. This refers to *reproductive karma* which is operative in the last moment of life.

Reproductive karma is also referred to as *throwing karma*, because at the point of death it will literally "throw" us into a particular samsaric realm. Virtuous throwing karma causes us to be thrown into the fortunate worlds of humans, demi-gods, or gods. By contrast, non-virtuous throwing actions result in us being thrown into the unfortunate worlds of hell beings, hungry spirits, or animals.

Throwing karma needs the four conditions of *intention*, *object*, *action*, and *completion*: a clearly intended action, an object (an item or person) toward which the action is aimed, the action itself, and the completion of the action with satisfaction in achieving it.

In sum, reproductive karma is that which conditions a future birth. Sayadaw adds:<sup>151</sup>

The death of a person is merely ‘a temporary end of a temporary phenomenon’. Though the present form perishes, another form which is neither the same nor absolutely different takes its place, according to the potential thought-vibration generated at the death moment. . . . The pain and happiness one experiences in the course of one’s lifetime are the inevitable consequence of Reproductive Karma.

### ***Supportive or Completing Karma***

*Supportive karma* involves those actions which support the reproductive karma. Also known as *completing karma*, it is

---

<sup>151</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.

not as powerful as throwing karma. This is the type of karma we produce that determines our living conditions in whatever realm we find ourselves in future lifetimes. In other words, it is the cause of the experience we have once we have taken a particular rebirth – some people experience a life of suffering, whereas others experience relative ease. Such differences are not coincidental, but are the present karmic display of past actions.

Renate Ogilvie explains further:<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, it is mistaken to congratulate ourselves for being better off than others, just as it is mistaken to consume ourselves with envy at the better fortunes of others. Apart from creating more negative karma, both attitudes are illogical if we accept the principles of karma. Rich people have been generous in past lifetimes; beautiful people have been patient; healthy people have saved lives and cared for the sick; and so forth.

The most important aspect of having positive living conditions is of course not to waste them and uselessly burn up all that good karma, but to use the rare jewel of leisure for study and spiritual practice. *Carpe diem*, use the day, was the motto of the Romans. All we know is that this life will come to an end, but we don't know when. What are we waiting for?

---

<sup>152</sup> FPMT Education Department, *Discovering Buddhism at Home Program*, "Module 6: All About Karma", teachings by Renate Ogilvie, meditations by Ven. Yeshe Khadro and Kendall Magnussen (Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005, 2006), 24.

## ***Counteractive Karma***

*Counteractive karma* obstructs or works against the reproductive karma. Taking the example of someone who is reborn as a human being, counteractive karma can cause trouble, pain, and suffering. The rebirth was good, but in unpleasant situations.

In other words, counteractive karma comes near the reproductive karma but does not support or maintain the action of it during the course of one's lifetime as does the supportive karma. Rather, counteractive karma tends to interrupt, weaken, and retard the fruition of reproductive karma. Again, for example, a person born with good reproductive karma may suffer various ailments which prevent them from enjoying the pleasant results of his good actions.<sup>153</sup>

## ***Destructive Karma***

*Destructive karma* stops the flow of the other forces. For example, sometimes beings experience an early death. Somehow, from some past action, powerful destructive karma interrupts the other karmic forces.

In other words, reproductive karma could be nullified by a powerful opposing karma of the past, which, "seeking an opportunity, may quite unexpectedly operate, just as a powerful

---

<sup>153</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.

counteractive force can obstruct the path of a flying arrow and bring it down to the ground."<sup>154</sup>

Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, in *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*, gives an example of the operation of the four types of karma: reproductive, supportive, counteractive, and destructive:<sup>155</sup>

As an instance of operation of all the four [types of karma], the case of Devadatta, who attempted to kill the Buddha and who caused a schism in the Sangha (disciples of the Buddha) may be cited. His good reproductive karma brought him birth in a royal family. His continued comfort and prosperity were due to the action of the supportive karma. The counteractive or obstructive karma came into operation when he was subject to much humiliation as a result of his being excommunicated from the Sangha. Finally the destructive karma brought his life to a miserable end.

In addition to throwing or reproductive karma (also known as weighty karma), there are three other kinds of karma that can operate at the time or moment of death: proximate, habitual, or random karma. These are indicative of the impact of patterns of thought that vary in their levels of intensity. They are said to play a crucial role in determining the circumstances of rebirth.

---

<sup>154</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

### ***Proximate Karma***

*Proximate karma* refers to the actions a person does or remembers immediately before their moment of dying. Since it plays an important part in determining their rebirth, how a person dies on their deathbed becomes significant. It is possible for an evil person to receive a good rebirth if they remember or do a good act at the last moment of their lives. However, this does not mean that they will be exempt from the effects of their evil actions which they accumulated during their lifetime.

### ***Habitual Karma***

*Habitual karma* refers the actions which a person habitually performs and remembers, and for which they have a great liking. Sayadaw further explains:<sup>156</sup>

Habits, whether good or bad, become one's second nature, tending to form the character of a person. At unguarded moments one often lapses into one's habitual mental mindset. In the same way, at the death-moment, unless influenced by other circumstances, one usually recalls to mind one's habitual deeds.

### ***Random Karma***

*Random karma* refers to all the actions that are not included in the previously mentioned three categories (reproductive, proximate, and habitual karma) as well those actions quickly forgotten.

---

<sup>156</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.



Goldstein and Kornfield summarize proximate, habitual, and random karma as follows:<sup>157</sup>

If there is no weighty karma, then the mind states generated by the performance or remembrance of wholesome or unwholesome actions in the last moments before dying will condition rebirth. This is called *proximate* karma, that is, actions done near death. The dying moments play a critical role in the unfolding of karma and rebirth, and it is encouraging that today there is an increased awareness and sensitivity concerning the circumstances and surroundings of people's deaths.

If there is neither weighty nor proximate karma operating, then rebirth is determined by the karma of one's *habitual* patterns, that which one has done over and over again, which comes naturally to the mind in the dying moment. This is usually the predominant karmic force.

If none of these three types of karma is working, then any action one has done at any time in the past may come to mind at the moment of death. This last is called *random* karma.

---

<sup>157</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

"My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand."

(Thich Nhat Hanh)

"Whatever we do lays a seed in our deepest consciousness, and one day that seed will grow."

(Sakyong Mipham)

## Appendix 2 – Karma in Buddhism

The idea of karma has ancient roots in the East and was prevalent in India before the advent of the Buddha. It is closely connected with the fundamental issues of life and death. As such, the universal truth of cause and effect – the law of karma – transcends cultures and time periods.

### *Life and Death*

In the West, the idea of karma and its connection with life and death has been unclear and difficult to explain. People see life as a one-time experience of birth, life, and death. Some have ideas of heaven and hell but these concepts may be nebulous and ambiguous.

In her book, *Working with Karma*, Gill Farrer-Halls makes the following observation regarding of karma and rebirth. She mentions that:<sup>158</sup>

For many people living in the East, however, karma and rebirth are much more easily accepted into their world view, because these philosophies have been embedded in the Eastern psyche since ancient times. Life and death are seen from a different perspective, and people easily accept previous and past lives and the workings of karma. Indeed, for many it is a question of what the next life will be, rather than whether there will be another incarnation. There is an

---

<sup>158</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 8.

implicit understanding that our actions in this life will condition the next life.

### ***Karma and Buddhism***

The Buddha formulated and explained the teaching about karma which became an integral part of Buddhism.

Karma remains an important subject within Buddhism and is inter-related with the many other Buddhist teachings.<sup>159</sup> For this reason, it may helpful to put the subject of karma into the broader Buddhist framework. In attempting to do so, I will draw on the "The Twelve Principles of Buddhism", written in 1942 and attributed to Christmas Humphries (1901-1983) – founder and president of the Buddhist Society of London. These principles were intended to encapsulate the essence of Buddhist teaching.<sup>160</sup> They express a common ground for all schools of Buddhism and have been approved by the leading sects throughout the world as a basis for World Buddhism.<sup>161</sup> One of

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 12. Farrer-Halls explains the term "karma" as follows: "Karma is a Sanskrit word, which is also sometimes spelt kamma, the Pali equivalent. Sanskrit and Pali are both ancient Indian languages and were the original languages of Buddhism, so both words mean the same thing. . . . The word karma essentially means action, but this is quite a general meaning. More specifically, we say that karma refers to actions that are willed or meant – in other words, those actions that have intention behind them."

<sup>160</sup> John R. Davis. *The Path to Enlightenment: Introducing Buddhism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 159-162. Davis states in a footnote on page 170: "While some attribute the authorship to Humphries, others state that it was Colonel H. S. Olcott, one of the founding presidents of the Theosophical Society, who proposed this 'common platform' for all Buddhists."

<sup>161</sup> The "Twelve Principles of Buddhism" have been adapted from <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebdha358.htm>, accessed September

the principles, number four, describes karma (number eleven also touches on karma).

*Self-salvation is for any man the immediate task.* If a man lay wounded by a poisoned arrow he would not delay extraction by demanding details of the man who shot it, or the length and make of the arrow. There will be time for ever-increasing understanding of the Teaching during the treading of the Way. Meanwhile, begin now by facing life as it is, learning always by direct and personal experience.

*The first fact of existence is the law of change or impermanence.* All that exists, from a mole to a mountain, from a thought to an empire, passes through the same cycle of existence – that is: birth, growth, decay, and death. Life alone is continuous, ever seeking self-expression in new forms. 'Life is a bridge; therefore build no house on it.' Life is a process of flow, and he who clings to any form, however splendid, will suffer by resisting the flow.

*The law of change applies equally to the 'soul'.* There is no principle in an individual which is immortal and unchanging. Only the 'Namelessness', the ultimate Reality, is beyond change; and all forms of life, including man, are manifestations of this Reality. No one owns the life which

---

16, 2012. Editor's note: The author's original wording, punctuation and spelling have been preserved. The use of the words "man," "men" and masculine pronouns is meant to include persons of both sexes and is indicative of the author's historical and cultural milieu and not meant to portray Buddhism as a male-only pursuit. Additionally, the reader may find it helpful to mentally substitute the word "liberation" or "enlightenment" for "salvation" and "harmonious", or "appropriate" wherever the word "right" or "perfect" appears in the text.

flows in him any more than the electric light bulb owns the current which gives it light.

*The universe is the expression of law.* All effects have causes, and man's consciousness or character is the sum total of his previous thoughts and acts. Karma, meaning action-reaction, governs all existence, and man is the sole creator of his circumstances and his reaction to them, his future condition, and his final destiny. By right thought and action, he can gradually purify his inner nature, and so by self-realization attain in time liberation from rebirth. The process covers great periods of time, involving life after life on earth, but ultimately every form of life will reach Enlightenment.

*Life is one and indivisible – though its ever-changing forms are innumerable and perishable.* There is, in truth, no death, though every form must die. From an understanding of life's unity arises compassion, a sense of identity with the life in other forms. Compassion is described as 'the Law of laws – eternal harmony', and he who breaks this harmony of life will suffer accordingly and delay his own Enlightenment.

*Life being One, the interests of the part should be those of the whole.* In his ignorance, man thinks he can successfully strive for his own interests, and this wrongly-directed energy of selfishness produces suffering. He learns from his suffering to reduce and finally eliminate its cause. The Buddha taught four Noble Truths:

- The omnipresence of suffering
- Its cause, wrongly directed desire

- Its cure, the removal of the cause
- The Noble Eightfold Path of self-development which leads to the end of suffering

*The Eightfold Path consists of right (or perfect) views or preliminary understanding; right aims or motive, right speech, right acts, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration or mind-development, and finally, right samadhi, leading to full Enlightenment. As Buddhism is a way of living, not merely a theory of life, the treading of this Path is essential to self-deliverance. 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good, cleanse your own heart; this is the Teaching of the Buddhas.'* (*Samadhi*, in simple terms, may be defined as a higher level of concentrated meditation, or a state of intense concentration achieved through meditation, at which union with the divine is reached.)

*Reality is indescribable, and a God with attributes is not the final Reality.* However, the Buddha, a human being, became the All-Enlightened One, and the purpose of life is the attainment of Enlightenment. This state of consciousness, Nirvana, the extinction of the limitations of self-hood, is attainable on earth. All men and all other forms of life contain the potentiality of Enlightenment; and the process therefore consists in becoming what you are. 'Look within: thou art Buddha.'

*From potential to actual Enlightenment there lies the Middle Way, the Eightfold Path 'from desire to peace', a process of self-development between the 'opposites', avoiding all extremes.* The Buddha trod this Way to the end, and the only faith required in Buddhism is the

reasonable belief that where a Guide has trodden it is worth our while to tread. The Way must be trodden by the whole man; not merely the best of him, and heart and mind must be developed equally. The Buddha was the All-Compassionate as well as the All-Enlightened One.

*Buddhism lays great stress on the need of inward concentration and meditation, which leads in time to the development of the inner spiritual faculties.* The subjective life is as important as the daily round, and periods of quietude for inner activity are essential for a balanced life. The Buddhist should at all times be 'mindful and self-possessed', refraining from mental and emotional attachment to 'the passing show'. This increasingly watchful attitude to circumstances, which he knows to be his own creation helps him to keep his reaction to it always under control.

*The Buddha said: 'Work out your own salvation with diligence'. Buddhism knows no authority for truth save the intuition of the individual, and that is authority for himself alone.* Each man suffers the consequences of his own acts, and learns thereby, while helping his fellow men to the same deliverance; nor will prayer to the Buddha or to any God prevent an effect from following its cause. Buddhist monks are teachers and exemplars, and in no sense intermediaries between Reality and the individual. The utmost tolerance is practiced towards all other religions and philosophies, for no man has the right to interfere in his neighbor's journey to the Goal.

*Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor 'escapist', nor does it deny the existence of God or soul, though it places its own*



*meaning on these terms.* It is, on the contrary, a system of thought, a religion, a spiritual science, and a way of life which is reasonable, practical, and all-embracing. For over two thousand years it has satisfied the spiritual needs of nearly one-third of mankind. It appeals to the West because it has no dogmas; satisfies the reason and the heart alike; insists on self-reliance coupled with tolerance for other points of view; embraces science, religion, philosophy, psychology, ethics and art; and points to man alone as the creator of his present life and sole designer of his destiny.

### ***Five Causal Factors***

Karma is *not* the only causal agent in life and reality. In the Buddhist tradition, five factors operate in the cosmos that cause things to happen (called the Five Niyamas). Karma is only *one* of these.

Our present situations are the result of myriads of aspects that are always changing. There is no single cause that makes any circumstance to be the way it is. Earlier Buddhist commentators apparently also referred to a form of transcendental causality.

Drawing on the work of Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, the five orders or processes (*niyama*) which operate in the physical and mental realms are:<sup>162</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> Adapted from Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.

*Utu Niyama*: Physical inorganic order, for example, seasonal phenomena of winds and rains. The unerring order of seasons, characteristic seasonal changes and events, causes of winds and rains, nature of heat, and so forth, all belong to this group. [Seasonal changes and climate]

*Bija Niyama*: Physical organic order, including the order of germs and seeds (for example, rice produced from rice-seed, sugary taste from sugar-cane or honey, peculiar characteristics of certain fruits, and so forth). The scientific theory of cells and genes, and the physical similarity of twins, may be ascribed to this order. [Heredity laws]

*Karma Niyama*: Order of act and result, for example, desirable and undesirable acts produce corresponding good and bad results. As surely as water seeks its own level so does karma, given opportunity, produce its inevitable result, not in the form of a reward or punishment but as an innate sequence. This sequence of deed and effect is as natural and necessary as the way of the sun and the moon. [Results of one's actions]

*Dhamma Niyama*: Order of the norm, for example, gravitation and other similar laws of nature. The natural reason for being good and so forth, may be included in this group. [Nature's proclivity to produce a perfect type]

*Citta Niyama*: Order of mind or psychic law, for example, processes of consciousness, arising and perishing of consciousness, constituents of consciousness, power of mind, and so forth, including telepathy, telaesthesia, retro-cognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience,

thought-reading and such other psychic phenomena which are inexplicable to modern science. [Will of mind]

Every mental or physical phenomenon could be explained by these all-embracing five orders or processes which are laws in themselves. Karma as such is only *one* of these five orders.

In sum, the causal mechanisms taught in the early texts of Buddhism are in five categories, and may be briefly summarized as follows:

First, natural laws govern *non-living matter*. This category includes physics, chemistry, geology, and similar sciences dealing with inorganic phenomena. These natural laws also order changes of weather and climate (including the seasons).

Secondly, *laws of living matter* order the nature of seeds, sprouts, leaves, flowers, fruits, and plant life. This category includes biology and genetics.

Thirdly, the *laws of moral causation* include the process whereby our thoughts, words, and actions creating an energy that results in effects. This process has been referred to as karma and it operates as a natural law like gravity. Skillful actions produce beneficial effects; unskillful actions produce harmful effects.

Fourthly, natural *spiritual laws* include the teaching of 'anatta' (no self) and 'shunyata' (emptiness), as well as the teachings of the Buddha.

Fifthly, *laws of mental activity* include consciousness, thoughts, and perceptions. It is akin to psychology.

In sum, we see that there are other forces beside karma that shape our lives. Thus, for example, when a natural disaster strikes an area, it would *not* be collective karmic punishment for the communities involved. Rather, it is the result of natural forces, not unlike the changing seasons and gravity. Any natural disaster is an unfortunate event that requires compassion – not judgment.

### ***Karma and Emptiness***

The Buddha was once asked: If there is no self doing an action, how can there be karma?<sup>163</sup>

The teaching on non-self does not deny individuality. We still see John; we see Susan. Their individuality is present. However, there is nothing *inherently fixed* about them.

In a way, every sentient being is a mind stream. In this mind stream arise all the sense impressions, thoughts, feelings, memories, and so forth. Each of our mind streams is different. Our personality has formed from the flow of thoughts, speech, and actions that each one of us is in the world. In other words, our personality occurs through our volitional actions of body, speech, and mind – which is karma! Personality, then, is the sum of a karmic pattern that we nurture and support.

An analogy may be helpful to explain emptiness further. Not far from here is the Brisbane River. It has certain characteristics. However, it is different from the Mississippi

---

<sup>163</sup> I am indebted to Guy Armstrong for the insights in this section, given in his presentation entitled "Emptiness and Karma " (2012-12-04) at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. <http://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/79/> Accessed December 17, 2012.

River. The Brisbane River is a flowing body of water – always changing. But, overall its form has constancy and consistency.

Within the flow of our mind stream nothing is fixed. As humans, we become bound by our actions – those that have developed into habit. As a result, they are hard to change, but not impossible. In fact, nothing in the mind stream cannot be changed since nothing is fixed.

The fact that everything in the mind stream can be changed is why Dharma practice can lead to our transformation. The path is a karmic unfolding, built on the principle of karma.

In Dharma practice, a whole set of new intentions enter the mind stream. For example, introduced into the mind stream are mindfulness, loving-kindness, renunciation, stillness, understanding, and wisdom. These are strengthened in the formal practice of meditation and daily life. These new intentions start to change the whole karmic unfolding. All this is based on the law of karma – we have new intentions, and our patterns are transformed. That is, the new intentions transform us, since nothing was solid in the original mind stream. These new forces can uproot our old habit patterns based on greed, aversion, and delusion.

We are floating on a sea of changing conditions – both in relation to our inner world and our outer world. Exposed to these changing and sometimes chaotic situations, we often have little control. We are vulnerable to these changes with no clear place of safety.

However, we do have one navigating tool, like a rudder on the seas. This is our intention. Intention can steer our boat

toward a safe harbor. Intention is similar to our will – and our own will is the backbone of our destiny. While karma shapes circumstances, our attitudes are our own.

Ultimately our character shapes our life, and we alone can shape our character. This is the message of karma. We need to take up skillful intentions which form our character. This process does have amazing consequences.

Practicing Dharma will lead to positive changes, both in our inner life and outer life. However, the process takes time – it is not achieved overnight. Our inner development will then express itself in our outer life as well. This is the promise of karma. It can steer us to happiness and freedom.

## Appendix 3 – Miscellaneous

### *The Bible and Karma*

The Bible also describes the law of *cause and effect*, albeit in the context of a Creator God. Consider the following scriptures:

- "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" (Jeremiah 17:10, NIV).
- "Your eyes are open to all the ways of men; you reward everyone according to his conduct and as his deeds deserve" (Jeremiah 32:19, NIV).
- "Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will treat you in accordance with the anger and jealousy you showed in your hatred of them . . ." (Ezekiel 35:11, NIV).
- "Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done" (Psalm 62:12, NIV).
- "My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12, NIV).
- "Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous" (Proverbs 13:21, NIV).
- "The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment (Proverbs 10:16, NIV).

- "Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools" (Proverbs 16:22, NIV).
- "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered" (Proverbs 21:13, NIV).
- "Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?" (Proverbs 24:12, NIV).
- "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you" (2 Thessalonians 1:6, NIV).
- "God will give to each person according to what he has done." (Romans 2:6, NIV).
- "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52, NIV).

Furthermore, the Beatitudes reflect a cause and effect relationship (Matthew 5:3-10, NIV):

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.



- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Bible also confirms the basic ways in which karma operates. In other words, the "four laws of karma" are described.

*Karma is definite* – cause and effect are fixed. Virtuous actions bring happiness; non-virtuous actions bring suffering. Once a cause has produced its results, changing the outcome is impossible – thus the need to exercise care when creating karmic causes!

The Scriptures state: "A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7, NIV). Also, "for with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38, NIV).

Similarly, the Buddha stated:<sup>164</sup>

For every action we perform we experience a similar result.

Also,<sup>165</sup>

Whatever karma is created  
Will bring a corresponding result.

*Karma increases* – the karmic seeds or imprints that we create on our mind stream will produce results that are far greater than

---

<sup>164</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment* (Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995), 230.

<sup>165</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 389.

their cause. Examples from nature abound. From a tiny apple seed, for instance, a large apple tree can grow and yield hundreds of apples every year. Likewise, even a small virtuous act can result in a powerful positive effect.

The Scriptures state: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (Luke 6:38, NIV). Also, "peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18 NIV). Finally, "'Consider carefully what you hear,' he continued. 'With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more'" (Mark 4:24, NIV).

From the sayings of the Buddha:<sup>166</sup>

Do not think "The small sins I do  
Will not return in my future lives."  
Just as falling drops of water  
Will fill a large container,  
The little sins a churl accumulates  
Will completely overwhelm him."

Likewise from the sayings of the Buddha:<sup>167</sup>

Do not think "A small virtue  
Will not return in my future lives."  
Just as falling drops of water  
Will fill a large container,  
The little virtues the steadfast accumulate  
Will completely overwhelm them.

---

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 392.

*Karma is specific* – a person will *not* experience a result for which he or she did not create the cause. In other words, if an action is not carried out, its result cannot be experienced. (This also means that we cannot take on the karma of others.)

The Scriptures state: "If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer" (Proverbs 9:12, NIV).

This principle is also attested to by Buddha in a sutra:<sup>168</sup>

The ripening result of an action  
Does not occur to the earth,  
To the water,  
To the wind, or  
To the elements.  
It occurs to the one who created the cause.

*Karma is never lost* – karmic seeds or imprints, once created in our mind, do not die away or cease until they have ripened. In other words, they are never lost, but will come to fruition under the right causes and conditions. Purification practices, however, can prevent or minimize the ripening of karmic seeds.

The Scriptures infer the same principle: "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong" (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

As a sutra also tells us:<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> Quoted in: Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 161.

<sup>169</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition, edited in the

The karma of embodied beings  
Does not vanish over hundreds of eons.  
If the prerequisites and the time are right,  
Karma will ripen to results.

Understanding karma, we can better appreciate that it is our own actions that shape our experiences. The law of karma has an inbuilt correction and reward mechanism. Therefore, the focus moves away from an omnipotent, omniscient Creator God who punishes or rewards humans for certain behaviors. Rather, each of us is responsible for our own actions – and we indeed reap what we sow.

Finally, as far as the idea of rebirth, apparently some early Christian sects believed in some form of rebirth. Also, consider the following passage: "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets'" (Matthew 16:13-14, NIV). The inference from this passage suggests that there was a notion of rebirths extant at the time.

Also, the following passage from the Book of John is sometimes mentioned in the context of rebirth:

As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus (John 9:1-3, NIV).

---

Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche, translated into English by Michael Richards (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 395.

## ***Karma, Rebirth and the Christian View***

The following attempt to integrate the ideas of karma, rebirth, and the Christian perspective is speculative.

A starting place can be the belief in an immortal soul, drawing on Plato's understanding. Based on Plato's view, there is a non-physical or immaterial part to each human being. This non-physical dimension is uncreated and indestructible. Therefore, it must have existed before we were born, and it will continue to exist after we die.

Furthermore, we could conclude that this incorruptible entity can appear in the world in different bodies and at various times. Why? It may be part of a perfecting process. This reasoning, on rational grounds, shows the *possibility* of rebirths. It does not prove its reality.

This idea of the transmigration of souls (that is, for souls to go to different bodies) provides a basis for understanding justice. Christian belief states that God is just (for example, 2 Thessalonians 1:6, NIV).

During our human existence, we may have the opportunity to make a decision about whether to accept or reject the teachings of Christ which lead to enlightenment and liberation. Those who accept the message, experience a measure of enlightenment, and at death go to be with God (some hold to the idea that at death believers are buried and await a first resurrection of all who have accepted Christ's message).

Could those who have heard the message of Christ, but for whatever reason are unable to accept it, be reborn and given more opportunities to consider their stance – as are those who

have never heard the teachings of Christ? (A novel idea is that humans could be reborn and live their lives on other planets.)

Moreover, could such a cycle of life and death continue until all recognize the message of Christ as a path to liberation? In this way, all would eventually be saved, or in other words, reach enlightenment. The possibility of damnation is almost removed.

This view would be far more compatible with the love of God. Additionally, spiritual growth and moral progress could also occur during successive rebirths. And, through such a process, individuals would come to better understand the love and compassion of God. In fact, grace is no longer contrary to rebirth. While karma governs "whatsoever one sows, one reaps", there is abundant grace in every opportunity being afforded to individuals to maximize their human potential by achieving enlightenment. Also, the possibility of purifying negative karma is a grace-filled opening at any time.

There may be some, however, who will continue to reject or refuse to follow the path of truth, the path of light, the path of life – that is, the path of Nirvana or path of God. For such individuals there would be ultimate punishment in that they have chosen to become lost causes. Their punishment would be annihilation.

In relation to the outworking of karma, Norman L. Geisler writes:<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 640.

To many, the idea of having more than one chance at life seems to be the most equitable solution. *Karma* is just. If you do bad things, you pay the price; if you do good, you get a reward. Punishment is in proportion to how bad your *karma* is, not all or nothing. The idea of condemning someone to an everlasting hell for a finite amount of sin sounds too harsh. Also, suffering in this life can be justified if it is really an outworking of *karma* from past lives. This explanation eliminates the need to make God responsible for suffering. All suffering can be explained as the just outworking of bad deeds done in former incarnations.

In sum, considering the possibility of rebirths, together with the law of karma, suggests there is a way in which God can punish sin (not personally, but punishment is inbuilt through the law of karma). Each person can come to faith in the message of Christ – at least during one lifetime. In this way, everyone can ultimately reach enlightenment, that is, be saved from a final death and destruction in Christian terminology. The person who rejects the teachings of Christ receives more time with opportunities or chances to reconsider his or her stance. In this way, each person can exercise their human freedom – there is no coercion for anyone to believe.

Norman L. Geisler concludes with these words:<sup>171</sup>

Finally, it is argued that reincarnation is just because it makes salvation a personal matter between the individual

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 641.

and God. Rather than dealing with problems of imputed guilt from Adam's sin or being reckoned righteous by faith, everyone is responsible for taking care of his or her own *karma*. . . . This eliminates the injustice of being punished in any way for Adam's sin and the injustice of Christ dying for sins that he did not commit. Instead, Jesus' death becomes our inspiration, "the perfect catalyst" for working out our salvation and assuring us that we stand in the unfailing light of God's love. He died as our example, not as our substitute. In these ways, reincarnation satisfies justice.



## ***Beyond Karma***

Spiritual writer, Timothy Freke in *Encyclopedia of Spirituality* presents the following view as far as ultimately being free from karma:<sup>172</sup>

Enlightenment is freedom from the effects of karma. However, enlightenment is not the result of finally paying off some sort of cosmic debt. Enlightenment happens when we eventually understand that the whole idea of personal karma accrued by good and bad actions only arises alongside the illusion of being a separate self. An enlightened master is free from personal karma because the master knows he or she is not a person. The master knows there is no such thing as *your karma* or *my karma*. There is only *the karma* – the impersonal process of cause and effect through which the past becomes the future. To be free of karma is to cease believing oneself to be a person being pushed around by events, and instead to be a detached witness to the unfolding of life.

"He who understands in truth that he does nothing, he is not bound by karma" (*The Bhagavad Gita* – Hindu Scripture).

Indeed, the highest aspiration would be to eventually transcend karma altogether on the path towards enlightenment. Ultimately, everything is impermanent. Therefore, even if one creates the causes to be happy, the ensuing happiness cannot

---

<sup>172</sup> Timothy Freke, *Encyclopedia of Spirituality: Information and Inspiration to Transform Your Life* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2000), 207, 209.

last forever – at some point, the karma that created the happiness will be used up and be finished.

The following words from *Working with Karma* by Gill Farrer-Halls form a fitting conclusion for this section:<sup>173</sup>

By now it should be clear that karma is not fatalistic. By consciously trying to act with wisdom, kindness and compassion for others as much as possible, you will create the karma for positive rebirths in which you will experience happiness and the opportunity to create further good karma. Such virtuous behavior will eventually lead those who follow this path beyond karma altogether, to enlightenment.

---

<sup>173</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 17.

## ***Proving Karma***

In the book *Working with Karma*, Gill Farrer-Halls shares the following observations as far as developing a greater understanding of karma:<sup>174</sup>

By contemplating and analyzing cause and effect, you can develop a reasoned, logical understanding that the teachings on karma are correct. In this way you go beyond the superstitions of blind faith, so that if you – or even someone else – question your understanding of, or belief in, karma, you can respond with the conviction of sound reasoning and valid arguments. A developed psychological understanding of karma also leads you naturally towards positive, skillful actions. . . .

However, if you do not use your wonderful psychological ability to investigate, analyze and reflect, then even if you have a great mental and intellectual capacity, it will remain undeveloped. From a Buddhist perspective, psychological understanding includes using your inner wisdom. Inner wisdom relies partly on intellect, but it is much more than intellectual understanding; it is a special kind of knowing – the inexplicable sense of intimacy that comes from experience. . . .

Not everything can be consciously known or understood, because some things reside in the unconscious mind. . . . Dreams partly function to bring "stuff" through from the unconscious to consciousness. Archetypes, or powerful

---

<sup>174</sup> Gill Farrer-Halls, *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma* (London: Godsfield Press, 2007), 106-107.

universal symbols, also impact on both the unconscious and conscious minds. If you continue meditating regularly, you can begin to understand more of the insights that arise from contemplation and enquiry. But sometimes it is best to accept that you simply do not know everything in a rational, conscious manner, but that insights may come through to consciousness from the unconscious mind.

Meditation can lead to an intuitive experiential understanding, which facilitates a shift in perception. This allows you to realize that meditation is no longer an intellectual process; you can go beyond the intellect and access deeper levels of the mind. When you meditate on karma in this way, your understanding of intentional actions and their results deepens, and a deeper understanding of how karma operates begins to arise. You start to know for yourself the truth of karma, but this is an understanding that arises from your direct personal experience, not from something you read in a book.

## ***Reflections on Rebirth and Karma***

As a person with a Western education and cultural background, I cannot logically and empirically (scientifically) prove the idea of rebirths – either in the human realm or in one of the other five realms.

Consequently, the following are simply reflections, based on an unproven assumption that rebirths may occur:<sup>175</sup>

### *Are rebirth and karma for real?*

Is rebirth for real - either as a human or in one of the other realms? This is the question most Westerners ask as soon as they become interested in Buddhism. Karma (Pali: Kamma) - the law of cause and effect - operates across multiple lifetimes, but where's the proof that there is any life other than the current one?

It's a complex subject and each tradition has its own explanation. It isn't uncommon for different teachers in the same tradition to have a different take on rebirth. One thing's for sure, there is no scientific proof of rebirth (yet). There are rational explanations, but they all rest on unproven assumptions.

One way to approach the question of rebirth is suggested by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who says, "You don't have to *believe* in rebirth, you just have to take it as a working hypothesis." Other teachers, such as Ajahn Summedho, have a similar view, that since we can never know what

---

<sup>175</sup> Excerpt taken from the following website, accessed October 12, 2012: [http://www.taleofgenji.org/buddhism\\_for\\_beginners.html#rebirthlink](http://www.taleofgenji.org/buddhism_for_beginners.html#rebirthlink)

will happen after death, it makes sense to practise Dharma (Pali: Dhamma) and live this life in the best way possible.

Some well-known monks, Ajahn Brahm and P.A. Payutto among them, say that when meditators reach the third or fourth jhana (level of absorption) they are able to "read their past lives" as the Buddha did and experience the truth of rebirth. But this ability is by no means universal, even among meditation masters.

Another explanation championed by Buddhadasa, Thailand's most revered monk, is that rebirth in a series of physical bodies is "conventional talk" to make the subject understandable for the masses, but in "Dharma talk" what the Buddha really meant was that each life was the arising of the ego in the mind. So we experience "death" and "rebirth" (of the ego) many times each day. Similarly, the six realms of existence all correspond to states of mind. In the same way, the cause and effect of karma can be observed in our own mental states - when we do good deeds it results in a wholesome mental state, when we do bad deeds, we experience unwholesome mental states.

This rational explanation of rebirth and karma doesn't necessarily exclude the traditional view. It augments it. What works for me is to take both of them as working hypotheses and practice accordingly. Recalling the Buddha's story about the man shot with a poisoned arrow, if we need to have every detail of the teaching proved to us at the outset, we'll be dead before we start practicing.

Upon personal reflection, I believe that the traditional view of karma and rebirth can be held as possibilities. Here are some of my thoughts:

*The Daily Cycle of Life*

Each day, from sunrise to sunset (and then nightfall) can portray the progression of physical life from birth to death. This thought is captured in a poem by an Indian poet, Kalidasa (400 AD):

**Look Well to This Day**

Look well to *this day*,  
for it is life –  
the very best of life.

In its brief course lie all  
the realities and truths of existence:

The joy of growth,  
The splendor of action,  
The glory of power.

For yesterday is but a memory,  
and tomorrow is only a vision,  
but today, if well-lived, makes  
every yesterday a memory of happiness,  
and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.

Indeed, each day is unique – no two days are exactly the same. A person of 60 years of age has lived through 21,900 days. This can be analogous with numerous lifetimes. The cumulative effect of all the experiences over the hypothetical 21,900 days is

what contributes to the person's personality and character today – while many of the exact details of each separate day are largely forgotten. Similarly, what we are today in our basic nature and makeup is the cumulative effect of many, countless lifetimes – however, each previous life can no longer be recalled.

Moreover, each day reflects the four seasons of one lifetime on earth – morning is spring, midday is summer, afternoon is autumn, and evening is winter. *Spring* represents birth, childhood, and a young person growing into adulthood – it is a time of growth and change. *Summer* pictures full adulthood – the time of marriage, child rearing, and pursuing a chosen career. *Autumn* characterizes a time when strength and energy begin to diminish – yet life also has a greater measure of love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, and wisdom. Finally, *winter* portrays old age and death, and when family members and friends pass away – it is a time of loss, sorrow, illness, and the awareness of one's own approaching and inevitable end.

### *The Death Process*

In his book *The Essence of Buddhism*, Roy Gillett writes:<sup>176</sup>

Tibetan lamas have documented the actual stages of the death process in great detail. They can tell you exactly the order and way that each of the senses fade, as the various elements dissolve, and then, if attention is held, the mind can focus on clear light. From this clear light vision consciousness can pass back through the stages of dissolution in reverse order. As soon as this reverse

---

<sup>176</sup> Roy Gillett, *The Essence of Buddhism* (London: Caxton Publishing, 2001), 31.



process begins various stages of rebirth commence, firstly in the "Bardo", the Tibetan word for this intermediate state, then in a new physical incarnation. Tibetan Buddhist death meditations are designed to prepare for this experience.

### *Karma*

The law of cause and effect takes into account every thought, word, and action throughout a lifetime – and for all lifetimes (for those who hold this view). There is a supreme and just logic to karma, since everything we think, say, and do forms an imprint on the mind. Since karma deals with cause and effect, there is no need for crippling guilt – only constructive regret which empowers positive change. One realizes that no negative action ever passes by without a harmful result; no positive deed ever passes by without a constructive outcome. Even in this life, negative acts bring about suffering in the person's mind right away, while positive acts yield a state of happiness. "When death comes," explains Roy Gillett, "the sum total of negativity in our mind automatically attracts us through the swoon of darkness to a new life that suits that negativity exactly."<sup>177</sup>

### *An Explanation for Inequality*

Karma, the law of moral causation, offers an explanation for the inequality of humankind. Without a cause, this unevenness or inequality evident in humanity is seen by some as purely accidental, attributed to blind chance, or pure accident. Others would ascribe the inequality to heredity, environment, or even to God, ordained for an unknown divine purpose. However,

---

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 32.

the following observations are difficult to account for without the law of karma as one of the factors:<sup>178</sup>

- What is the cause of the inequality that exists among mankind?
- Why should one person be brought up in the lap of luxury, endowed with fine mental, moral and physical qualities, and another in absolute poverty, steeped in misery?
- Why should one person be a mental prodigy, and another an idiot?
- Why should one person be born with saintly characteristics and another with criminal tendencies?
- Why should some be linguistic, artistic, mathematically inclined, or musical from the very cradle?
- Why should others be congenitally blind, deaf, or deformed?
- Why should some be blessed, and others cursed from their births?

From observation, it appears that everything in this world that happens to a person is due to causes, even though we may not be able to discern or comprehend the causes. With the possibility of past and future rebirths, the definite cause or causes of a visible effect may not necessarily be confined to the

---

<sup>178</sup> Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm#2>. Accessed on December 16, 2012.

present life, but may be traced to a proximate or remote past birth.<sup>179</sup>

### *Ocean Analogy*

An analogy that can assist in understanding rebirth (and karma) is that of the ocean:<sup>180</sup>

If we imagine the world as an ocean, we are like the ripples on the ocean. Formations like ripples and waves occur, because of wind, tides, and other kinetic forces. In the Buddhist analogy, the universe is in motion due to karmic forces. A ripple, a wave, or a billow may seem as an individual entity for a moment, creating the illusion that it has a self, but it is gone in the next moment. The truth is that all individuals are one. A ripple is a temporary phenomenon; it is just water in motion. We know that kinetic energy causes wave forms on a body of water and it would be ridiculous to say that a single ripple or wave has a self.

Similarly, in case of beings, the process of coming into life and being conditioned in a particular way is caused by karmic forces. The up and down of the ocean's waves corresponds with the rotation of the wheel of life. The sea that surges, falls, and resurges, is the life that is born, dies, and is reborn again. It is therefore obvious that we should not focus on the temporary phenomenon of the wave, but on the force that causes, forms, and drives it.

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Excerpt taken from the following website, accessed November 5, 2012: <http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/karma.html>

## *Seal and Wax Analogy*

Another analogy, for those who wish to consider the next life or rebirths, is as follows: In the transition from this life to the next, the quality of death consciousness becomes important – since it conditions the arising of the next moment, the rebirth consciousness. The analogy of a seal imprinting wax may be helpful in understanding the overall process. The seal is real (just as this life is real); however, nothing of the seal itself goes into the wax. Only a shape is transmitted in the process of imprinting. In the same way, our life today conditions the nature of our future existence – however, our physical characteristics will not be the same, only the qualities of mind that have been developed. And so, just as in our lives, each moment conditions the next, the same process is at work from life to life.<sup>181</sup>

In closing, the following thoughts may be helpful:<sup>182</sup>

An attitude that helps to keep us open to possibilities beyond our present level of understanding is expressed in a phrase of the poet Coleridge: 'the willing suspension of disbelief.' With this attitude of mind we are trapped neither by blind belief nor blind disbelief. In this way we acknowledge what we don't yet know for ourselves and stay receptive to new levels of understanding.

---

<sup>181</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Goldstein for these insights, found on his Dharma Talks (2012-05-02 "Karma") at <http://dharmafeed.org/teacher/96/>

<sup>182</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

## ***Cause and Effect in Life***

The following quotations show the hidden but certain working of karma, the law of cause and effect, in our daily, moment-to-moment lives. They have been taken from Susan Hayward's book, *A Guide for the Advanced Soul: A Book of Insight*:<sup>183</sup>

- Life is the movie you see through your own, unique eyes. It makes little difference what's happening out there. It's how you take it that counts. (Denis Waitley, *The Winner's Edge*)
- Experience is determined by yourself – not the circumstances of your life. (Gita Bellin)
- To find yourself, think for yourself. (Socrates)
- Dwell not on the past. Use it to illustrate a point, then leave it behind. Nothing really matters except what you do now in this instant of time. From this moment onward you can be an entirely different person, filled with love and understanding, ready with an outstretched hand, uplifted and positive in every thought and deed. (Eileen Caddy, *God Spoke to Me*)
- We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakeable. (*The Dhammapada*)

---

<sup>183</sup> Susan Hayward, *A Guide for the Advanced Soul: A Book of Insight* (Crow's Nest, Australia: In-Tune Books, 1984). The last two quotations were taken from the *Bible* (New International Version).

- Thoughts are things; they have tremendous power. Thoughts of doubt and fear are pathways to failure. When you conquer negative attitudes of doubt and fear you conquer failure. Thoughts crystallize into habit and habit solidifies into circumstances. (Brian Adams, *How to Succeed*)
- You are given the gifts of the gods; you create your reality according to your beliefs. Yours is the creative energy that makes your world. There are no limitations to the self except those you believe in. (Jane Roberts, *The Nature of Personal Reality*)
- Be at peace and see a clear pattern and plan running through all your lives. Nothing is by chance. (Eileen Caddy, *Footprints on the Path*)
- What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind. (The Buddha)
- Everything I do and say with anyone makes a difference. (Gita Bellin)
- Thoughts are like boomerangs. (Eileen Caddy, *The Dawn of Change*)
- There is little sense in attempting to change external conditions, you must first change inner beliefs, then outer conditions will change accordingly. (Brian Adams, *How to Succeed*)
- Success depends on where intention is. (Gita Bellin)
- You should always be aware that your head creates your world. (Ken Keyes, Jr. *Handbook to Higher Consciousness*)

- Until you can understand that nothing can happen to you, nothing can ever come to you or be kept from you, except in accord with your state of consciousness, you do not have the key to life. (Paul Twitchell)
- A loving person lives in a loving world. A hostile person lives in a hostile world. Everyone you meet is your mirror. (Ken Keyes, Jr., *Handbook to Higher Consciousness*)
- Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her. But once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game. (Voltaire)
- Life has a bright side and a dark side, for the world of relativity is composed of light and shadows. If you permit your thoughts to dwell on evil, you yourself will become ugly. Look only for the good in everything, that you absorb the quality of beauty. (Paramahansa Yogananda, *Sayings of Paramahansa Yogananda*)
- A man must elevate himself by his own mind, not degrade himself. The mind is the friend of the conditioned soul, and his enemy as well. (*Bhagavad-Gita*, VI:5)
- For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. (*Bible*, Proverbs 23:7)
- Do not be deceived . . . A man reaps what he sows . . . Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. (*Bible*, Galatians 6:7-9)

## ***Karma-Related Quotations***

The following miscellaneous quotations are related to the topic of karma.<sup>184</sup>

### *The Mind*

Like molding dough in your hand, you can definitely turn your mind whichever way you want. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Mindfulness of Attitude*

People can't see your mind; what people see is a manifestation of your attitude in your actions of body and speech. So pay attention to your attitude all the time. Guard it as if you are the police, or like a parent cares for a child, like a bodyguard, or as if you are the guru and your mind is your disciple. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Mindfulness of Energy*

Right understanding is the only solution to both physical and mental problems. You should always check very carefully how you're expending your energy: will it make you happy or not?

---

<sup>184</sup> Source: Quotations have been taken from the following website: <http://www.fpmt.org/> FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition) is devoted to the transmission of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and values worldwide through teaching, meditation, and community service. FPMT provides integrated education through which people's minds and hearts can be transformed into their highest potential for the benefit of others, inspired by an attitude of universal responsibility. They are committed to creating harmonious environments and helping all beings develop their full potential of infinite wisdom and compassion. The organization is based on the Buddhist tradition of Lama Tsongkhapa of Tibet, as taught by the founder, Lama Thubten Yeshe, and the spiritual director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche.



That's a big responsibility, don't you think? It's your choice: the path of wisdom or the path of ignorance. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Freedom to Choose*

Every second of this human life gives us the freedom to choose between hell and enlightenment, samsara and liberation. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Mental Outlook*

Over and over again our experiences prove that it is our mental outlook that is fundamentally responsible for whether we are successful or unsuccessful, healthy or ill, attractive or ugly, happy or depressed. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Right Intention*

If you help others with sincere motivation and sincere concern, that will bring you more fortune, more friends, more smiles, and more success. If you forget about others' rights and neglect others' welfare, ultimately you will be very lonely. (His Holiness the Dalai Lama)

### *Purification*

When we are able to recognize and forgive ignorant actions done in one's past, we strengthen ourselves and can solve the problems of the present constructively. (His Holiness the Dalai Lama)

### *Karma*

Karma is your experiences of body and mind. The word itself is Sanskrit; it means cause and effect. Your experiences of mental and physical happiness are the effects of certain causes, but those effects themselves become the cause of future results. One action produces a reaction; that is karma. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Mindfulness of Environment*

You can see from your own life experiences how the environment can affect you. When you're among peaceful, generous, happy people, you're inclined to feel happy and peaceful yourself. When you're among angry, aggressive people, you tend to become like them. The human mind is like a mirror. Therefore, it is very important to be conscious of your surroundings and how they affect your mind. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Love*

If you want to be loved, love others first. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Importance of the Mind*

No matter whether you are a believer or a non-believer, religious or not religious, a Christian, Hindu, or a scientist, black or white, an Easterner or a Westerner, the most important thing to know is your own mind and how it works. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Gentleness*

Be wise. Treat yourself, your mind, sympathetically, with loving kindness. If you are gentle with yourself, you will become gentle with others. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Responsibility*

You are responsible for your own problems just as you're responsible for your own liberation and enlightenment. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Personal Responsibility*

When you recognize your problem comes from your concept or your concept is the problem, you don't blame others. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Karma*

Your whole life is controlled by karma, you live within the energy field of karma. Your energy interacts with another energy, then another, and another. That's how your entire life unfolds. Physically, mentally, it's all karma. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *The Mind*

It's the foggy mind, the mind that's attracted to an object and paints a distorted projection onto it, that makes you suffer. That's all. It's really quite simple. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Suffering*

If you are suffering, use it as the cause to bring happiness to others. This way, whatever kind of life experience you have, you use it on the path. There is no interruption to Dharma practice and one's life is most beneficial. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

### *Anger*

I encourage people not to express their anger, not to let it out. Instead, I have people try to understand *why* they get angry, what causes it and how it arises. When you realize these things, instead of manifesting externally, your anger digests itself. In the West, some people believe that you get rid of your anger by expressing it, that you finish it by letting it out. Actually, in this case what happens is that you leave an imprint in your mind to get angry again. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *Meditation*

We are not compelled to meditate by some outside agent, by other people, or by God. Rather, just as we are responsible for our own suffering, so are we solely responsible for our own cure. We have created the situation in which we find ourselves, and it is up to us to create the circumstances for our release. Therefore,

as suffering permeates our life, we have to do something in addition to our regular daily routine. This "something" is spiritual practice or, in other words, meditation. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche, *The Purpose of Meditation*)

### *Wrong View*

The mental pollution of misconceptions is far more dangerous than drugs. Wrong ideas and faulty practice get deeply rooted in your mind, build up during your life, and accompany your mind into the next one. That is much more dangerous than some physical substance. (Lama Thubten Yeshe)

### *The Mind*

Happiness and suffering come from your own mind, not from outside. Your own mind is the cause of happiness; your own mind is the cause of suffering. To obtain happiness and pacify suffering, you have to work within your own mind. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

## ***SourcePoint Practice Commentary***

The SourcePoint Practice<sup>185</sup> is one of the most effective methods you can use to create positive changes in your health, relationships and all aspects of your life. Through this practice, you will gain access to your most important and valuable inner resource – your own heart. Relying on the external world to provide happiness and security always causes stress because of impermanence and uncertainty.

Conversely, using the SourcePoint Practice you will discover the lasting happiness, security, wisdom and compassion which naturally reside within your heart. You may use this practice silently and privately, anytime, anywhere. The simple yet profound practice of breathing slowly, naturally and evenly, and bringing your attention into the heart creates an immediate and beneficial shift from habitual intellectual/cognitive processing into a more heart-centered perception and way of being.

According to medical studies, this shift of perception greatly reduces psychological distress, anger, fatigue and impatience, and activates the relaxation response of the parasympathetic nervous system. Stress hormones are reduced,

---

<sup>185</sup> Developed by Neil Steven Cohen. Information located at <http://www.sourcepointglobaloutreach.org/> Accessed December 25, 2012. Note: SourcePoint Global Outreach is a nonprofit organization founded in 2001. Through their outreach projects, they are dedicated to serving the welfare and upliftment of their local and global community. As part of their outreach, the SourcePoint Practice is offered as a simple yet effective method for reducing stress, creating optimal health, and empowering the heart. By using the SourcePoint Practice, the intent is for people to gain access to their most important and valuable resource – the heart.

the immune system is empowered to protect and heal the body, and your energy is refreshed and vitalized. The SourcePoint Practice also helps you maintain a healthy state of coherence (harmony) between your brain, heart and nervous system. This increases emotional resilience, positive outlook, communication skills, productivity, motivation and clarity regarding your goals in life.

Giving attention to your own personal development is excellent and necessary. In addition, learning to share your heart with others, offering loving and selfless service to both the local and global community is also integral to human development and evolution. Use the SourcePoint Practice for your personal development, and consider extending this heart-centered practice into the world through selfless acts of kindness, generosity and charity.

### ***Further Notes***

Studies have shown that meditative techniques which shift conscious attention to the area around the heart are beneficial for reducing stress, anxiety and depression; enhancing cognitive performance; and decreasing muscle tension, headaches and all forms of pain caused by tension.

Most disease originates from discord between the mind and body. Learn to use your heart as a psychological and physiological access point or *SourcePoint* for creating a healthy state of coherence (harmony) and integration between your body, brain and heart. Physicians, psychotherapists, and other health professionals are increasingly adding methods such as this to their practice as an essential element of an integrated health program.

Explore, discover and experience a part of your being that has never been damaged or wounded, a part of you that is deeper and remains untouched by fear, negative beliefs, anxiety or depression.

Learn to balance the head and the heart; harmonize intellectual and cognitive perception with heart-centered perception.

Use the SourcePoint Practice to initiate a profound shift from stress-based behavior (sympathetic nervous system predominance) to a more relaxed, peaceful, compassionate and empowered way of life (balanced autonomic nervous system).

Reduce emotional reactivity, neurosis, fear and stress by gaining direct access to the enlightened qualities of the heart. Learn to establish a deep sense of peace, wellbeing, happiness and empowerment, completely independent of outer circumstances.

Experience more love and increased emotional resilience (affect tolerance). Learn to connect more deeply and intimately in relationships without losing inner contact with your own core self.

Dissolve emotional defenses around the heart and liberate the natural vitality which brings greater health, more confidence and a more authentic sense of self.

Enhance mental clarity, reasoning and learning abilities. Increase brainwave coherence. Improve memory, intuition, and creativity. Enjoy a deeper sense of life purpose.

## ***Science of Karma***

In his book *Beyond the Breath*, Marshall Glickman shows that karma is *not* a quaint Eastern notion, but an inexorable law that can be scientifically explained – and with which we can align ourselves for greater peace of mind. The following notes are based on direct excerpts from his book.<sup>186</sup>

### *Newton's third law of motion*

We can begin with Newton's third law of motion: *For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*. From experience, this principle applies to emotional reactions too. Each time we respond to something – whether recoiling or clutching, nudging away or leaning towards – our response creates an effect. The repercussions are important. This means that every desire, every volition, every action, and every reaction we have, has *consequences* – not because an omniscient observer is watching our every move.

### *Emotional physics*

Whenever we react to something, the force of that response pushes inward and outward, forward and back – influencing our present and future state of mind, leaving an imprint that becomes part of our "past". The net result of these reactions is tension, however slight, which accumulates inside us and creates the terrain of our inner life. By understanding how this happens, we get insight into how to heal ourselves.

---

<sup>186</sup> Marshall Glickman, *Beyond the Breath: Extraordinary Mindfulness through Whole-Body Vipassana Meditation* (Boston: Journey Editions, 2002), 127-141.



### *Essence of karma*

At the simplest level, we can notice Newton's law at work by observing ourselves if we spread nasty gossip: immediately we feel mean and ugly ourselves. We cannot *consciously* harm someone else or have an unwholesome intention without hurting ourselves as well. This is the essence of karma. It's a *bi-directional golden rule*: by being compassionate to others, we're also being compassionate to ourselves, and vice versa. Truly living according to this principle can make an enormous difference. To understand karma, then, is to recognize the mind's role in creating – or undoing – our own unhappiness.

### *Superficial understanding of karma*

Our actions do affect our life's circumstances. However, to focus on material results is to focus on the most superficial aspect of karma – the part that may be beyond our control, and impossible to trace. We also have to admit the *complexity of the world* – we don't live in a tidy cause-and-effect universe. Rather, for a given incident there are usually multiple influences and effects. An event in our life isn't an isolated thing, but one moment in a longer, continual movement which flows like a river.

### *Intentions and actions*

What is important is to recognize how our psycho-spiritual fate is affected by our *intentions and actions*. It is an inexorable process, but often so subtle it can be difficult to recognize. In other words, what is most meaningful in life is our *state of mind* – not so much what's happening in our external life circumstances. Our internal intentions and actions over a lifetime always affect our own waters (using a river analogy) – but what happens on the shore is affected by people and events

that may be beyond our control.<sup>187</sup> In *Karma and Chaos*, Paul Fleischman notes that "karma is neither *freedom* nor *determinism*, as it has been often misread to be, but a dynamic fusion of these two" [emphasis mine].

### *Karmic unconscious*

There is a difference between Freud's unconscious, and a karmic unconscious created by intention and action – although the phenomenon itself is the same. But, how we think of our unconscious affects how we work with it. In a *karmic-unconscious paradigm*, we see we're contending with an ongoing, self-created – or, at very least, self-reinforced – process, not a *thing*, as the term "*the unconscious*" suggests.

### *Dealing with the unconscious*

When the unconscious is seen as a thing, it seems inaccessible and unchangeable, as though it were a large locked safe sitting in our living room. We may have some ideas about the contents inside, but mostly we need to accept it as a big, largely impenetrable obstacle that's always going to be there. When we regard unconscious material as generated by a process, however, we recognize that it will wax and wane depending upon how we handle and observe the present. We see that our unconsciousness is maintained by unwise choices and a lack of awareness. So, if we bring more light to our mind-body doings, it doesn't need to permanently exist. This doesn't imply ignoring the past, but that by paying close attention to the present with skillful awareness, the past's hold on us will unravel naturally.

---

<sup>187</sup> Many Buddhists believe the external circumstances of our life are also the result of our intentions and actions.

Unconscious material exists along a continuum, from easily noticed vague worries, to deeply buried pain and instinctual drives.

### *Accessing unconscious energies*

Unconscious "material" can be thought of as held in our body. So by bringing awareness to the literal feelings in our body, we directly access our unconscious energies. This is because *sensations have both a mental and somatic component* – or, in other words, sensations are where the mind and body meet.

### *Neurochemistry of karma*

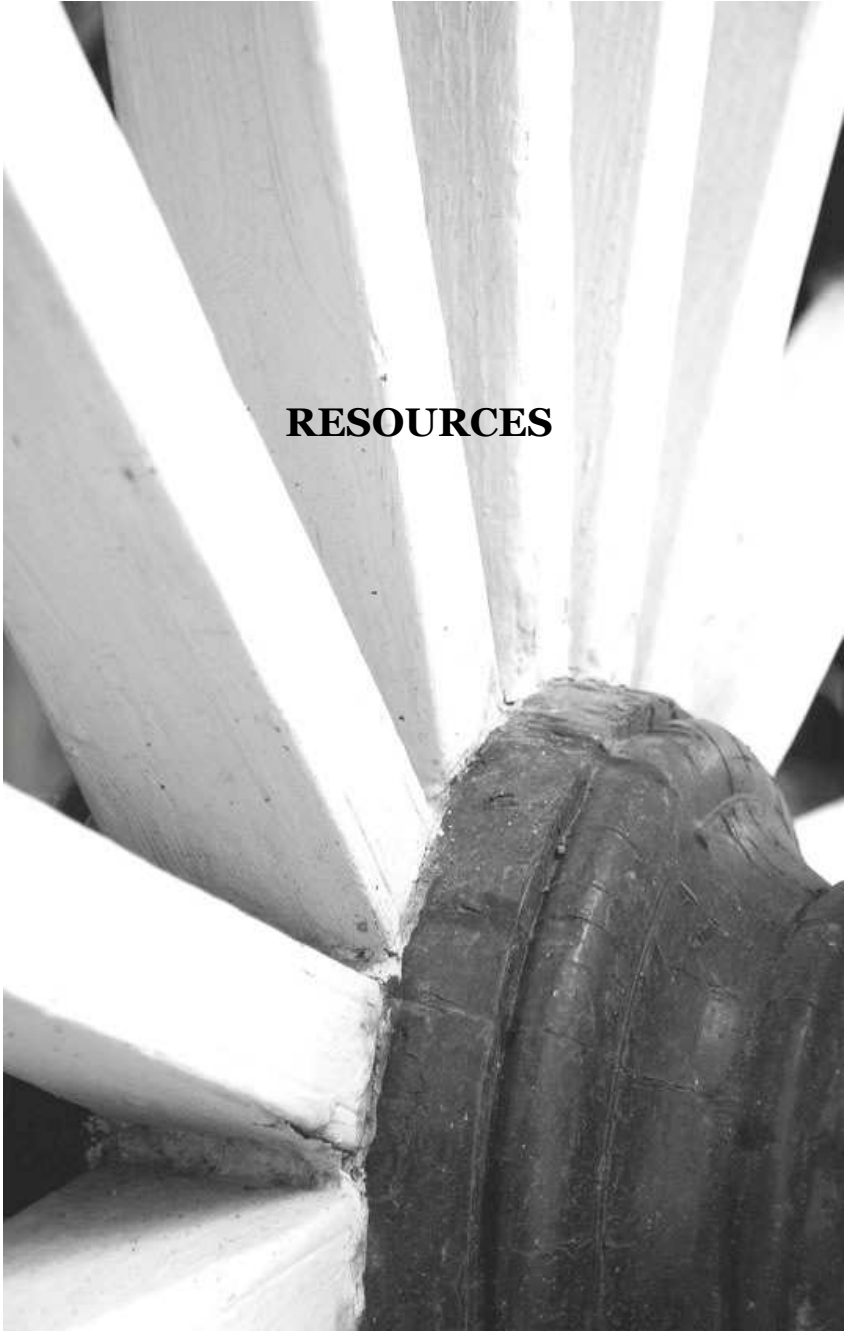
Recent breakthroughs in neurobiology suggest how precise karmic accounting can be possible. Neuroscientists have increasingly concluded that our thoughts and feelings are recorded by/in *neuropeptides*, information-carrying chemical messenger molecules. What is relevant about neuropeptides is that they record the effects of our stress and feelings, whether we're aware of it or not. These cells, which hold the "flavor" of our experience, are both stored in body parts and circulate throughout our whole body-mind, including the brain.

### *The mind is everywhere in the body!*

For dramatic evidence of the mind being everywhere in the body, consider the accounts of some organ transplant recipients: after getting a new kidney, heart, or liver, the organ-receiver reports having unfamiliar impulses, thoughts, and dreams as well as uncanny changes in facial expressions, musical choices, and food preferences that turn out to be reminiscent of the organ donor. This is evidence that our *memories, feelings, and mind are held throughout our body.*

## *Meditation*

Meditation sets the biophysics of the mind-body or the laws of karma working for us. When we are mostly nonreactive, *energy held in neuropeptides gets released*. As one goes deeper in meditation, powerful feelings can arise, including some from the distant past. Reaching this point is a good sign (even though difficult for new meditators to understand). It shows we're releasing some deeply buried feelings. Ultimately, there's no point in running away; unless we face and accept these emotions, they won't ever truly leave and will continue to influence our life anyway. We feel purer and clearer after meditating because we're less blocked by frustrated energy. Of course it's very difficult to be perfectly aware and completely accepting of our feelings. So the unburdening process takes a while. Finally, as Tibetan monk and former molecular biologist Matthieu Ricard has said: "This process [of releasing old tension] can be called *purification*, not so much in the moral sense, but in a practical one, rather like the elimination of pollution" [emphasis mine].



**RESOURCES**

'All is transient.' When one sees this, he is above sorrow. This is the clear path. 'All is sorrow.' When one sees this, he is above sorrow. This is the clear path. 'All is unreal.' When one sees this, he is above sorrow. This is the clear path.

*(The Dhammapada: The Path, 277-279.)*

Find joy in watchfulness; guard well your mind. Uplift yourself from your lower self, even as an elephant draws himself out of a muddy swamp.

*(The Dhammapada: Endurance, 327.)*

## Bibliography

- Atkinson, Mark. *Holistic Health Secrets for Women: Discover Your Unique Path to Health, Healing, and Happiness*. London: Piatkus Books, 2009.
- Barker, Kenneth ed. *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985.
- Chödrön, Pema. *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*. Edited by Helen Berliner. London: Shambhala Publications, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1994.
- Chodron, Thubten. *Buddhism for Beginners*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001.
- Davis, John R. *The Path to Enlightenment: Introducing Buddhism*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997.
- Farrer-Halls, Gill. *Working with Karma: Understanding and Transforming Your Karma*. London: Godsfield Press, 2007.
- Freke, Timothy. *Encyclopedia of Spirituality: Information and Inspiration to Transform Your Life*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2000.

FPMT Education Department. *Discovering Buddhism at Home Programme*, "Module 6: All About Karma". Teachings by Renate Ogilvie, meditations by Ven. Yeshe Khadro and Kendall Magnussen. Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Discovering Buddhism at Home Programme*, "Subject Area 13: Introduction to Tantra". Teachings and meditations by Jon Landaw. Portland, OR: FPMT, Inc., 2005.

Gach, Gary. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Buddhism*, 3d ed. New York: Alpha Books, 2009.

Geisler, Norman L. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999.

Gillett, Roy. *The Essence of Buddhism*. London: Caxton Publishing, 2001.

Glickman, Marshall. *Beyond the Breath: Extraordinary Mindfulness through Whole-Body Vipassana Meditation*. Boston: Journey Editions, 2002.

Goldstein, Joseph. *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation*. With an introduction by Ram Dass and preface by Robert Hall. London: Shambhala, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Here, Now, Aware". In *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in*



*Daily Life*, ed. Barry Boyce and the editors of the Shambhala Sun, 25-26. London: Shambhala, 2011.

\_\_\_\_\_, and Jack Kornfield. *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. With a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987. Chapter 10, "Understanding Karma: Cause and Effect", accessed on October 24, 2012 at <http://victoriaims.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Karma-Seeking-the-H.of-W.pdf>

Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang. *Eight Steps to Happiness: The Buddhist Way of Loving Kindness*. Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2012.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Introduction to Buddhism: An Explanation of the Buddhist Way of Life*. Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Joyful Path of Good Fortune: The Complete Buddhist Path to Enlightenment*. Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Meaningful to Behold: Becoming a Friend of the World*. Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Understanding the Mind: The Nature and Power of the Mind*. Ulverston, England: Tharpa Publications, 2002.

Harra, Carmen. *The Eleven Eternal Principles: Accessing the Divine Within*. Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 2009.

- Hattstein, Markus. *World Religions*. Edited by Peter Delius. Köln: Könnemann, n.d.
- Hayward, Susan. *A Guide for the Advanced Soul: A Book of Insight*. Crow's Nest, Australia: In-Tune Books, 1984.
- Howley, Venerable Adrienne. *The Naked Buddha: A Practical Guide to the Buddha's Life and Teachings*. New York, Marlowe & Company, 2003.
- Humphries, Christmas. *The Buddhist Way of Life*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1969.
- Ihnen, Anne, and Carolyn Flynn. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Mindfulness*. New York: Alpha Books, 2008.
- Johnsen, Linda. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hinduism*, 2d ed. New York: Alpha Books, 2009.
- Kornfield, Jack. *A Lamp in the Darkness: Illuminating the Path through Difficult Times*. With a foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2011.
- Landaw, Jonathan, Stephan Bodian, and Gudrun Bühnemann. *Buddhism for Dummies*, 2d ed. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.
- Lhundrup, Thubten Ven. *Practical Meditation with Buddhist Principles*. Heatherton, Victoria, Australia: Hinkler Books, 2004.
- Mascaró, Juan, trans. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*. Translated from the Pali with an introduction by Juan Mascaró. London: Penguin Books, 1973.

- McDonald, Kathleen. *Awakening the Kind Heart: How to Meditate on Compassion*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010.
- Myss, Caroline, and C. Norman Shealy. *The Creation of Health: The Emotional, Psychological, and Spiritual Responses That Promote Health and Healing*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.
- Pabongka Rinpoche. *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment*, new revised edition. Edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche. Translated into English by Michael Richards. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006.
- Sayadaw, Ven Mahasi. *Basic Buddhism: The Theory of Karma*. Buddhist Studies: Buddha Dharma Education Association & Buddhnet, 1996-2012. Accessed on October 31. Available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm>
- Too, Lillian. *Chinese Wisdom: Spiritual Magic for Everyday Living*. London: Cico Books, 2001.
- Yangsi Rinpoche. *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

## Websites

The following websites have proven helpful in writing this book:

<http://buddhism.about.com>

<http://www.fpmt.org>

<http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/96/>

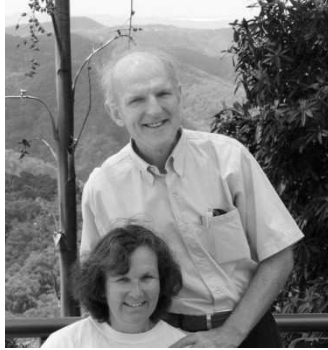
<http://www.sourcepointglobaloutreach.org/>

<http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/karma.html>

[http://www.taleofgenji.org/buddhism\\_for\\_beginners.html#rebirthlink](http://www.taleofgenji.org/buddhism_for_beginners.html#rebirthlink)

<http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebdha358.htm>

## About the Author



Alexander Peck, teacher, writer, and editor, has lived and worked in Australia, the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. After receiving post-graduate qualifications in education in the U.S, Alexander earned two Masters Degrees in Australia with an emphasis in Christian spirituality. With his wife, Eva, he has also co-authored several books, including *Let's Talk*, an English conversation textbook published in the Czech Republic which sold over 60,000 copies. The Pecks live in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia where they continue to write. Alexander is presently pursuing Buddhist studies.







# INSIGHTS INTO KARMA

## The Law of Cause and Effect

*Insights into Karma* explores the timeless and profound law of cause and effect. It seeks to answer such questions as:

- ~ What is karma?
- ~ How does karma work in our lives?
- ~ Can karma help us better understand life?
- ~ What are some predictable karmic results of our actions?
- ~ Does karma allow for personal responsibility and freedom?
- ~ Is karma compatible with compassion?
- ~ How is karma often misunderstood?
- ~ Is there a connection between karma and our destiny?
- ~ How do we deal with past bad karma?
- ~ Is there a way to prove karma for myself?

Our actions clearly determine how we experience life, either in happiness or suffering, both now and in the future. As we come to better understand the nature of karma, the author suggests, we will be equipped to fashion our lives anew to yield greater compassion, peace, and freedom from misery.

Alexander Peck, teacher and writer with a wide international background, received a Masters Degree in education in the U.S and then completed two Masters Degrees in Australia with an emphasis in Christian spirituality. He is presently pursuing Buddhist studies.

