

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (3) WHAT IS KARMA?

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE LONG ASCRIBED TO FATE, destiny or even God's will problems they felt powerless to resist, resigning themselves to these perceived forces. The ancient Greeks envisioned three elderly goddesses—the Fates—who controlled people's lives. The goddess Clotho determined birth, spinning the thread of human life; Lachesis dispensed that thread, steering the path a person would follow in life; and Atropos cut the thread thus determining an individual's moment of death.

This attitude—that all in life is predetermined or inalterable—is not limited to people of old; it exerts an influence on the hearts and minds of many living today. Expressing frustration over this tendency, British author and essayist George Orwell wrote: “For the ordinary man is passive. Within a narrow circle . . . he feels himself master of his fate, but against major events he is as helpless as against the elements. So far from endeavoring to influence the future, he simply lies down and lets things happen to him.”¹

The idea that something other than ourselves controls our destiny can in one sense be seen as a form of avoidance—a rationalization to escape facing and challenging real problems and suffering. It may also be an expression of a deep, subconscious sense of helplessness.

Buddhism teaches the solution to human suffering and provides a way to overcome or transform this sense of helplessness. Ultimately, it teaches that the cause of misery lies not with any external force or circumstance, but with ourselves. Buddhism looks nowhere beyond the sufferer for both the cause and the solution to suffering.

According to Shakyamuni Buddha: “If a person commits an act of good or evil, he himself becomes the heir to that action. This is because that action actually never disappears (*Udana*).”

The Sanskrit word *karma* means action. And Buddhism divides the actions that constitute karma into three categories: actions of the body (behavior), actions of the mouth (speech, language) and actions of the mind (thoughts).

The latent force of both our good and bad actions remains in our lives.

ONCE committed, any human action, whether good or bad, does not simply vanish into the past with time. Each act remains in one's life at the present as a potential force or energy, influencing the course of one's existence from the point of that action forward. In this sense, rather than simply viewing karma as “action,” it may be more appropriate to think of it as action plus that action's potential influence on one's life. Or, in simpler terms, karma may be seen as life's ingrained habits, leanings or tendencies—actions that tend to repeat themselves, or that we tend to repeat.

Buddhism teaches of the eternal or unending nature of life as a cycle of birth and death. So when people speak of “past karma,” they really mean the present influence on one's life of actions taken in the past (in past lives). Buddhism also teaches that actions (karma) can be either good or bad; good actions (good karma) give rise to happy, positive effects, and bad actions (bad karma) give rise to unhappy, negative effects.

Further, some actions yield specific results that will appear at a set time—this is known

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as fixed or immutable karma. Other actions yield results that are not set or specific in their nature or timing—this is non-fixed or mutable karma. Immutable karma is often used to describe a person's life span, because the time of one's death is viewed in Buddhism as fixed or set by the influence of past karma.

What kind of actions form immutable karma? In the Buddhist scripture *A Treasury of Analysis of the Law* (Jpn. Kusha Ron), they are described as:

1. Actions arising from strong earthly desires (delusions, illusions); or conversely, actions arising from a very pure heart and mind.
2. Actions that are continually repeated over time.
3. Actions taken toward the correct teaching of Buddhism.
4. Actions taken toward one's mother or father.

While human beings cannot avoid the results of their actions in past lives, Buddhism does not teach that we should simply resign ourselves to the effects of karma, be they good or bad. Submission to fate, to “one's lot in life” or to some will outside our own is not a correct Buddhist view. Rather, Buddhism is correctly understood as a forward-looking, empowering teaching that stresses personal responsibility and hope. “If I am the one who made myself what I am today, then I am the one who will create the ‘me’ of the future,” is the ideal attitude of a Buddhist.

Karma, then, does not so much apply to our circumstances as to our thoughts, words and deeds. Things do not happen to us, we make them happen—or we act in a habitual way when they do happen that leads us to habitual situations. We made what we are and experience now, and we are at this moment making what we will be and experience in the future. That is karma. So to change karma means to change our lives right now; that is, the way we think, speak and do things. The best way to positively transform the effects of our past bad karma, enjoy the effects of past good karma, and create good karma for the future is to inform our actions with fresh life force and wisdom.

Fortunately, the Daishonin's Buddhism provides us with a way to bring forth this powerful life force and wisdom. The power of our Buddhist practice also enables us to transform negative karma or circumstances into a motivating force for creating great future benefit and reward.

Faith and practice enables a change of destiny and the accumulation of good fortune.

THE key to breaking through the wall of our bad karma and creating future happiness lies only in ourselves—in our own actions.

Nichiren Daishonin writes in “On Prolonging Life” that “sincere repentance will eradicate even immutable karma, to say nothing of karma which is mutable” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 229).

“Sincere repentance” here means to repeatedly refresh our determination to dedicate ourselves to the Law of Buddhism by continually carrying out the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for our sake and for that of others. This is the purpose of our SGI organization—to provide many people with support in doing just this. When we freely engage ourselves in chanting daimoku and in SGI activities, powerful vitality will emerge from within us. Not only will we break the restraints of our past karma, we will also build a rock-solid foundation of good fortune and happiness for the future.

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1 George Orwell (1903–50), British author. Inside the Whale and Other Essays, “Inside the Whale” (1940).

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