

BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE THE CONCEPT OF KARMA

Even within Asia, where the concept of karma has a long history and has been incorporated in a wide range of cultures, it is often misunderstood. Viewed from a negative, backward-looking perspective, karma has been used to encourage the disadvantaged members of society to accept their situation in life as being of their own making. Present suffering is attributed to negative causes made in the past.

Considering themselves to blame for their situation, some people have fallen prey to a sense of powerlessness. This is, however, a distortion of the original meaning of karma as it is used in the Buddhist tradition. To accept the idea of karma does not mean to live under a cloud of guilt and vague anxiety, not knowing what bad causes we may have made in the past. Rather, it means to be confident that our destiny is in our own hands and that we have the power to transform it for the better at any moment.

In the simplest terms, karma, which means actions, indicates the universal operation of a principle of causation, similar to that upheld by modern science. Science assures us that everything in the universe exists within the framework of cause and effect. “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction,” is a familiar principle. The difference between the materialistic causality of science and the Buddhist principle of karma is that the latter is not limited to most things that can be seen or measured. Rather, it includes the unseen or spiritual aspects of life, such as the sensation or experience of happiness or misery, kindness or cruelty. In an address delivered in 1993, SGI President Ikeda described these different approaches.

The Buddhist concept of causal relations, he wrote: “...differs fundamentally from the kind of mechanistic causation which, according to modern science, holds sway over the objective natural world—a world divorced from subjective human concerns. Causation, in the Buddhist view, spans a more broadly defined nature, one that embraces human existence. To illustrate, let us assume that an accident or disaster has occurred. A mechanistic theory of causation can be used to pursue and identify how the accident occurred, but is silent regarding the question of why certain individuals should find themselves caught up in the tragic event. Indeed, the mechanistic view of nature requires the deliberate forestalling of such existential questionings.

In contrast, the Buddhist understanding of causation seeks to directly address these poignant “whys?”

Originally, the Sanskrit word *karma* meant work or office, and was related to verbs that mean simply “do” or “make.” According to Buddhism, we create karma on three levels: through thoughts, words and actions. Acts of course have a greater impact than mere words. Likewise, when we verbalize our ideas, this creates more karma than merely thinking them. However, since both words and deeds originate in thoughts, the contents of our hearts—our thoughts—are also of crucial importance.

Karma can be thought of as our core personality, the profound tendencies that have been impressed into the deepest levels of our lives. The deepest cycles of cause and effect extend beyond the present existence; they shape the manner in which we start this life—our particular circumstances from the moment of birth—and will continue beyond our deaths. The purpose of Buddhist practice is to transform our basic life tendency in order to realize our total human potential in this lifetime and beyond.

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The important thing to recognize, however, is that cause and effect both exist within us at the present moment. As one of the ancient Buddhist texts states: “If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present.”

Karma is thus, like everything, in constant flux. We create our own present and future by the choices we make in each moment. Understood in this light, the teaching of karma does not encourage resignation, but empowers us to become the protagonists in the unfolding drama of our lives.

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