



OPEN EYE

Meditation Group

See for Yourself

## All About Karma & Rebirth | Part One of Three

### EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT KARMA BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

- Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Karma and rebirth are often treated as Buddhism's cultural baggage: a set of Indian beliefs that—either because the Buddha wasn't thinking carefully, or because his early followers didn't stay true to his teachings—got mixed up with the dharma even though they don't fit in with the rest of what he taught. Now that the dharma has come to the West, it's time, we believe, to leave all this unnecessary baggage unclaimed on the carousel so we can focus on the Buddha's true message in a way that will speak directly to our own cultural needs. However, the real problem with karma and rebirth is that we tend to misunderstand what these teachings have to say. This is because Buddhism came to the West at the same time as other Indian religions, and its luggage got mixed up with theirs in transit. When we sort out which luggage really belongs to the tradition, we find that the bags marked "Karma" and "Rebirth" actually contain valuables. And to help show how valuable they are, here are my answers to some frequently asked questions on these topics.

**1. What is karma?** The word karma has two meanings, depending on context. Primarily, it means intentional actions in thought, word, and deed; secondarily, it refers to the results of intentional actions, past or present—results that are shaped by the quality of the intention behind those actions.

**2. How do actions determine results?** Skillful intentions tend toward pleasant results, and unskillful intentions toward painful results. It's important to stress the word tend here, since there's no ironclad, tit-for-tat deterministic connection between an intentional act and its results. The causal principle underlying actions and results is actually very complex. Your present experience is shaped by three karmic factors: the results of past intentions—and this includes all your sense spheres; present intentions; and the results of your present intentions. Past intentions provide you with the raw material or potentials for your present experience, but your present intentions are what shape those raw potentials into your actual experiences. Because the results of many past actions could be

offering all sorts of raw materials at any point in time, and because you're potentially free to create any type of new karma at all, these conditions can interact in many complex ways. In fact, in your experience of the present, your current intention arises prior to your awareness of the senses. Without present intentions, you'd have no experience of space and time. You'd be free from their limitations. On the ultimate level, this fact is what makes awakening possible. On the immediate level, it means that even though you may have bad "karma seeds" from past unskillful intentions ripening in your "karma field," you have some freedom in how you treat the ripening seeds so that you don't have to suffer from them. You can be proactive in preventing suffering. This is why we meditate: to sensitize ourselves to our present intentions, some of which are very subtle. This sensitivity enables us to expand the range of our freedom in the present, training the mind in the skills it needs to create positive present karma, to deal positively with the raw material from past negative karma, and eventually to go beyond the karma of intentions entirely.

**3. If your intentions influence the quality of the result, does this mean that every action done with good intentions will tend toward a good result?** For an intention to give good results, it has to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion. Now, it's possible for an intention to be well-meaning but based on delusion, in which case it would lead to bad results: believing, for instance, that there are times when the compassionate course of action would be to kill or to tell a lie, or for a teacher to have sex with a student. To give good results, an action has to be not only good but also skillful. This is why the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, to develop three qualities in his actions: wisdom—acting for longterm happiness; compassion—intending not to harm anyone with his actions; and purity—checking the actual results of his actions, and learning from his mistakes so as not to be fooled by an intention that seems wise and compassionate but really isn't. This is how good intentions are trained to be skillful. Beyond that, there are two main levels of skill: the skillful actions that lead to a good rebirth, and those that lead beyond rebirth entirely, to the deathless.

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4. Is it possible to burn off old karma? No. In the Buddha's times, the Jains believed that they could burn off old karma by not reacting to the pain of their austerities, and the Buddha reserved some of his sharpest ridicule for that belief. As he said, they should have noticed that the pain experienced during their austerities ended when they stopped the austerities, which meant that the pain was the result not of old karma being burned off, but of their present karma in doing the austerities. Still, it is possible to minimize the results of bad past karma. The Buddha compared past bad karma to a big lump of salt (Anguttara Nikaya 3.101). If you put the salt into a small glass of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. But if you toss it into a large, clean river, it doesn't make the water of the river too salty to drink. The river stands for a mind that has developed infinite goodwill and equanimity, grown mature in virtue and discernment, and has trained itself not to be overcome by pleasure or pain.

#### **5. Does karma shape everything you experience?**

The Buddha used the teaching on karma to explain only three things: (1) your experience of pleasure and pain; (2) the level of rebirth you take after death, in terms of such things as your wisdom or lack of wisdom, wealth or lack of wealth, and the length of your life span; and (3) what to do to get out of the cycle of rebirth. The noble eightfold path is this last type of karma: the karma that puts an end to karma. Beyond that, he said that if you tried to work out all the implications of the results of karma, you'd go crazy. Because his teaching deals simply with suffering and the end of suffering, that's as far as he took the issue.

#### **6. Is it true that “if you want to see a person's past actions, look at his present condition; if you want to see his future condition, look at his present actions”?**

That's much too simplistic. It implies that you have a single karma account, like a bank account, with your present situation showing the running balance. Remember that karma is like seeds in a field. You're planting karma seeds in your field with every intention, and those seeds mature at different rates. So you've got lots of karma accounts at different stages of development. All you can see at any one moment are the seeds that are currently sprouting. As for the other seeds that haven't yet sprouted, good or bad, you can't see those at all.

#### **7. Doesn't the teaching on karma teach people to be callous toward the sufferings of others?**

Since you have both good and bad seeds in your field that haven't yet matured, the teaching on karma teaches you to ask this question instead: what's the wisest way

to view other people whose bad seeds are currently sprouting? And the answer is: with compassion. Is your compassion so rarified that you give it only to people who have never done anything wrong? If it were, you wouldn't find anyone to receive it. So when you see someone suffering, you don't say, “They deserve it,” and leave them to their suffering. Actions yield results, but nobody “deserves” to suffer. The path is for putting an end to suffering, “deserved” or not. You look for the potential good seeds in other people's fields that are about to mature, and try to give them whatever aid you can that will help them not to suffer from the bad seeds. After all, that's how you would like them to treat you when your bad seeds start to mature.

#### **8. But can't karma be used to justify social injustices?**

Only by people who don't really believe in karma. If someone has the karma that tends to poverty or a painful death, there are plenty of natural causes or accidents that will provide an opportunity for that karma to bear fruit. But if you decide to oppress that person economically or bring about his painful death, that bad karma now becomes yours.

9. Don't people believe in karma just because they want the universe to seem just? If they do, they're in for a disappointment. When you sow seeds in your karma field, you get the same kind of plant whose seed you sow, but the size of your harvest will vary in line with many other factors—for example, other actions you do before or after, or your state of mind when the seed ripens. This means that a minor action might yield huge results, or a major action, small results. One discourse (Majjhima Nikaya 86) tells of Angulimala, who murdered many people but then had a total change of heart and became an arahant. The only karmic result of all those murders was that people threw things at him when he was on his alms round. The relatives of those he killed probably didn't think that justice was served, but that was how karma worked in that case. And we're fortunate that karma isn't always just. As the Buddha said, if we had to pay back all the bad karma we've done in the past before reaching awakening, no one would ever awaken.

To Be Continued Next Week