



UNDERSTANDING "KARMA"

The Law of Action & Reaction

The teaching of Karma concerns the moral law of our voluntary actions and their consequences, as well as the mechanism by which we either create a world of suffering for ourselves and others, or reduce suffering and lead to liberation and enlightenment.

The word Karma has entered the everyday vocabulary of many Western people. But it often has a misunderstood meaning: either as an occult, mysterious, metaphysical force, or as an inevitable fate.

Karma, according to the teaching of the Buddha, is in fact nothing more than our intention, or will (cetanā) expressed through a specific act. Therefore, it does not have the mysterious meaning it acquired in later times.

Karma or Kamma is an Indian word and means "action", "action", "work". It comes from the verb kara which means "I do, I do, I act, I act", etc. In Greek we also have the words "I do, I do, I did, I do, I do, I do", etc. which are probably of Indo-European linguistic origin from the Indian word "Kamma", or "Karma" and have the meaning of "done act".

Essentially, Karma indicates our good and evil intentions (kusala-, akusala-cetanā). These intentions are manifested as good or bad deeds with our body, our speech and our mind. In turn, our actions bring about results called "karma-vipāka" (karma-vipāka), that is: the result, the consistency, the fruit of the actions, the maturation of the actions. But usually, the word Karma is used by ordinary people for both actions and results, which is not accurate.

Therefore, Karma (Actions) follows the natural law of cause and effect, the natural law of action and reaction. And there is no teacher in the world who has taught this law as thoroughly and clearly as the Buddha. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "If there was any teacher in the world who insisted on the relentless law of cause and effect, it was Buddha Gautama".

The Law of Cause & Effect

One of the axioms of science is that the universe is governed by fundamental physical laws that operate as long as the forces or energies of nature are in manifestation.

The laws of nature are discovered through observations and understood by specific facts. In all cases they are based directly or indirectly on empirical evidence. It is generally understood



that they reflect causal relationships which are the fundamental principles for the reality of phenomena and these laws are discovered rather than invented. Thus, the words "luck" and "coincidence" have no place in the vocabulary of a scientist or a person who uses methodical and systematic observation of phenomena. As the French philosopher Voltaire put it: "Words like luck, chance and coincidence were invented to express known effects of unknown causes".

Here we can add other words that were invented for unknown reasons, such as: fate, kismet, Divine will, God willing, Divine Harris, etc. That is, a higher, invisible, invisible, mysterious, mysterious, inexplicable force, which is considered responsible for what happens to each person - his happiness or unhappiness - as well as what this force has defined for each person, i.e., his destiny.

Such perceptions were developed by primitive, simplistic, gullible people and still prevail today. They are not based on observations and experiments or on empirical evidence. On the contrary, the whole history of science has been the gradual realization that events do not occur arbitrarily, randomly, without specific causes and effects, but that they reflect a particular underlying order. Thus, from the point of view of this particular law, each effect has a cause or a chain of causes and occurs according to a defined order.

All things are a series of causes and effects. It is a continuum, where everything is connected and interrelated. The laws of physics imply a cause and an effect, as well as an uninterrupted sequence of action and reaction between the observed elements. Every result must have a confirmed and verified cause and in turn this cause must have some effect. It is the continuous, endless cycle of cause and effect.

The Law of Ethics

What is of great interest, however, is that the law of cause and effect, of action and reaction, prevails not only in natural processes but, just as strictly, in moral acts.

Accordingly, the teachings of the Buddha emphasize that "ethics"- defined as skilful thought, speech and deed - result to happiness at a given time, while the acts that are morally awkward result in future pain, suffering and torment.

That is why the Buddha says:

"If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows him, like his shadow that never leaves".



"If with a corrupt mind one speaks or acts, misery follows him, as the wheel of an ox car follows the second leg". (Dh 1, 2).

That is, if someone promotes something positive, they will get back something positive. Conversely, if it displays something negative, it will take back something negative.

Pure Mind - Pure Act - Result (Happiness)

Corrupt Mind - Corrupt Act - Result (Misery)

Good Cause - Good Result

Bad Cause - Bad Result

This is called the natural law of Karma, that is the natural law of cause and effect, action and reaction. It is also called the law of "moral causality".

To understand how this law is working, it is good to see how other laws, operate in nature. Such a natural law is the law of weather, atmospheric, meteorological and thermal phenomena. Here belongs the law of action and reaction, of cause and effect in the natural order of phenomena, such as the perpetual cycle of the seasons, the regular order of the seasons, the causes of winds and rains, the causality of heat. Here also belongs the law of electromagnetism, light, the pull of gravity, etc. That is, meteorological, physical, chemical, geological, astronomical, etc. laws of inorganic matter governed by causality.

Another natural law is the biological and genetic law of organic matter, such as the relationship between seeds (cause), and fruits (result). For example, the seed of an apple tree cannot produce oranges as a fruit but only apples. The seed of a sugar cane gives a sweet taste and not a bitter one. This includes the law of heredity in plants and animals through cells, genes, and encoded genetic information within DNA.

Similar to the above natural laws, there is the law of cause and effect, of action and reaction in the human mind and in human actions called "moral law, or "moral causality". How does this law work? Why do we become what we think we are?

Suppose a farmer has a piece of land that is good, fertile land. The land gives the farmer a choice: he can plant whatever he chooses on the land. The land will return what the farmer plants, but it does not care what is planted in it. It is up to the farmer to make the decision.



We could thus compare the human mind with the earth, because the mind, like the earth, does not care about what we plant in it. It will return exactly what we decide to plant to it.

Let us now say that the farmer has two seeds in his hand - one is a corn seed, the other a strychnine, a plant with toxic fruits. He digs two little holes in the earth and plants the two seeds separately. He covers the holes, waters the two seeds and takes care of the earth..... what will happen? As a rule, the land will return fruit from the seeds he planted. Remember that the earth does not care. Toxic fruit will return with the same abundance as corn will return. And here are the two plants and their fruit: a corn and a stalk with a toxic fruit.

Good Cause - Good Result

Bad Cause - Bad Result

The human mind is much more fertile than the earth, and it works the same way. It does not care what we plant... success or failure..., good or bad..., a specific, worthwhile goal... or confusion, fear, stress and so on. But for sure, what we plant will be returned to us.

Eventually, the human mind will return to us what we want, what we choose, what we intend to plant, that is, what we intend to do: good or evil.

INTENTION

The Manifestation of Karma

Karma (Actions) manifests itself in three ways, namely: with the body, with speech and with the mind.

When we act physically, the body serves as an instrument enabling our intention. This is the physical Karma (Actions). The oral Karma (Actions) is when we speak, expressing our thoughts and intentions, which can occur directly through speech and indirectly through writing or other means of communication. When we think, plan and desire, without manifesting an external action, this is the mental Karma (Actions).

But what lies behind all these forms of action is the mind, and the main mental factor that causes the action is intention.



Each of our Choices Has a Huge Potential for the Future

According to the Buddha, our voluntary actions, our intentional actions, produce effects that ultimately return to us. One effect is the immediate, visible psychological effect. Another is the effect of moral retribution.

First of all, let's look into the psychological effect of Karma (Actions). When an action is performed intentionally, it leaves a trajectory in the mind, a footprint that can signal the beginning of a new mental tendency. It tends to recur, to be reproduced. As these operations multiply, they become our character and our personality.

Our personality and character are merely a sum of all our voluntary actions and deeds, a representative sample of all our accumulated Karma (Actions). So, by succumbing (starting with simple things) to the vicious impulses of the mind, we slowly build a greedy or hostile or confused character. On the other hand, by resisting these vile

impulses, we replace them with their opposites, i.e., good qualities. Then we develop a virtuous character or we could become wise and enlightened.

As we gradually change our habits, we change our character and as we change our character, we change our whole existence.

This is why the Buddha so strongly emphasizes the need to pay attention to every action, every choice. Because our every choice holds enormous potential for the future.

Let us now consider the effects of moral retribution. The most important aspect of Karma (Actions) is its tendency to mature in the future and produce effects according to the moral law.

Every time we perform an action, an intentional deed, that action plants a "seed" in our mind, a seed with the capacity to produce effects in the future. These effects correspond to the nature of the original action. They arise from the inherent moral tone of the action, i.e., the intention.

Our bad Karma (Actions) returns to us and leads us to harm and misery. Our good Karma (Actions) ultimately returns to us and leads us to happiness and prosperity.



Thus, the law of Karma (Actions) is a moral application of the general fundamental principle that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. However, the function of Karma (Actions) is not spontaneous.

Karma (the Actions) is a voluntary action, a voluntary deed, and thus it is something alive and dynamic. Therefore, Karma allows for variations and changes.

Karma is like a Seed

The seeds only ripen under the right conditions. But if the right conditions are not met, they remain seeds. And if they are destroyed, then they can never mature. If Karma (Actions) finds the opportunity, then it will bring about its effects. If it does not meet the right conditions, it will not mature.

Karma may even be destroyed by another Karma. It is therefore important to understand that our current lifestyle, our mood and behaviour can influence the way our old Karma (Actions) grows.

Some past Karma (Actions) is so powerful that they must reach maturation. We cannot escape it no matter what we do. As the Buddha says specifically about the effects of evil actions:

*“Neither in the sky nor in the middle of the ocean,
nor by entering a mountain cave,
is there a place in the world where one can escape
the results of evil actions “. (Dh 127)*

But for the most part, the maturation of the previous Karma (Actions) depends on the way we live now. If we live carelessly and recklessly, we will give the previous bad Karma (Actions) the opportunity to mature. This may prevent good Karma (Actions) from producing effects, or it may nullify the good effects.

On the other hand, if we now live wisely and prudently, we will give our former good Karma (Actions) the opportunity to mature and prevent the effects of our bad Karma (Actions), i.e., weaken them, destroy them, or prevent their maturation.

Types of Karma (Actions) Based on the Time of Maturation

Karma (Actions) can produce effects at different times, even in different lives.



There are three main types of Karma (Actions) depending on the stage of maturation. There is the Karma (Actions) that matures: a) in this life, b) in the next life and c) in a life after the next one.

The third type of Karma (Actions) is the strongest one. The first two types lose their power if they do not find the opportunity. They will never mature unless they have the opportunity to mature, either in this life or the next. But the third type stays with us for as long as we to be in Sansāra, the “cycle of existence”, the “cycle of birth and death”. It can bring about effects even after hundreds or even thousands of centuries in the future.

This delay, this time gap helps us understand what may seem like a discrepancy in the function of Karma (Actions). We often see good people face difficulties and great suffering in their lives. And on the other hand, we see bad people who are very successful and lucky. This is due to the time lag between Karma (Actions) and the effect (kamma-vipāka).

The good man collects/reaps the effects/fruit of some bad Karma (Actions) of the past. But he will enjoy the pleasant effects of the good Karma (Actions) he is now gathering in the future. On the contrary, the bad man enjoys the effects of some good Karma (Actions) of the past. In the future, however, he will be faced with the fruit of his bad Karma (Actions) and suffer.

Two Kinds of Karma (Actions) Based on Ethical Causes

From an ethical point of view, there are two categories of Karma (Actions): Good Karma (Actions) and Bad Karma (Actions).

Bad Karma is an action that is spiritually harmful and morally reprehensible. Good Karma is an action that is spiritually beneficial and morally commendable.

Intention & Root of Intention

There are two main criteria for distinguishing between good and bad Karma (Actions). One is the intention that lies behind the action, and the other is the root of the intention.

Intention

If an action is intended to harm ourselves, harm others, or harm both ourselves and others, then it is bad Karma (Actions). The Karma (Actions) that contributes to the good of ourselves, the good of others, or the good of both is good Karma (Actions).



The Roots

The other criterion is the root of the intention and, therefore, of the action. All actions stem from certain mental factors that are called the roots. These are the causal factors that form the basis of the action or the source of the action.

All evil actions stem from three evil roots: greed, hate and delusion. Greed is the selfish desire that aims at personal pleasure, expressed as predation, greed, desire and attachment. Hate is malice, anger, enmity, resentment, rage, intense annoyance that manifests itself violently, as well as the negative evaluation of a situation or a person. Delusion is ignorance, mental turbidity, confusion and fantasy.

The roots of good deeds are: non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion. Non-greed manifests itself as non-attachment and generosity. Non-hatred is positively expressed as goodwill, good intentions, friendliness, compassion, benevolence and kindness. Non-delusion manifests itself as wisdom, understanding and mental clarity.

Due to these roots, we have to be very careful when judging our own actions and the actions of others. There can often be a big difference between the external action and the state of mind from which that action originates.

One can do good for others, but only externally. The inner motivation that lies behind the beneficence may be the desire to gain fame and recognition, which is a form of evil greed and intense desire.

Someone may sit in silence and meditate, seemingly distant and self-centred; but internally, he can develop a friendly disposition and compassion for all beings, wishing for them to be happy and live without pain. Some may criticise him for pursuing only his own good, but he may be doing more to benefit the world than the benefactor driven by the desire to make a name for himself and gain fame.

The function of Karma (Actions) is so complex and so subtle that it is almost impossible to make specific predictions. The only thing we can know for sure is our tendencies and intentions, but that is enough to guide our Karma (Actions).



GOOD KARMA & BAD KARMA

Bad Karma

There are ten main forms of bad Karma (Actions):

With the Body

- The murder of living beings
- Theft
- Sexual misconduct

With Speech

- False words
- Divisive words
- Harsh words
- Prattling

With the Mind

- Greed/avarice
- Hate
- Wrong views (delusion)

Wrong Views and the Three Evil Philosophies

Here, the term “wrong views” includes erroneous concepts that make up the “three evil philosophies that lead to a certain bad rebirth” (niyata-micchā-diṭṭhi) for anyone who persists and clings to them.

These are:

- The denial of the effect (vipāka) of good and bad actions (kamma). This is the philosophical direction of moral nihilism. Moral nihilism rejects the moral values of good and evil and is equivalent to amoralism.
- The denial of both the cause and the effect (vipāka) of good and bad actions (kamma). This is the fatalistic philosophy. Fatalism as a way of philosophical thinking presents the moral part of good or bad actions as advice on apathy in the course of events.
- The complete denial of good and bad actions. According to this way of philosophical thinking, good and bad actions have no capacity, i.e., non-ethical dualism.



Good Karma

By abstaining from the above bad Karma (Actions), one develops good Karma (Actions).

Benevolent Philosophy

In Buddhism, Karma (Actions) refers to the concept of the law regulating the relationship between cause and effect, determining that every voluntary action is a cause that brings about an effect that, in turn, becomes the cause for other actions that will follow in the future.

Thus, the law of Karma becomes synonymous to the law of causality, i.e., the inevitable relationship between cause and effect, the law of action and reaction, the law of moral justice and balance, which is applied to every manifestation of life and, as a consequence, shaping Karma itself accordingly.

The more a person grows morally and spiritually, the less they are bounded by Karma, thus becoming the conscious creator of the conditions in their life.

The Law of Attraction

Here, we must also mention the law of attraction, i.e., “same attracts same”. We are living magnets. What we attract into our lives is whatever is relevant to our prevailing thoughts, words and actions.

If we are ethical, we attract ethical people into our lives. If we are unethical, we attract unethical people.

If we want good, ethical and virtuous people in our lives, we must strive to be good, ethical and virtuous ourselves.

This way, we attract the company of people who make us better, and not the company of those who encourage our worst self. Thus, we are the ones who create our personality through our actions and the ones who reap the fruit. As to how this happens, the Buddha likens it to the work of a painter:

“Suppose a painter using paint and colours creates the full image of a man or a woman, with all their characteristics. Similarly, when one creates something with one’s actions and will, it is the material body that he creates, it is the emotion that he creates, it is the perception that he creates, it is the mental functions that he creates, it is the consciousness that he creates”.



Now, just as a skilled painter can create an image that is beautiful and well-formed, a skilled person with a pure and ethical mind can similarly create a beautiful body with pleasant feelings, emotions, perceptions, etc.

On the other hand, just as a clumsy painter can create an image that is ugly, distorted and unpleasant, a clumsy and unethical person with a confused mind can similarly create an ugly, distorted and unpleasant body with unpleasant feelings, emotions, perceptions, ideas and consciousness. Thus, the Buddha points out:

“Karma (Actions) make the world go round; the actions make this generation spin. Beings are bound by their actions, just as the wheels of a chariot are bound by the axis of rotation”.

Our lives can also be likened to an echo, a reverberation. What we emit, returns back to us. Whatever we give, we receive. Each of our actions has a reaction, an effect.

Karma (Actions) Diversifies Beings as Inferior and Superior

Karma (Actions) produces its effects in various ways. There are two main ways in which it bears fruit:

1. It produces the type of rebirth, meaning the basic consciousness of rebirth, and
2. It produces various effects during an existence.

At the moment of death, a particular prevailing Karma (Actions) may come to the forefront of the mind and direct the stream of consciousness towards the new existence, towards a new rebirth. Once the rebirth happens, some other Karma (Actions) mature over a lifetime with favourable or adverse effects.

The good and bad effects resulting from Karma (Actions) are not rewards or punishments. They are not imposed by an external force. Like all-natural laws, they do not require a legislator.

The actions produce their effects normally through the law of cause and effect that works at a moral level. According to the effects of Karma (Actions), the Buddha explains that Karma (Actions) is the cause of the difference between the good and bad luck of people.



(a) Some people have a short life and they die prematurely because in the past they have ruined the lives of other beings. The Karmic effect of taking the life of living beings brings about a short life.

On the contrary, others live long lives because they were kind and compassionate and had respect for the lives of living beings. In fact, they may have helped others continue and prolong their lives.

(b) Some are sickly, not in good health, because they had injured and harmed other beings. While others are very healthy because they had not injured and harmed other beings. They may even have helped others regain their health.

(c) Those who were often angry and cruel become ugly. While those who were patient, friendly and able to control their anger become beautiful.

(d) Some are rich because they were generous in the past, while others are poor because they were selfish and stingy.

(e) Some have no influence, are weak and powerless, without a recognised value for their position, because they had envied the good fortune and success of

others. On the contrary, others have an influence and a recognised value for their position because they were happy for the good fortune and success of others.

(g) Some are smart because in the past they were thoughtful, knowledgeable and studious, because they searched, asked questions to learn and explored the realm of knowledge. On the contrary, others are featherbrained, foolish and senseless because they were lazy and negligent and because they did not study, think or explore the realm of knowledge.

That is why the Buddha says:

*“The beings are
the owners of their Karma (of their actions),
the heirs to their actions,
they come from their actions,
are related to their actions,
have their actions as their refuge”.*



“Whatever action (Karma) they take – good or bad – they will inherit it. It is the action (Karma) that differentiates beings as inferior and superior.”

(MN 135, Cūḷakammavibhaṅgasuttaṃ)

We are not Desperately Imprisoned in our Past

The twin teachings on Karma (Actions) and rebirth have several important implications for understanding our own lives. First, they allow us to understand that we are fully responsible for who we are. We cannot blame others for our problems, our environment, our heredity, our fate or our upbringing.

All these factors have made us who we are, but the reason we have encountered these circumstances is because of our previous Karma (Actions). Initially, this may appear to be a pessimistic doctrine. It seems to imply that we are prisoners of our previous Karma (Actions), and that we have to submit to their effects. This is a misinterpretation and distortion of reality.

It is true that, very often, we have to reap the results of our past Karma (Actions). But the important point to understand is that Karma (Actions) is an intentional action, it is a voluntary, intentional action, and the voluntary action always occurs in the present, and only in the present. This means that it is possible to change the whole direction of our lives in the present.

If we look closely at our lives, we will see that our experiences are of two types: First, the experience that comes to us passively and which we receive regardless of whether we choose it. And secondly, the experience that is actively created through our intentions, choices, and dispositions.

The passive side of the experience is largely due to the influence of the past Karma (Actions). Generally, we have to deal with it and learn to accept it. But within these constraints there is space: the vast space of the present moment, in which we can rebuild our world with our own mind.

If we allow ourselves to be dominated by evil thoughts, then we will continue to live in misery and pain and we will continue to cultivate the seeds of rebirth in a world of suffering. On the other hand, if our behaviour is pure and our mind is good and understanding, then we can transform our world and build a world of genuine happiness and peace.



Beyond Karma (Actions)

The ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching is not simply to achieve good effects with good Karma (Actions). This is a worldly goal. The real goal is to go completely beyond the chain of Karma (Actions) and its effects. As long as we continue to do Karma (Actions) and accumulate Karma (Actions), we continue to submit to birth and death, thus encountering pain and suffering in various forms.

Whether one is now living in a lucky world or in an unlucky one is a secondary issue, since all states of existence are unstable, with no real permanence. The Karma (Actions) is created due to the attachment to good or bad actions. This attachment arises out of ignorance. By developing our memory and insight and learning to see things as they really are, we can put an end to this attachment and ultimately detach ourselves from Karma (Actions) and its effects.

Then, we discover the freedom beyond Karma (Actions), the freedom beyond continuous rebirth.