

The Tree of Enlightenment

Dr Peter Della Santina



E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net
Web site: www.buddhanet.net

Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Karma

With this chapter, we begin our consideration of two related concepts common in Buddhism: karma and rebirth. These concepts are closely connected, but because the subject is a large one, I intend to dedicate two chapters to it—this and the following one.

We have learned that the factors which keep us prisoners in samsara are the afflictions: ignorance, attachment, and aversion. We discussed this when we considered the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering (see [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 7](#)). The afflictions are something that every living being in the world has in common with every other living being, whether human, animal, or a being who dwells in realms that we cannot normally perceive.

All living beings are alike insofar as they are subject to the afflictions, yet there are many differences among living beings with which we are all familiar. For instance, some of us are wealthy while others are poor, some are strong and healthy while others are weak and diseased, and so forth. There are many differences among human beings, and there are even greater differences between human beings and animals. These differences are the result of karma. Ignorance, attachment, and aversion are common to all living beings, but the particular circumstances in which each living being finds himself are the effects of his particular karma, which conditions his specific situation.

Karma explains why some living beings are fortunate while

others are less fortunate, why some are happy while others are unhappy. The Buddha clearly stated that karma accounts for the differences among living beings. We might also recall that part of the Buddha's experience on the night of his enlightenment consisted of gaining an understanding of how karma determines the rebirth of living beings—how living beings migrate from happy to unhappy conditions, and vice versa, as a consequence of their particular karma. Therefore, it is karma that explains the differing circumstances in which individual living beings find themselves.

Having said this much about the function of karma, let us look more closely at what karma actually is: in other words, let us define it. Perhaps we can begin by deciding what karma is not. Often people misunderstand the meaning of karma. This is especially true in the everyday, casual use of the term. You often find people speaking resignedly about a particular situation and making use of the idea of karma to reconcile themselves to it. When people think of karma in this way, it becomes a vehicle of escape and assumes most of the characteristics of a belief in predestination, or fate. But this is most certainly not the correct meaning of karma. Perhaps this misunderstanding is a result of the idea of fate that is common in many cultures. Perhaps it is because of this popular belief that the concept of karma is often confused with and obscured by the notion of predestination. But karma is certainly not fate or predestination.

If karma is not fate or predestination, what is it? Let us look at the meaning of the term itself. Karma means “action,” that is to say, the act of doing this or that. Immediately, we have a clear indication that the real meaning of karma is not fate;

rather, karma is action, and as such, it is dynamic. But karma is more than just action, because it is not mechanical action, nor is it unconscious or involuntary action. On the contrary, karma is intentional, conscious, deliberate action motivated by volition, or will.

How can this intentional action condition our situation for better or for worse? It can do so because every action must have a reaction, or an effect. This truth has been enunciated with respect to the physical universe by the great classical physicist Newton, who formulated the scientific law that every action must have an equal and opposite reaction. In the sphere of intentional action and moral responsibility, there is a counterpart to this law of action and reaction that governs events in the physical universe—namely, the law that every intentional action must have its effect. For this reason, Buddhists often speak of intentional action and its ripened consequences or intentional action and its effect. Thus, when we want to speak about intentional action together with its ripened consequences, or effects, we use the phrase “the law of karma.”

On the most fundamental level, the law of karma teaches that particular kinds of actions inevitably lead to similar or appropriate results. Let us take a simple example to illustrate this point. If we plant the seed of a mango, the tree that grows as a result will be a mango tree, which will eventually bear mangos. Alternatively, if we plant a pomegranate seed, the tree that grows as a consequence will be a pomegranate tree, and its fruit will be pomegranates. “As you sow, so shall you reap”: according to the nature of our actions, we will obtain the corresponding fruit.

In the same way, according to the law of karma, if we perform a wholesome action, sooner or later we will obtain a wholesome fruit, or result, and if we perform an unwholesome action, we will inevitably obtain an unwholesome or unwanted result. This is what we mean when we say, in Buddhism, that particular causes bring about particular effects that are similar in nature to those causes. This will become perfectly clear when we consider specific examples of wholesome and unwholesome actions and their corresponding effects.

It may be understood from this brief, general introduction that karma can be of two kinds: good or wholesome karma, and bad or unwholesome karma. To avoid misunderstanding these terms, it may be of use to look at the original words used to refer to so-called good and bad karma—namely, *kushala* and *akushala*, respectively. To understand how these words are used, it is necessary to know their actual meanings: *kushala* means “intelligent” or “skillful,” whereas *akushala* means “unintelligent” or “unskillful.” By knowing this, we can see that these terms are used in Buddhism not in the sense of good and evil, but in the sense of intelligent and unintelligent, skillful and unskillful, wholesome and unwholesome.

In what way are actions wholesome and unwholesome? Actions are wholesome in the sense that they are beneficial to oneself and others, and hence motivated not by ignorance, attachment, and aversion but by wisdom, renunciation or detachment, and love and compassion.

How can we know that a wholesome action will produce happiness, and an unwholesome action, unhappiness? The short answer is that time will tell. The Buddha himself explained that,

as long as an unwholesome action does not produce its fruit of suffering, a foolish person will consider that action good, but when it does produce its fruit of suffering, then he will realize that the act was unwholesome. In the same way, as long as a wholesome action does not produce happiness, a foolish person may think that it was unwholesome; only when it does produce happiness will he realize that the act was good.

Thus we need to judge wholesome and unwholesome actions from the point of view of their long-term effects. Very simply, sooner or later wholesome actions result in happiness for oneself and for others, whereas unwholesome actions result in suffering for oneself and others.

Specifically, the unwholesome actions that are to be avoided are related to the so-called three doors of action—namely, body, voice, and mind. There are three unwholesome actions of body, four of speech, and three of mind. The three unwholesome actions of body are (1) killing, (2) stealing, and (3) sexual misconduct; the four unwholesome actions of voice are (4) lying, (5) harsh speech, (6) slander, and (7) malicious gossip; and the three unwholesome actions of mind are (8) greed, (9) anger, and (10) delusion. By avoiding these ten unwholesome actions, we can avoid their consequences.

The general fruit of these unwholesome actions is suffering, which can, however, take various forms. The fully ripened fruit of unwholesome actions is rebirth in the lower realms, or realms of woe—the hell realms, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the realm of animals. If the weight of unwholesome actions is not sufficient to result in birth in the lower realms, then it results in unhappiness even though we are born as humans.

Here we can see at work the principle alluded to earlier – that of a cause resulting in a corresponding or appropriate effect. For instance, if we habitually perform actions that are motivated by ill-will and hatred, such as taking the lives of others, this will result in rebirth in the hells, where we will be repeatedly tortured and killed. If the unwholesome action of killing other living beings is not habitual and repeated, then such actions will result in a shortened life even though we are born as human beings. Otherwise, actions of this kind can result in separation from loved ones, fear, or even paranoia. In this case, also, we can clearly see how the effect is similar in nature to the cause. Killing shortens the life of those who are killed, depriving them of their loved ones and the like, so if we indulge in killing we will be liable to experience these same effects.

Similarly, stealing motivated by the afflictions of attachment and greed can lead to rebirth as a hungry ghost, where we are completely deprived of the things we want and even denied such essentials as food and shelter. And even if stealing does not result in rebirth as a hungry ghost, it will result in poverty, dependence on others for our livelihood, and so forth. Sexual misconduct, for its part, will result in marital problems.

Thus unwholesome actions produce unwholesome results in the shape of various forms of suffering, whereas wholesome actions result in wholesome effects, or happiness. We can interpret wholesome actions in two ways, negatively and positively: we can regard wholesome actions as those that simply avoid the unwholesome ones (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and the rest), or we can think of wholesome actions in terms of generosity, restraint, meditation, reverence, service to others, transference of merit, rejoic-

ing in the merit of others, listening to the Dharma, teaching the Dharma, and correction of our own erroneous views.

Here, again, the effects of actions are similar to their causes. For instance, generosity results in wealth, listening to the Dharma results in wisdom, and so on. Wholesome actions have effects that are similar in nature to their causes—in this case, wholesome, or beneficial—just as unwholesome actions have effects that are unwholesome, like the actions themselves.

Karma, whether wholesome or unwholesome, is modified by the conditions under which it is accumulated. In other words, a wholesome or unwholesome action may be more or less weighty depending on the conditions under which it is performed. The conditions that determine the weight or strength of karma may be divided into those that refer to the subject, or doer of the action, and those that refer to the object, or the being toward whom the action is directed. Hence the conditions that determine the weight of karma apply to the subject as well as the object of actions.

If we take the example of killing, five conditions must be present for the action to have complete, unmitigated strength: (a) a living being, (b) consciousness of the existence of a living being, (c) the intention to kill the living being, (d) the effort or action of killing the living being, and (e) the consequent death of the living being. Here we can see conditions that apply to the subject as well as the object of the action of killing: the subjective conditions are consciousness of the existence of a living being, the intention to kill, and the action of killing a living being, while the objective conditions are the presence of a living being and the consequent death of that living being.

Similarly, there are five alternative conditions that modify the weight of karma: (i) persistence or repetition, (ii) willful intention, (iii) absence of regret, (iv) quality, and (v) indebtedness. Again, the five can be divided into subjective and objective categories. The subjective conditions are actions done with persistence, actions done with willful intention and determination, and actions done without regret or misgivings. If you perform an unwholesome action again and again, with willful intention and without regret or misgivings, the weight of that action will be increased.

The objective conditions are the quality of the object – that is, the living being toward whom the action is directed – and indebtedness, or the nature of the relationship that exists between the object of an action and the subject. In other words, if we perform a wholesome or unwholesome action toward a living being with extraordinary qualities, like an Arhat or the Buddha, the wholesome or unwholesome action will have greater weight. Finally, the strength of wholesome and unwholesome actions is greater when they are done toward those to whom we are indebted, like our parents, teachers, and friends who have benefited us in the past.

The subjective and objective conditions, taken together, determine the weight of karma. This is important, because knowing this will help us remember that karma is not simply a matter of black and white or good and bad. *Karma* is, of course, intentional action and moral responsibility, but the working of the law of karma is very finely balanced so as to justly and naturally match the effect with the cause. It takes into account all the subjective and objective conditions that influence the precise

nature of an action. This ensures that the effects of an action are similar and equal to the cause.

The effects of karma may become evident either in the short term or in the long term. Traditionally, karma is divided into three categories determined by the amount of time needed for its effects to manifest themselves: in this very life, in the next life, or only after many lives.

When the effects of karma manifest in this life, it is possible to see them within a relatively short space of time. The effects of this kind of karma can be easily and directly witnessed by any of us. For instance, when a person refuses to study, indulges in alcohol or drug abuse, or begins to steal to support his harmful habits, the effects are evident within a short space of time. They manifest themselves in the loss of his livelihood and friends, in ill health, and the like.

Although we ourselves cannot see the medium- and long-term effects of karma, the Buddha and his prominent disciples, who had developed their minds through the practice of meditation, were able to perceive them. For example, when Moggallana was attacked by bandits and came to the Buddha streaming with blood, the Buddha was able to see that the event was the effect of karma that Moggallana had accumulated in a previous life. Then, it seems, he had taken his aged parents into a forest and, having beaten them to death, reported that they had been killed by bandits. The effect of this unwholesome action, done many lifetimes before, manifested itself only in his life as Moggallana.

At the point of death, we have to leave everything behind—our property and even our loved ones—yet our karma will follow us like a shadow. The Buddha said that nowhere on earth or

in heaven can we escape our karma. When the conditions are present, dependent on mind and body, the effects of karma will manifest themselves, just as, dependent on the appropriate conditions, a mango will appear on a mango tree. We can see that, even in the natural world, certain effects take longer to appear than others. If we plant watermelon seeds, we obtain the fruit in a shorter period than if we plant the seeds of a walnut tree. In the same way, the effects of karma manifest themselves either in the short term or in the medium to long term, depending on the nature of the action.

In addition to the two principal varieties of karma, wholesome and unwholesome, we should mention neutral or ineffective karma. Neutral karma is action that has no moral consequences, either because the very nature of the action is such as to have no moral significance, or because the action was done involuntarily and unintentionally. Examples of this variety of karma include walking eating, sleeping, breathing, making handicrafts, and so on. Similarly, actions done unintentionally constitute ineffective karma, because the all-important volitional element is missing. For instance, if you step on an insect when completely unaware of its existence, such an act is considered neutral or ineffective karma.

The benefits of understanding the law of karma are obvious. In the first place, such an understanding discourages us from performing unwholesome actions that have suffering as their inevitable fruit. Once we understand that, throughout our entire life, each and every intentional act will produce a similar and equal reaction—once we understand that, sooner or later, we will have to experience the effects of our actions, wholesome

or unwholesome—we will refrain from unwholesome behavior because we will not want to experience the painful results of such actions. Similarly, knowing that wholesome actions have happiness as their fruit, we will do our best to cultivate such wholesome actions.

Reflecting on the law of karma, of action and reaction in the sphere of conscious activity, encourages us to abandon unwholesome actions and to practice wholesome ones. We will look more closely at the specific effects of karma in future lives, and at exactly how it conditions and determines the nature of rebirth, in the next chapter.

