



# Karma: The Possession That Follows Us Everywhere



*It is mental volition, O monks, that I call karma.  
Having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind.*

- The Buddha (Anguttaranikaya, III, p. 41)

Karma is a very important subject, one which we should understand clearly. Karma is not a concept or a theory; karma is a natural law of the universe. Comprehending karma is the Right Understanding (or Right View) of Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. With right understanding, we realize the wholesome, life-affirming actions that bring benefit and happiness to all beings, as well the unwholesome, negative actions which bring unhappiness and suffering. With this correct understanding we are able to cultivate true wisdom. Our present understanding of karma may be vague or unclear. Although we may know that our thoughts, speech, and actions bring benefit or suffering to ourselves and others in this present life, have we given deep consideration to the fact that karma is a possession we have brought with us from the past, and one that will certainly follow us everywhere...even into the future?

## What is Karma?

It is essential to understand karma as a foundation for our behavior, for our dharma practice, and for the quality of our lives as a whole. The Sanskrit word *karma* means *action*. This refers to intentional physical, verbal, or mental actions. Karma is directly related to our *intention* or *motivation* while doing an action. Very simply, we receive what we give; we harvest exactly what we plant. Our actions, whether they are positive or negative, virtuous or non virtuous, leave imprints or seeds in our minds, and these imprints ripen into our life experiences when the appropriate conditions come together. Karma is the universal law of cause and effect. The seeds of our actions continue with us from one lifetime to the next and do not get lost. Our relationship to karma is very simple—we *are* the actual product of our karma. We *are* the product of every thought, feeling, word, and action from our past and we will be the product of our karma in the future as well.

Life is a seamless continuum, uninterruptedly weaved together with the threads of our karma; our volitional (intentional) actions. Whether it is good or bad, our karma follows us everywhere, in this life and the next. If we are compassionate, wise, honest, and skillful, we create positive and harmonious circumstances in this and future lives. Committing cruel, dishonest, and other unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind, we will certainly not escape the consequences of these deeds, either in this life or in the future. Whatever happiness and good fortune we experience in or lives comes from our own positive actions. Our problems and conflicts also arise from our own negative and destructive actions. Karma is our only true property—for better or worse, it follows us everywhere. Therefore, the Law of Karma teaches that responsibility for unskillful actions is born by the person who commits them. Again, karma is our only true property.

It can be confusing when we see cruel people in positions of great power, wealthy people who are dishonest or selfish, or very kind people who have bad things happen to them or who die young. Seeing this, we may certainly wonder about the Law of Karma. Our largest obstacle to understanding or even believing in karma may be the factor of time. Most often, the results of our actions will show up after a delay of time. As ordinary human beings, who have not developed the omniscient eye of wisdom, we cannot see into past lives. Thus, it is difficult to discern which action caused which result. We must realize that we are only looking at a very small period of time in this one life. Many of the experiences we have in this life are the inevitable results of actions done in previous lives. In addition, the seeds of our actions in this life will ripen in future lives.

The following contemplations were offered by the Buddha in the Upajjhatthana Sutta: *“I am the owner of my actions (karma), heir to my actions, born from my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my judge. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, that I will inherit.”*

## The Four Laws of Karma

1. Results are similar to the cause. Karma and its results are certain and unailing. Positive actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the positive result of some form of happiness and benefit. Negative actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the negative result of some form of suffering. Karma and its results are exactly like a seed and its fruit.

2. No results come without a cause. Actions not engaged, will not bring results. It is obvious that things do not just appear out of nothing. If the cause has not been created, the effect will not be experienced.

3. Once an action is done, the result is never lost. An action done, is not lost and will definitely ripen and bring a result.

4. Karma expands. Once we have an imprint of an action in our mind, it tends to be habit-forming.

## Changing Our Karma

*Some people misunderstand the concept of karma. They take the Buddha's doctrine of the law of causality to mean that all is predetermined, that there is nothing that the individual can do. This is a total misunderstanding. The very term karma or action is a term of active force, which indicates that future events are within your own hands. Since action is a phenomenon that is committed by a person, a living being, it is within your own hands whether or not you engage in action.*

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama, from his book: *Path to Bliss*

Understanding the universal Law of Karma, rather than being discouraging or overwhelming, can actually be very inspiring and uplifting. With a clear understanding of the Law of Karma (cause and effect/causality), we can choose to be the captain of our own ship. We can navigate our life in the exact direction we choose, rather than being tossed about upon the stormy seas of our own ignorance and delusion. If we ignore the workings of karma, we tend to create many problems for ourselves and others. However, with this excellent understanding, we have the ability to transform our mind, heart, and life for the better, and we will be able to benefit others as well.

Changing our karma is not difficult. However, this change does require a very sober realization and acknowledgment—simply that *our situation in life is the result of our own actions!* According to Buddhist teachings, there is nobody in the universe who is distributing rewards and punishments. We ourselves create the causes of our life experiences by our own thoughts, speech, and actions, and we experience the results. In this way, we can learn to be accountable. We can take full responsibility for our lives. Once we acknowledge that our situation in life is the result of our own actions, we can begin to change our karma.

To change our karma, we need to understand the unwholesome, negative, and non virtuous actions that bring pain, unhappiness, and suffering. We also need to understand the wholesome, positive, and virtuous actions that bring benefit and happiness. The rest is diligent practice. By practicing the essential foundation of the Buddhist Path, morality (personal integrity), we will transform our karma and our life experiences. By understanding the Four Noble Truths and following the Noble Eightfold Path we will transform our karma. By practicing The Six Paramitas (Perfections), we will transform our karma. By cultivating positive, virtuous thoughts, feelings, words, and actions, exercising compassion, loving-kindness, and wisdom in our daily lives, we will transform our karma. By way of this practice, we will change the entire course of our life experience and move swiftly toward liberation.

The Buddhist teachings of all lineages offer many excellent practices for training the mind, purifying the heart of defilements, and transforming our karmic tendencies. It is wise for us to truly contemplate the workings of karma so that we are not influenced by deluded views of reality.

Understanding karma and learning to take responsibility for our every thought, word, and action is true sobriety, wisdom, and awakening.

## The Four Powers of Purification

The purification practices we find in Buddhist teachings are similar to those in many other religions. The most essential factor that one requires is sincerity or honesty with oneself. When we want to purify past negative karma, we must apply ourselves to engaging in all actions with the correct motivation and by using the following Four Powers of Purification:

1. Power of the Object: One should practice remembering and thinking of all sentient beings one may have hurt. Traditionally, one remembers and generates compassion for all sentient beings and takes refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

2. Power of Regret: One realizes soberly, “what I did was wrong and negative.” One regrets having committed that action and feels this regret in their heart. This regret should not be senseless guilt, self-recrimination, or criticism, which are said to be useless emotional torture. What is intended here is to examine oneself and one's actions and to truly recognize that negative actions done in the past were very unwise. With the power regret, one feels deep remorse for their past negative actions.

3. Power of Promise or Remedy: As a logical consequence of the above, one should promise not to repeat these negative actions and apply oneself diligently to doing virtuous actions in order to counteract the negative ones. It can be helpful to at least promise oneself to avoid a negative behavior for a specific period of time. Not being honest at this stage makes the practice useless or even harmful to oneself. Here one can also rely on and pray to the Buddhas and Bodhistsavas for the purification of the negative actions one regrets.

4. Power of Practice: Basically any positive action with a *good motivation* can be used. Traditionally in Buddhism one can use practices such as prostrations (as a means to destroy pride), making offerings (to counteract greed), reading Buddhist texts (to counteract ignorance and negative thoughts), and acts of kindness to cultivate a heart of compassion, and so forth.

Through applying these Four Powers of Purification and dedicating ourselves to the Buddha's Path of Liberation, we can purify the karma of negative actions and completely transform our lives!