

THE BASIS OF CONDUCT: KARMA, CAUSE AND EFFECT

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What is the basis for the arising of causes and conditions? They are the experiences of karma. Karma literally means “action,” or “cause and effect,” which is the natural law of our universe. When we say, “karma,” it sounds somewhat abstract and mysterious. We might be talking about some deep and complex philosophical system that is removed from our daily life and ordinary experience. When someone asks, “Do you believe in karma?” it is a very strange question because what is really being asked is, “Do you believe in cause and effect?” It is doubtful that there is anyone who does not believe in cause and effect. We can all see the workings of cause and effect in our everyday lives, in every moment. Every single experience of our life is connected with this notion of cause and effect.

While karma is connected to our actions of body, speech and mind, it is most fundamentally related to our mental actions—to the movement of our thoughts, our intentions, and motivations. This is so because our speech and physical actions are led by our mind. We do not think to ourselves, “I want to give my neighbor who has been so kind to me a wonderful gift of appreciation,” and then in the next moment steal from that person.

When we decide to work with our conduct, we are making a decision or commitment to try to be mindful of every single action in our life. When we are mindful of our actions, we not only see the action itself but also the state of mind that produces that action. We see how these are connected as cause and effect. We also develop the insight that sees what is positive and what is negative. This leads to a recognition of the importance of distinguishing harmful actions from those that are beneficial for oneself and for others. It is a practice of living in a mindful, wholesome way that makes one’s life more workable and beneficial to all.

Karmic Logic: First the Seed, Then the Sprout

In order to understand karma, it is necessary to understand the notion of interdependence, or dependent origination, which is a foundational teaching of the Hīnayāna. This teaching explains that all things—all phenomena—arise due to causes and conditions and therefore have no independent existence. They arise in dependence on the existence of

factors other than themselves. They also cease when the causes and conditions for their cessation occur. Thus all phenomena are insubstantial and have no permanent or absolute reality.

On one level, the logic of karma is quite simple. We can understand it by looking at the example of a seed and a sprout: the seed is the cause, or action, and the sprout is the result of that cause. The seed carries within it the power to give rise to a certain result—the sprout. But the seed's power to manifest that result is not total. It is also dependent on the existence of supporting conditions. The seed has to be planted in the right soil at the right time and in the right conditions, with enough water, sunlight, and so on. When the cause and conditions come together in a perfect balance, the result occurs. In the same way, the karmic seeds we have planted in our mind-stream must meet with appropriate supporting conditions in order to yield their result. When such conditions come together, the seeds ripen and manifest as the different forms of our experiences—either pleasant or unpleasant.

How they manifest, or come to fruition, will be influenced by both our karma from the past and the karma of the present. The Buddhist teachings say that past karma and present karma both carry a certain weight or power to affect the form of the final result. You might say, for example, that they each carry 50 percent of the power. When cause and conditions meet, you have 100 percent of the karma that will determine the specific result. But those percentages are not necessarily exact. If we have a very potent seed, or habitual tendency to act in a certain way, the potential of that seed may be much greater—80 percent, for instance. That would leave very little space for the karma of the present to influence the situation—only 20 percent. That is why we sometimes struggle so much with our karma.

If we are faced with a situation of overwhelming anger, for example, we have a choice whether to punch someone or restrain ourselves. However, if in the past we have habitually lost control of our emotions and resorted to violence, then the momentum of that karma will be very difficult to overcome. There will be very little space for present conditions—the cautionary advice of friends or our own mindfulness—to intervene and alter that outcome. However, if we recognize these karmic patterns and are really determined to change them, we can. It requires a lot of work, and our practice must be very strong. When we develop more skill in working with our mind and emotions, and when we cultivate our wisdom and compassion, we can transform our negative actions into positive ones. That is the aim of working with our conduct.

On the other hand, in a situation where the karma from the past is weaker—for instance, when it carries a power of 20 percent, then present karma—our current state of mind, intention and motivation, as well as the surrounding conditions—comprises 80 percent of the power and influence. In that case, we can easily transform that karma. But whether the karmic seed is weak or strong, it is up to us how we work with and manifest it.

We should remember that, from the Buddhist point of view, karma is not fate. It is not destiny. It does not imply that things are predetermined. If they were, why would the Buddha teach the dharma? If everything were set, laid out in a karmic blueprint, then your actions would have no effect on your future. If you were set to become enlightened in 2008, then no matter what you did, you would become enlightened at that time. You wouldn't need to worry and could do whatever you liked. On the other hand, if it were not your karma to become enlightened at any time, then no matter what you did, you would not get there—so why try? The Buddhist view of karma is different from this, and we must understand that.

HOW ABSOLUTE TRUTH EASES RELATIVE PAIN

When we face challenging and difficult situations, we should remember the forces of past karma and apply our skill, wisdom, and compassion to transform these karmic seeds. These are very important relative practices. We should also remember that when we talk about karmic cause and effect and the interdependent nature of the world, we are talking about relative truth. From the absolute point of view, all experiences are empty and egoless, like dreams and illusions. When we remember this, we bring the absolute view to relative truth, as well as some absolute insight for working with it. In dealing with the relative, we must understand karma—cause and effect and the interdependent nature—and use our understanding to transform our negative karma and nourish our positive karma.

When you see too much suffering or get tired of struggling with all the details of relative life, remembering the absolute view and seeing the dreamlike nature of everything will help you to relax. But, you also have to remember the relative view of karmic cause and effect and deal with it. The Buddhist teachings say that the more you realize the nature of emptiness, the more you become aware of the subtleties of relative truth. They say that when you truly realize the nature of emptiness, you will respect the relative nature of karma and its precise functioning more fully and can work more skillfully to transform it.

According to the teachings, a yogi who claims to have realized the absolute truth but does not respect the relative truth of karma has not realized emptiness. The more you realize absolute truth, the more you respect relative truth. That's the key. Otherwise, merely believing in emptiness can become dangerous, leading to a nihilistic view and approach. We might say: since everything is empty, it doesn't matter whether you kill someone or help someone. That is not the right view of emptiness. The right view is seeing everything as being empty on the absolute level but seeing the details of karma and how to transform them precisely and clearly on the relative level.

The biographies of great masters like Padmasambhava, Tilopa and Nāropa contain many stories of their miraculous yogic manifestations. We should understand clearly that their feats, such as walking through rocks, are demonstrations of their realization of the view of emptiness. They are manifesting the absolute view within the relative truth.

When Milarepa amazed people by walking right through the rocky walls of a cave, he said: "You are the ones who are performing miraculous activities, not me. The nature of things is empty, but you are making them solid and real." That is the actual miracle, he said. The yogis who have realized absolute truth can see the relative confusion of sentient beings clearly and transform it through their realization.

A song called "Friends" by Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche based on Milarepa's song, "Taking Appearances to the Path," says:

**Friends are empty forms like a water-moon
To think of them as being truly real
Will only make your many sufferings increase**

**To know they're empty forms like a water-moon
Will make illusionlike samādhi increase
Compassion free of clinging will increase**

**And nonreferential view will also increase
And meditation that's fixation-free
And conduct free of doer or deed increase**

**Of all the many marvels, this by far the most marvelous
Of all the many wonders, this the most wonderful⁵⁷**

57 Composed by Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche at Marpa House, England, August 1997. Translated and arranged by Jim Scott. © 2002 Marpa Translation Committee.

When we are engaging in the conduct of selflessness, we can sing this song and remind ourselves that all appearances are like illusions or water-moons.

The best example of the experience of realization, of completely waking up, is a lucid dream—when you have a dream and recognize that you are dreaming. When you realize emptiness but are in the world, you see everything clearly as it appears, but you know that it is all a dream. The realization begins when you move from glimpses of emptiness into solid clinging and back to glimpses of emptiness. The complete realization of emptiness comes from having the experience of many glimpses. If you can move back and forth from glimpses of emptiness into solid clinging and back into glimpses of emptiness, it will be very helpful. Before you can fully realize emptiness, you must have as many glimpses as you can. When all these brief experiences come together, you can have the full realization of emptiness, which will be the basis for true compassion to manifest in the world.

The idea that we create and accumulate our karma ourselves is at the heart of the Buddhist view. It shows that there are no outside creators, supernatural beings, or natural forces outside ourselves that create our world of suffering and happiness. There is only one person creating the world you experience—and that illusionlike, dreamlike person is you. We create our own suffering and we create our own happiness—so we are pretty self-sufficient. We don't have to rely on anything outside. We can stand on our own feet and can deal with the suffering and happiness we are creating. That's the good news.

HOW MEDITATING ON EMPTINESS BECOMES COMPASSION IN ACTION

As Mahāyāna practitioners, it is important for us to remember the view of emptiness and to engage in the relative practices of compassion, loving-kindness, and karmic cause and effect. We should use our compassionate hearts and try to help everybody who needs it. But, we all have to work on ways to free ourselves. We should try to show people that the best help will come from themselves. We must also realize that we have limited capabilities. When we attain the realization of selflessness and the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha, we will be able to help sentient beings much more effectively. We can acquire the wisdom and compassion to create joy and happiness and to transform the suffering and the cause of suffering not only for ourselves but for others as well.

Working with karmic cause and effect is a way of indirectly helping sentient beings—a form of silent compassion. By working with your negative karma and transforming it into positive karma, you are helping sentient beings. You are setting a great example for the world, and you are helping to create a wonderful society where everyone lives in harmony.

Therefore it is crucial to develop genuine compassion, to maintain the pure intention of bodhichitta⁵⁸ and to balance the absolute view with the relative one of karmic cause and effect. We should realize that the reference point of all karma—this person, this self, this me—is empty. There is no self and there are no individual actions—therefore, there is no karma. Karma exists and functions strictly on the level of relative truth. It does not exist on the ultimate level. When we are able to bring the view of emptiness together with our actions in the world, we can be very useful. A person who accomplishes that is called a bodhisattva—someone who remains in saṃsāra and tries to benefit beings through creating a positive environment.

Accumulating Merit and Wisdom: Breaking through Ego-Clinging

It is said that if you do not have a sufficient accumulation of merit, you will not be able to realize the nature of emptiness. What is this accumulation? The term “accumulation” suggests the gathering of many small pieces—in this case, the gathering of pieces of knowledge, wisdom, and acts of compassion. This translates to the practice of working with and being mindful of every single action in our lives and making it into positive, meritorious, virtuous action. Actually, action and karma cannot be separated; so in one way, positive action itself *is* what merit is. Thus the path of accumulating merit is the path of generating positive deeds.

The accumulation of merit is based on working with ego-clinging; thus, it involves the practice of detachment, or training the mind in letting go. In the Buddhist tradition, this notion is introduced with the practice of generosity. We begin by working with our clinging to material objects, for example, my clothes, my food, or my wealth. Generosity is the practice of simply cutting through that attachment, cutting through that clinging on to our physical existence. Such clinging is the fundamental root, or cause, of developing negative karma. By training ourselves in positive action, we are cutting the root of our negative karma. We learn to let go of clinging to outer objects first, and then increasingly

⁵⁸ Bodhichitta is translated as awakened heart or mind. It refers to the altruistic motivation to attain the state of enlightenment so that one can lead all beings out of suffering and to the state of perfect and complete awakening.

we begin to work with letting go of conceptual clinging—of clinging to the whole universe of ego, inside.

The most genuine practice of accumulating merit is letting go without any expectation of receiving something in return. In other words, letting-go practice here is simply giving. Whether it's your positive thought, your compassion or a material object that you're giving, if you can give it freely without any expectation, then that becomes the genuine practice of merit.

If we have developed a certain degree of insight and an understanding of mind through study and contemplation, it is possible to extend this practice to working with our emotions, or afflicted mental states. The objective is to see every aspect of our clinging and to let it go. When we are able to do this, the habitual tendency of grasping and ego-clinging is reversed. Ordinarily, we cling to whatever we perceive or whatever arises in our mind, and each time mind grasps, an imprint of that clinging is made in our mind-stream. With each imprint, we build up ego and solidify our belief in a self. When we practice letting go, over and over, the tendency to *not* grasp is imprinted in our mind-stream instead. In this way, we break through the boundary of ego-clinging and our self-centered view. Thus the accumulation of merit leads to the higher realization of egolessness, of transcendental knowledge, or wisdom, and a total sense of freedom.

TRANSFORMING SUFFERING & CHANGING KARMA

In ordinary life, we know that we cannot teach complex and subtle concepts to those who are deeply confused. They are so involved with their suffering that nothing really seeps in. First, it is necessary to transform their suffering by clearing away their mental confusion. In the same way, realizing the view of emptiness will be beyond our capacity so long as our minds are clouded by our ego-clinging and accumulation of negative karmic actions. Therefore in order for our path to become workable, we must transform our negative karma and accumulate positive actions.

There are several different processes of transformation. One is the Hinayāna-Mahāyāna approach of working with mindfulness practice to transform our afflictions, or disturbing emotions. When anger arises, we first have to recognize it. That is the mindfulness practice—to see our anger as it comes. Once it is there, we watch the movements of the anger. No matter what changes it goes through, we watch our anger and let it go, watch and let it go. We do the same when other afflictions arise.

Of course, the final transformation is the absolute view of seeing the empty, illusionlike nature of our mind's afflictions. But first the main practice is seeing the thoughts and afflictions arise, watching them and letting them go. There are also different approaches to working with the emotions that are based on our level of practice or training.

From the Hīnayāna point of view, our relationship to our emotions is like a warrior facing a dangerous enemy on a battlefield. We see our afflictions as powerful enemies that disrupt and disturb our mind. We try to overcome the enemy with whatever skills we have developed to work with and transform the negative tendencies of our mind. When we realize that we lack the skills to defeat our enemy in our present encounter, we engage in another form of skillful means—strategic retreat—which means we run! Running can also be an expression of wisdom. When you run from your enemy, where do you go? You run to your back to your meditation cushion so you can develop more mindfulness, calmness and insight. Then you can go back to the battlefield to fight your enemy again.

In the Mahāyāna, we develop a different relationship with our emotions. At this stage, we learn how to make friends with our emotions. The battlefield is the same, but the enemy is seen in a positive light. The enemy helps you become a warrior. You cannot be a warrior without an enemy, and you cannot be a great warrior without a great enemy. If your enemy is weak, fighting him is not a fair game. It is abusive. You need an enemy who is as strong or even stronger than you. Then, if you manage to overcome him, it is a great accomplishment. Therefore the Mahāyānists appreciate the enemy's force and power and entire existence. Without them, they cannot become true warriors. No enemies, no warriors. That is the Mahāyāna approach of making friends with the enemies and transforming them.

The Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen approaches to transformation are even more direct and straightforward. At this stage, you simply look at mind's nature. When you realize its true nature, that is sudden transformation. There is no long process of watching afflictions and letting them go—nothing like that. You just cut through directly.

When you can engage with and transform all your mental afflictions so directly, you will have a great capacity to help others. In the biographies of great masters, like Milarepa and Padmasambhava, you can read about how their realization manifested, and how they benefited so many different types of beings. These masters were able to overcome many different kinds of suffering and to transform many kinds of confusion

into wisdom. So, from profound realization, great compassion can manifest—a compassion that is much vaster and more effective because it is based on wisdom and egolessness. Without egoless wisdom, we may feel that we are forcing ourselves to try to do something that we are not capable of, and then we become frustrated. But, when wisdom and compassion are combined, there is no frustration. We know what is not possible and what is possible—what can be effectively accomplished. This leads to the highest form of right conduct.

Thus working with conduct involves training on both the relative and absolute levels. We work with our relative karma by cultivating positive actions, and we work with the view of selflessness—the awareness that everything is like a dream or the reflection of moon in the water—to transform that karma on the absolute level.

At this stage of the path, the fruition of our training is the realization of the selflessness of persons.⁵⁹ When the true nature of selflessness is directly realized, the results are very clear and obvious. Suffering—the illusion of suffering—is caused by ego-clinging, and when our clinging to the self is uprooted and transformed, the cause of suffering will be eliminated and saṃsāra will cease.

In the ultimate sense, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are not two separate things. When suffering is recognized for what it is, it is nirvāṇa—enlightenment. When it is not recognized, it is saṃsāra. Therefore saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are one. They are the nature of mind and its display. Together, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa inseparable are the wisdom play of bodhichitta, the union of compassion and emptiness. Within that space of awareness, compassion manifests spontaneously, unconditionally, and without bias. We discover genuine love for all beings. Such compassion is our natural state, and at its fullest point, it becomes egoless compassion that takes us beyond clinging to a self and dualistic phenomena. ♣

⁵⁹ In the Hīnayāna, the view and practice of emptiness is the selflessness of persons. However in the Mahāyāna, there is the classification of twofold selflessness: the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena.



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