

Karma

By Joseph Goldstein

Obvious Karma

It is easy for us to understand the role of physical laws, such as the law of gravity or the laws of thermodynamics. The Buddha saw that there is a natural moral law at work as well, influencing the experiences of life. He called it the law of karma, which is just this understanding that actions bring results. The principle is found in many spiritual traditions. Perhaps the most commonly recognized example for us in the West is the biblical saying that we reap what we sow...

...Greed, hatred, and delusion are unwholesome qualities that produce fruits of suffering; generosity, love, and wisdom are wholesome factors that bear fruits of happiness.

...In addition to the feelings themselves, the mind states often bring about speech and action. And actions create reaction. What is likely to happen if you kick a sleeping grizzly? That would be the law of karma at work. What responses are we likely to get if we treat people with kindness, clarity, and honesty? Or if we treat them with rudeness, blaming, deception? In such simple, obvious ways every day our mind states affect what we say and do and bring us quick karmic results.

...As we experience the pain or the happiness that derives from present mind states or past actions, we see that no mental event or outward action ends in itself; it leaves an impact or imprint in the mind. Those consequences demonstrate the law of karma. This is not the whole picture, but still we begin to see that cause and effect is not just a spiritual concept; to a large extent, it is what we are...

Subtleties of Karma

But there are many subtleties in understanding the law of karma and many ways in which it can be misunderstood. Sometimes people feel that this law of moral cause and effect is deterministic or fatalistic, as if we were bound and powerless in a completely mechanistic system. This is not an accurate understanding, because our actions do not bring about predetermined results. Rather, each action is a seed, and the seed will bear some fruit, but what that particular fruit will be depends on many different conditions interacting in extraordinarily subtle and complex ways.

For example, one of the conditions that determine the karmic result of a past action is the present state of our mind and its on-going, habituated states. When our mind is generally free from greed, hatred, and ignorance, then unwholesome actions of the past have less opportunity to come to fruition. We are, as it were, protected by the energy field of present wholesomeness; the purity of our mind blocks or modifies those unwholesome karmic results. Likewise, if anger, hatred, fear, greed, or delusion fill our mind habitually, those qualities create the field for past unwholesome actions to bear fruit, and they block or modify the fruits of past wholesome actions.

Ignorance, the Root of Harming

When harm is done, who or what is ultimately responsible?

A teacher of a friend of mine was a Hindu sadhu, or renunciate, a beautiful man. Years ago he visited America and said something that has stuck with me ever since. He said that when he looks at the world, he does not see cruelty, he does not see war, and he does not see hatred. What he sees is ignorance.

That is what is really happening. All of the harmful actions that people do, all of the things that cause suffering--where are they rooted? They are rooted in deep ignorance, in not understanding the suffering being caused, and not understanding the karmic fruits being created for themselves in doing such actions.

A person walking toward a fire is doing the very thing that will cause the person to be burned. Because of the universal and unavoidable law of karma, when someone does something harmful, if we can see past the action to its root cause in ignorance, then instead of our more usual reaction of anger we can respond with compassion. That person is walking toward the fire of some kind of suffering, the sure result of his or her action.

It does not make sense to feel hatred for ignorance. It neither helps the ignorance nor alleviates the suffering; it only compounds harm with more harm. What helps ignorance is bringing wisdom and compassion to bear on the situation. Brian Keenan, a British hostage released from Lebanon after more than four years in captivity, expressed this basic wisdom. He said that he had no desire for vengeance because vengeance is self-maiming, and he did not intend to maim himself.

Excerpted from *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*, by Joseph Goldstein, Shambhala Press, 1993, pp. 124-130. Edited by Dale Lugenbehl.