



Working with our Karma

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The Buddhist teachings on karma do not ask us to dwell for too long on what we may or may not have done in the past because, for the most part, this will inevitably be a matter of speculation.

Rather, their purpose is to guide us in performing positive actions now to create a better future. The Four Noble Truths identify two root causes of dukkha, karma and the afflictions. If we wish to overcome dukkha which one do we need to address first, our actions or our afflictions? How do we go about eliminating suffering on the practical level?

The process is a subtle one and the two are very intertwined. The Tibetan scholar Geshe Tashi Tsering (*The Four Noble Truths* p.84-7) offers some helpful advice.

The truth of the origin of suffering consists of the relationship between ignorance, afflictive emotions, and karmic actions. Ignorance leads to afflictive emotions, which in turn cause karmic action to take place. Of these two, afflictive emotions play the most important role in keeping us in this unenlightened state. They are of course connected, and when we try to eliminate one it always affects the other. (...)

Karmic actions are reactions to our afflictive emotions. Although it seems logical to think that we would eliminate our karmic actions by going after their causes, the afflictive emotions, this is not the way it works in practice. Afflictive emotions are so deep-seated and our habits so ingrained that it is hard to address them directly at first, so we start out by addressing our behaviour. By reducing our negative karmic actions, we slowly reduce the hold our afflictive emotions have on us.

If we wish to eliminate the causes of dukkha we have to start by changing our behaviour. In fact, the Geshe adds that reducing our negative karmic actions is the *only* chance we have to deal with our afflictive emotions. It is unrealistic to think that we can simply go straight to the root of our problem, which is ignorance, and cut that; or straight to the afflictions and eradicate them. In practice we have to proceed step by step and dismantle the edifice of self-clinging and confusion stone by stone. If we take the example of anger, first we abandon the manifestation of our anger and then the anger itself will subside. If we tend to scream at people we are angry with, the first thing we need to do is refrain from doing that. In the heat of the moment we remember in a flash that anger is harmful, and we stop ourselves from acting it out. This takes practice and sometimes we will fail, but persistent effort over time will lead to a reduction, and eventual elimination, of our patterns related to anger.



The instructions given by Buddhist masters are to begin with the coarsest levels first, and then the subtle levels will come to light once we have begun to subdue the coarse ones. In other words, we begin to work with our most obvious emotional reactions and patterns, and gradually move on to working with the subtle ones.

It is on the strength of this understanding that a Buddhist practitioner engages in avoiding harmful actions and cultivating virtuous ones. He or she knows that by doing this, the afflictions that bind us to suffering will gradually weaken and eventually disappear. In Buddhism, ethical discipline is not a question of submitting to arbitrary rules; it is one of the Three Higher Trainings of ethics, meditation and wisdom, and only becomes meaningful when it is consciously connected to the other two. Understanding that karma causes suffering is part of wisdom, and understanding how to change one's behaviour in order to work with the afflictions is also part of wisdom. The practice of meditation brings the mindfulness and mental strength one needs to stop following one's habits and tendencies and to change one's behaviour. All three elements of the Buddhist path work together to support an ethical life.

Discussion

Consider some of the personal habits and tendencies you would like to change, and analyse the process for doing that in the light of the Buddhist teachings.



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