



How the law of karma works

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

Three stages of an action

Each one of the three parts of an action—the intention, action and result—has the power to produce its own associated karmic effects. The most powerful effect will therefore be generated if we have the intention to do something, we actually do it, and we achieve the result we wanted. However, the karmic consequences of an action, whether good or bad, will be less powerful if only one or two of these factors come into play.

Imagine the case of someone who wants to rob your house. Scenario 1 is that the person intends to rob, is very experienced and skilled in doing so and actually manages to break and enter and steal your things, and then he succeeds in running off without getting caught. He or she feels really pleased that they pulled it off. This would produce the maximum karmic effect for an act of stealing. But in scenario 2, the person intends to rob you but something goes wrong. They can't manage to break the window or get through the door so the mission is aborted and they go home disappointed and empty handed. In this case they produce the karmic results of the intention to steal, and also the results of being disappointed that they didn't manage to steal, but they will not have produced the karmic effect of stealing itself. In scenario 3, the person intends to rob you and succeeds in doing so, but once they get back home and go through their loot they have a strong sense of guilt and regret. In this case, they would not have the karmic effect produced by satisfaction in accomplishing the action.

What form do karmic effects take?

How do karmic results affect us? Buddhists claim that they affect us either mentally or physically or both. In the case of a bad action, for instance:

- a. Mentally, we might experience certain life situations as painful and difficult and full of suffering. This could explain why some people find situations such as poverty, illness or rejection very hard to take, while other people don't have the same reaction.
- b. We might develop bad mental habits and tendencies. For example, if we succeed in stealing once it is easier to steal a second time, and this can lead us to develop a propensity to steal.
- c. Physically we might experience our external environment as difficult or our body might be prone to illness, for example.

We can relate these points to the fourth aggregate (skandha) of personality called mental formations which includes karma. The principle of this fourth aggregate is that the karmic consequences of our actions shape our character and mindset, and thereby become causes of future intentional actions in an endless chain of cause and effect. Karmic effects colour the way we experience the world as well as the way we relate to ourselves.



According to the Buddhist scriptures, certain results are associated with particular actions. For instance, stinginess leads to being poor, injuring others leads to frequent or chronic illness, and anger leads to being ugly. On the positive side, patience leads to being attractive, generosity leads to prosperity, and saving lives leads to having a long life. The Tibetan tradition¹ identifies four types of karmic effect:

1. **The fully ripened effect** or maximum effect of a negative action. For example, an action motivated by hatred can cause rebirth in the hells.
2. **The effect similar to the cause.** For example, if we are often criticised, belittled or lied to by others, this is the result of having done so ourselves in the past. If we have spoken harsh words in the past, everything that is said to us seems offensive or insulting, and whatever we say provokes an argument.
3. **The conditioning effect** acts on our environment. For instance, stealing causes rebirth in areas stricken by famine.
4. **The proliferation effect** refers to the way that whatever action we did before we will tend to repeat again and again. This accounts for habits and propensities, both virtuous and non-virtuous.

The time frame for karmic results

The time that elapses between an action and its karmic effects can vary considerably. In Buddhism, it is considered that karmic effects can come either in this present life or in the next life or in subsequent future lives. The Buddha uses an analogy to make this point: “*Bad karma is like freshly squeezed milk... it takes time to sour.*”² For this reason it is almost impossible for us to know what the karmic effects of our actions will be; if they occur much later on when the original action is all but forgotten, we will not know how to make the link back to their cause. Sceptics argue that this seriously weakens the Buddhist theory of karma because there is no clear proof that actions produce moral consequences at all. But such an absence of clear proof does not in itself disprove the theory of karma.

The idea that karmic effects do not necessarily follow on straightaway from the actions that produce them creates a philosophical problem for Buddhists: how can we account for the causal link between two very distant events? How can we explain the connection between an action carried out in, say, 1990 and its moral consequence which does not happen until 2020? The reason this is problematic is because, in Buddhist logic, a cause must *immediately* precede its effect; a cause occurs by definition in the very moment preceding the existence of its effect in a long chain of causal moments. So how do Buddhists solve this problem?

Their general solution is to explain that the immediate karmic consequence of an action is to plant a ‘karmic seed’ (*bija*) or imprint in the mind of the actor. This imprint can either ripen very quickly and bear its fruit soon afterwards, or it can lay dormant for an indeterminate period of time until circumstances create the right opportunity for it to ripen and bear its effects. These karmic imprints are present in the mind in a

¹ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Shambhala, Boston, 1998, pp.112-117.

² *Dhammapada* 71.



continuous chain of moments and, crucially, they are carried by the subtle consciousness after death from one life to the next. This then accounts for the way karmic results can occur many lifetimes after the event.

Discussion

This is an exercise in seeing how karma works from the Buddhist point of view.

Take one example of a specific intentional action carried out in the present life. Analyse the factors involved in creating karmic consequences, try to see the range of possible consequences that might occur.

