

Right View Part I: Karma

As Chris mentioned last week, the Noble Eightfold Path is divided into three areas: wisdom, morality, and concentration. The traditional order of the path, which we'll be following in this series of talks, begins with the wisdom section, comprising Right View and Right Intention. This order seems odd in one way, because the *practice* of the Path often begins with morality. Wisdom, in the most profound sense, is something that we hope to develop later in our practice.

But there are certain basic aspects of wisdom that serve to encourage and inform our practice of the other factors of the path. These must be developed to some small degree in order for one to even have an interest in following the path. This, I suspect, is why the traditional order begins with the wisdom factors.

Tonight I'd like to begin speaking about Right View, the first factor of the Path. Right View is often subdivided into two factors, which Bhikkhu Bodhi refers to as "mundane" and "superior" Right View. Mundane Right View, which we'll discuss tonight and next week, refers to the law of karma, while superior Right View refers to an understanding of suffering and the end of suffering as described by the Four Noble Truths.

As I understand it, Bhikkhu Bodhi's division of "mundane" vs. "superior" indicates that the law of karma, while certainly important, is not *directly* concerned with the ultimate goal of the end of suffering. Attending to your karma through ethical restraint may result in a reduction of suffering, or maybe just a nicer apartment in which to suffer, but will not in itself bring about the end of suffering. The end of suffering requires the "superior" right view of the Four Noble Truths.

The word "karma" has found its way into common speech. It is often used incorrectly, and this has given many people confused ideas about its meaning. Furthermore, Hindu and Jain meanings of "karma" are different from the Buddhist meaning, adding more confusion. So tonight I'll try to clear up that confusion a little.

The Thai teacher Ajahn Chah described karma as follows:

Karma is action. Karma is clinging. Body, speech, and mind all make karma when we cling. We create habits that can make us suffer in the future. This is the fruit of our attachment, our past defilement.

Let's examine that statement. "Karma is action." This is a literal translation: the word "karma" means "action." When you do, say, or think something, that is karma. "Karma is clinging." A great deal of our action is motivated by some type of clinging or attachment. We might physically steal something that we want, say something

nice to someone because we want something from that person, or fantasize about someone else's partner. All of these actions are based on clinging. As Ajahn Chah says, they will "create habits that will make us suffer in the future." In fact, the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh sometimes uses the term "habit energy" to refer to karma, thereby bypassing the linguistic confusion around the term.

Karma has fruits ("*phala*" or "*vipaka*"). In less Buddhist language: "actions have results." The nature of the fruit is determined by the nature of the karma. In short, Buddhism posits an orderly universe in which a) effects always have a cause and b) the nature of the effect is determined by the moral quality of the cause. This is expressed in the famous first verses of the Dhammapada.

*Phenomena are preceded by the mind,
Ruled by the mind, made by the mind.
If one speaks or acts with a corrupted mind,
Suffering will follow as the wheel
Follows the foot of an ox.*

*Phenomena are preceded by the mind,
Ruled by the mind, made by the mind.
If one speaks or acts with a pure mind,
Happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves.*

In some cases, the fruit of karma is easily observed. If you do something nice for someone, you are likely to experience the fruit of that karma fairly promptly in the form of warm fuzzy feelings. Most of the time, however, karma isn't directly observable. The fruit might take a very long time to develop and its final shape might not be something that obviously links it to its source. "Yesterday I swatted a fly and today I got stung by a bee. Karma?" I don't know. You don't know. It doesn't really matter. Just don't swat the next fly. (Linguistic aside: westerners have developed the odd habit of using the term "karma" to refer to the effect (the bee sting) when it actually refers to the cause (the swatting of the fly). The bee sting is *phala*.)

Since we usually cannot directly observe karma, it is an aspect of the Dharma that we must essentially take on faith. Remember that while karma is simple in its philosophical basis (good action → good result; bad action → bad result), it is unbelievably complex in its application. The moment that you are experiencing right now is the product not only of the moment that preceded it, but of innumerable other acts and thoughts since beginningless time. A karmic equation will always have far more variables than you want to think about. The Buddha is said to have had the "divine eye" that allowed him to see the "the passing away and reappearance of beings" (MN 36), but I don't think that even all of the arahants had that ability.

Karma is impersonal. This is a little hard for those of us who grew up in theistic homes to grasp. It's a natural law, not a cosmic scheme of rewards and punishment. If you step off a cliff and get hurt, you wouldn't say that your action angered the god of gravity and he punished you by breaking your leg. You understand that your broken leg is simply the natural result of an unwise action. Karma is the same way. There's no entity sitting on a throne somewhere weighing our actions and doling out apples and lumps of coal.

So, why is karma important?

1. It informs our moral decisions. If we don't accept that our actions have consequences, we're not likely to follow the precepts given in the morality part of the Path, or for that matter, to follow any path at all. By asserting the law of karma, the Buddha separated his doctrine from that of the nihilists, who believed in a chaotic universe ungoverned by moral laws.
2. The other reason that karma is important is that it controls rebirth. Adeesha will be saying more about rebirth next week. For now I'd like to emphasize that this doesn't just mean the "next life" kind of rebirth. It's more useful to consider the rebirth that you're going through right now—your body, thoughts, perceptions, &c. changing from moment to moment. As Ajahn Chah says, "you need not bother to think about past, present, or future; merely watch the body and mind now. You can figure out your karma for yourself if you watch your mind."