

## Spring 2004: Karma

*Question: I have a hard time with the idea that negative things in a person's life could be caused by actions in a past life. What bothers me is that it seems like a way to blame people for their suffering and could be used as an excuse to avoid helping someone who needs it. Can you shed some light on this?*

**Narayan Liebenson Grady:** All too often the concept of karma has been misunderstood or misappropriated in our culture, even in spiritual circles. We may invoke the idea of karma to punish ourselves, or others, or to ignore the all-too-real suffering that we and others experience. For example, we may raise the issue of karma as punishment to explain why a person has a life-threatening disease, was killed in a car crash, lost a spouse, or lost a job. This is an oversimplification of an ancient and profound concept.

The results of karma cannot be understood intellectually, or through simple logic and reason. The Buddha said that karma is an imponderable (Pali: *acinteyya*), and that only a buddha can see into the complexity and subtlety of why a particular consequence comes about. Ajahn Chah put it more bluntly. He said if one thinks about the unthinkable, the mind will explode.

As practitioners we need to hold the concept of karma in the biggest possible way, recognizing that all of us have been engaged in both wholesome and unwholesome actions. After all, the point of Buddhist practice is not to sit in judgment but to cultivate wisdom and compassion and let go of the torments of the heart, such as greed, hatred and delusion. Reacting with blame and indifference in the face of suffering is clearly a torment of the heart.

One way of relating to the concept of karma is to understand that life unfolds according to certain laws. A cherry tree will not grow from an apple seed. Acknowledging that things do not occur randomly can help us develop equanimity when dealing with difficult conditions.

Equanimity allows us to remain balanced and steady in the face of suffering, making it easier to work with conditions as they are instead of reacting with blame or hatred. And it allows us to open our hearts to suffering rather than react with aversion or indifference. It's great to have an ideal of wanting to be more compassionate, but without equanimity, genuine compassion is not possible.

It's not that things are as they should be, but rather that things are as they are. To see things as lawful does not mean that we accept the unacceptable. To use the concept of karma to blame those who are subjected to injustice, for example, seems to me to be one way to rationalize conditions that are unacceptable and avoid taking responsibility for the way things are.

The Buddha called karma the light of the world because it clarifies the path. Reflecting on karma can be deeply empowering. It can help us to understand that our thoughts and actions have consequences and that by practicing mindfulness we protect ourselves, and others, from harm. This allows us to follow the path of wisdom, delighting in doing what is wholesome and avoiding that which causes harm. In this way, we can sense that all things are interconnected, that we are not separate. Having this understanding of non-separation is what leads to compassion.