

## **Lessons from Karma**

Sara Milnes, July 10, 2016

The word karma is bandied about all the time in our culture, although its origins are from India, and quite ancient.

We hear it all the time—

- it's her karma
- he has bad karma
- it was his karma to have a heart attack
- the people affected by the hurricane must have bad karma
- Let's get out of here—this place has bad karma.

Colloquially, we use it to mean fate, or destiny, or bad vibrations, and those are among the dictionary definitions.

Another way of using it is to refer to action—the concept that actions bring about certain results: good action brings good results, bad action brings bad results.

In terms of reincarnation, people might say that it's the actions in a previous lifetime that “caused” the current lifetime of good or bad circumstances. Karma as frequently used can have a certain fatalistic ring to it.

Let's take a look at some alternative views of karma. What are its origins? How has it evolved? Is it possible to encourage “good karma”? And if you don't believe in karma, is it possible to act in a way that leads to a happier life?

The concept of karma is very ancient. Many small societies have some concept of rebirth, but only in India did it develop in the ways we see today.

Our first historical glimpse of it is in the early brahminical tradition's Rig Veda, which generally is dated to about 1900 BCE. This brahminical religion is a precursor to modern Hinduism.

In the Rig Veda, there is allusion to rebirth from the heavenly realm, but it has nothing to do with good or bad actions. It has to do with performing (or hiring someone of the highest class to perform) the purifying rituals correctly, both physically and in chanting them with the correct pronunciation and intonation.

Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, a remarkable period of transformation began across many cultures, and some of the world's great religions were formed. This period is often called the axiel age. During this

time, there were travelling traders and scholars, a growth of small cities, and the growth of the merchant class.

The Upanishadic tradition (which follows the Vedas), Jainism, and Buddhism came into being in India during this time, and with them changing views of karma and rebirth.

A more detailed view of rebirth, and beginning references to karma as action, appear in the Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad, generally considered to be one of the oldest of the Upanishads, created around 700 BCE.

In this Upanishad, people's actions in this lead to an appropriate destiny hereafter, in a heavenly or hell realm, prior to being reborn. But acting correctly in the Upanishads didn't have to do with ethical actions.

To reach the heavenly realm rather than the hell realm, acting correctly was conceived of in terms of purifying acts, called punya karma.

Also introduced in the Upanishads was a way to escape rebirth entirely. This is the concept that the essence inside us all, called Atman, is the same as the Universal supreme essence (Brahman).

A person who understands and totally knows and internalizes that Atman is Brahman is a person who escapes rebirth entirely. So action was associated with this knowing, this gnosis.

According to Richard Gombrich in his book *What the Buddha Thought*, "in [Upanishadic] ritual, acts are enjoined or prohibited according to the agent: what is right for a man may be wrong for a woman, and *vice versa*; what is right for a Brahmin may be wrong for an outcaste, etc. Norms are thus particularized, not universal." So only the act itself, not the doer of the act, is important. With this system, ethics—good and bad actions—don't have an effect on one's karma.

This concept began to change around the same time as the Upanishads, with the Jains, who were actually the first to associate ethical action with rebirth.

The early Jains believed that everyone was in a perpetual cycle of rebirth, and that the quality of one's rebirth is determined by the moral quality of one's actions in earlier lives. They believed that a good rebirth was dependent on not causing harm. And since all life, even insentient life, could suffer pain, one needed to curtail all one's activities to avoid harm. This lies at the root of Jain asceticism.

The earliest Jain doctrine of karma leaves no room for meritorious action. One can try to eliminate bad karma, but there was no possibility of good karma. Obviously, it's very difficult to do no harm at all, so early Jainism wasn't very accessible to ordinary people.

Living around the same time as the early Upanishads and the Jains, around the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, was Gotama Siddhartha, who became known as the Buddha.

As a spiritual seeker, he practiced deep meditation and severe austerities for six years, before rejecting both the Brahmin rituals and the Jain austerities. He realized that rituals and austerities all had to do with externals. The Buddha's insight was that everything that matters happens in the mind.

The Buddha radically redefined karma. He used the same word—karma—which the brahminical tradition defined as purifying ritual acts that varied, depending on one's station in life.

He redefined the word karma to instead mean ethical intention. Since ethical action follows ethical intention, the emphasis was on a person who was an autonomous individual who could make choices and be responsible for himself. Rituals to the gods were no longer important.

In addition to totally changing the brahminical meaning of the word, his definition was different from the Jain meaning, because it included meritorious action as well as abstaining from action.

Suddenly, the word karma meant not only the action, but the intention behind the action. It emphasized the internal action, not just the external one.

Because intention is key in the Buddha's definition of karma, he excludes many of a person's experiences from being a result of karma. In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, in an early sermon by the Buddha, he included conditions brought about by health, illness and its treatment, weather, and acts of violence against oneself as not resulting in good or bad karma. Only actions brought about by intention, which had no other common-sense or medical explanation, resulted in karma.

In terms of the Buddha's definition of the word, many of our colloquial uses of the word, such as attributing disease or natural disaster to karma, are not due to karma at all.

Over centuries of evolution, the brahminical tradition's evolution into modern Hinduism also adopted the concepts of moral behavior bringing good and bad karma, and encouraged moral actions and restraints, and Jainism similarly evolved. But even in Hinduism's present form, there is still also an emphasis on purifying rituals, and intention is not the key to karma.

So karma is not so simplistic as fate or destiny, and at least in the Buddha's view, doesn't include things over which we have no control. This view doesn't require us to believe in a God and participate in any rituals. We aren't

reliant on an external agent such as a God, but on our own intentions, our own conscience. I think this is why Buddhism resonates with many Unitarian Universalists.

The Buddha's teachings are replete with pragmatic steps to recognize intentions, to encourage and act upon wholesome intentions and discourage and refrain from unwholesome ones. He wasn't interested in discussing cosmological and metaphysical subjects, because he said they would not bring freedom from unwholesome karma.

What was important for him was ethical and skillful intentions and the actions that followed from them, which creates the good and bad karma that affects our lives. The Buddha's view of karma was eminently practical. His emphasis on intention and the many teachings he gave to strengthen ethical behavior are extraordinarily useful in helping us make ethical choices.

His teachings are geared towards answering the question: "How should I behave?" not "What should I believe?"

His ethical teachings span 45 years, and are wide-ranging, but to me, the starting point to cultivating good karma that leads to happiness is mindfulness. This is because mindfulness provides a doorway to understanding intention.

Many of you may meditate, and many more at least have tried it. And whatever method you may have used, you were probably suddenly aware of how very busy your mind was, darting about, refusing to stay on the object you wanted it to meditate on.

You may have found yourself wanting something, daydreaming of a buying something new, a meal, what you were going to do when you finished.

Or thinking of something you didn't want—an unpleasant encounter in the past, or being uncomfortable in the present.

You could have been sleepy, even falling asleep, or restless or anxious in body or mind.

Or you might have been busy doubting, thinking this is the craziest thing you've ever done and hoping it would be over soon.

These occurrences—greed, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt—are the five hindrances outlined by the Buddha.

Many beginning meditators, and even experienced ones, tend to try to push away thoughts that they consider unworthy—pettiness or anger or

greediness. But that actually isn't the point. The point is to be aware of what arises. If we repress it, we may not have the opportunity to choose the ethical action.

Mindfulness is practiced both in meditation, and in daily life. The advantage of sitting meditation is that it helps the mind calm down enough to recognize some of the not-so-clear motivations in daily life. It's a practice ground for daily life. Because it's in daily life that ethical behavior occurs—ethics is grounded in relationship.

Thoughts will arise without our willing them. Current brain research has showed that the impulse to act occurs BEFORE the conscious intention to act. That part isn't in our control. But if our mind isn't alert enough to notice the impulse and choose ethical action, we are likely to act out whatever the impulse is—good or bad.

What we have is not free will, because thoughts arise without us willing them, but free won't—the ability to curb unwholesome actions and choose wholesome ones.

The Buddha gave guidelines as to what constituted wholesome behavior. All religions provide ethical guidelines. In fact, one of the reasons that Buddhism is classified as a religion, even though it doesn't posit a God, is its ethical dimension. These guidelines provide useful filters in examining our intentions.

The first guideline is to abstain from taking life, but it's much broader than just not killing. It has to do with not harming another. Said positively, it points to treating others with kindness and friendliness.

When we recognize that others are people just like us, who have hopes and dreams and are trying to live a life as best they can, we are inclined to feel kindness and compassion, and curb any impulse that might arise towards impatience, irritation or other unskillful acts.

The second guideline is to abstain from taking anything that is not freely given. More than just not stealing, it involves allowing others to be safe, physically, mentally, emotionally. It requires a generosity of spirit to give that to others.

The third is to use sexuality wisely, in a way that doesn't cause harm. For people who aren't monks or nuns who have taken vows of celibacy, this doesn't say anything about who you have sex with or what you do. The moral imperative is whether you are causing harm to yourself or others.

The fourth is abstaining from false speech. The Buddha said that speech should be truthful, kind, beneficial and timely. We all know people who have

blurted out in anger something that is truthful, but is neither kind, beneficial nor timely. Maybe we have done it ourselves.

In many ways, I think the guideline about speech is the most difficult. We get wrapped up in our thoughts and conversation, and don't pause to look at our intention, and because of that, say something unskillful. We don't stop to ask ourselves if this is really useful, or the time to say it.

This doesn't mean that we should never bring up difficult topics, and have difficult conversations. It means that we need to have those difficult conversations at the right time, when they'll be useful, and have clear intentions to be truthful and kind. The Buddha didn't shirk from saying things to people that they didn't want to hear, when the time was right.

The last guideline is to abstain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind. This makes a lot of sense, when we see our goal as having a clear mind that allows to be aware, to recognize our intentions and to act with kindness and generosity. Wholesome intention leads to wholesome action, leads to wholesome karma.

The Buddha's message on karma, and how to cultivate good karma, is a message of hope. It's not a fatalistic view that things will happen to us that we can't do anything about, or that everything that happens to us is the result of what we did in this lifetime, or worse yet, some other lifetime we don't know about.

The Buddha's message on karma is that we can be aware of our intentions, and cultivate intentions that bring mindfulness, kindness and safety to ourselves and others.

The more we act in ethical ways, the more we are inclined to act in ethical ways. Each wholesome action adds to a pattern of wholesome actions, and becomes what the mind will think. This is the way to cultivate good karma.

As Lao Tzu said,

Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

May we all cultivate good karma, and experience the happiness to ourselves and others that wholesome action brings.