

KARMA — VIPAKA

A few Essential Points concerning the Law of Cause and Effect regarding one's acts

By Sönam Lhundrup, revised version, April 2007

The life we are presently living is the result of our past actions: our thoughts, words and physical deeds. Our present actions will determine how our life (and lives) will be in the future.

The quality of one's acts determines one's experience of life.
Mind is the governor; body and speech are its servants.
And as far as mind is concerned: motivation is the key point.

Our acts have consequences beyond what we perceive, and even beyond this life. The ripening of actions is unavoidable; they will unfailingly rebound, like boomerangs, and affect us. However the maturation of actions is something dynamic. This dynamic aspect can be used in order to:

- avoid suffering and hardships,
- reduce suffering
- create joy and happiness
- increase happiness
- and finally to go beyond all conditioning to become awakened.

This is possible because acts have different results:

- certain acts give the result of suffering, and are thus called “harmful”,
- while other types of actions result in happiness, and are therefore called “beneficial”.

That's why we are motivated to learn to:

- avoid harmful actions and
- accomplish beneficial actions.

In our working with karmic cause and effect, two key attitudes are to develop:

- *accept* our present experiences: working with the ripening of our previous actions to purify them
- and *take responsibility* for our present acts and future experiences: giving a direction to our life and to one's stream of being which continues beyond this life through beneficial actions.

Regarding a skilful application of the law of cause and effect, one obviously has to learn more about the consequences of one's acts, the influence of our motivation and other factors through carefully:

- observing
- listening
- reading
- thinking
- contemplating
- meditating.

And then we need to act in accordance with our understanding – if not, it's meaningless!

Definitions:

Karma is the conscious act which is the cause.

Vipaka is the experience which is the result.

The future is determined by our actions; so the long term evolution of ourselves and of mankind will not necessarily be positive, but also not necessarily negative, it depends on how we act.

Buddha Shakyamuni stated: « For beings their acts are their goods; their acts are their inheritance, their acts are their womb; their acts are their ties; their acts are their refuge. Acts are what differentiates beings into inferior and superior. »

According to the Buddha acts are called “beneficial” because they do good to oneself and to others, they are wholesome and virtuous, their consequences are pleasant, they lead to happiness, they protect temporarily from suffering in the present and in future lives, they make everything that is beneficial increase and everything that is harmful decrease, and finally they bring suffering to an end.

Other acts are called “harmful” because they harm oneself and others, they are unwholesome and non-virtuous, their consequences are unpleasant, they lead to suffering in the present and in future lives, they make everything that is harmful increase and everything that is beneficial decrease, and they chain us to suffering.

The result of an action depends on the following factors:

- the obvious consequences of the act (whether harm was done or benefit)
- the full accomplishment of the act (whether completed or left incomplete)
- the intensity of the motivation or will preceding the act (weak, medium, strong)
- the consciousness of the act (being fully conscious or not, dreaming, unconscious...)
- the level of responsibility of the person accomplishing the act (whether adult, child, slave...)
- nature and intensity of the mental state during the act (hatred, desire, love, compassion...)
- the state of mind immediately following the act (whether rejoicing in it or regretting...)
- other reinforcing or tempering acts accomplished by the same person
- the frequency of the act (whether habitual, rare or unique)
- who is concerned by the act, our connection with them (masters, parents, strangers, animals...)
- the moment of the act (just before dying, in the *bardo*, during adulthood, childhood...)
- the level of development of the person accomplishing the act (previous training, vows...)
- the context of the act (with or without witnesses, with or without necessity, forced or not...)

A “strong act” which produces a strong result is therefore accomplished with a strong intention, of one's own free will, consciously, with the mind's full control and strength; the act is completely accomplished, with strong rejoicing (during and afterwards); it is followed and accompanied by reinforcing acts which go in the same direction; it is often repeated, and accomplished at crucial moments of life, like at death; it is directed towards beings with whom there is a strong connection or who are powerful amplifiers (masters, parents,...) or towards numerous beings.

Such acts are “strong” because they predominate over other acts, they ripen very quickly within this life or immediately after death, and they have the power to nullify the effects of their opposite acts.

In order to have results (*vipaka*) which are positive, i.e. to have a life which allows us to deepen our dharma practice, it is essential to avoid strong acts of a harmful nature and to accomplish more strong acts of beneficial nature. This is what the practice of dharma is.

The result (*vipaka*) of an act (*karma*) will manifest either in this life, in the next, or in another life. It manifests within the six realms of existence as a pleasant or unpleasant experience, with a troubled or untroubled mind.

Only “pure” acts – free of even the slightest grasping – do not result in an experience within the six realms. They lead to the exhaustion of karma, to the state beyond suffering (*nirvana*).

With the exception of very profound meditative absorptions (the *dhyanas* of deep *shamatha*) all other acts are “variable” (*injati*), which means that the place of ripening of their result is not fixed; it will depend on the power and influence of other acts accomplished by this same stream of being (person). For instance, if a stream of being has accomplished numerous actions that lead to human rebirth, an act that would usually ripen as a hell realm experience may also manifest as a difficult experience within a human life.

Each act has immediate and future consequences.

The « waves » of our acts interact with the waves of our actions of before and afterwards. They also mature by interaction with the waves created by other beings who share the karma of a similar life.

- An act has influence on the state of mind that follows immediately after.
- It reinforces the tendency to act in the same way later on.
- It has an influence on one's body (appearance, constitution, etc.) now and later on.
- It influences other beings (their life experience, attitudes, etc.)
- It has an influence on one's material environment.

These influences (“waves”) interact in a limitless way to create our experiences.

Three types of fruit (*phala*) or results are distinguished:

- 1- Fully ripening results (*vipaka-phala*) determine the place of a next rebirth.
- 2- Secondary results (*nisyanda-phala*) determine one's further personal experiences in that place.
- 3- The results which influence the circumstances (*adhipati-phala*) determine the outer conditions of that life.

1- The fully ripening results of acts are: rebirth in a life with characteristics that correspond to the act – aggressiveness and paranoia leads to hellish experiences, greed and quarrels to the hungry ghosts, ignorance and fear to the animal realm, desire and mixture of sorrow and joy into the human realm, jealousy and sensual enjoyment to the demigods, pride and tranquillity into the god realms.

The acts which determine one's next rebirth have their effects in the following order:

- (1) first, the heavy or strong acts (*guru-karma*),
- (2) then the acts accomplished in the moments just before death,
- (3) then strong habitual acts of the previous life,
- (4) and finally acts from other lives.

2- Secondary results are: the qualities and faults of such a life, longevity or short life, health and illness, wealth or poverty, relationships with others, success and failure, emotional experiences, etc.

3- The results which influence the circumstances are: the qualities of our environment, splendour or ruggedness of the terrain, climate, weather, good or poor harvests, protection and safety or many dangers, general ease or difficulty of life, ...

Our perennial suffering even when presumably happy is the proof that we are not very skilled in our quest for happiness. It is impossible to stop suffering and live happily, if we have not created the necessary causes. For a better understanding of the relationship between causes and effects, here are a few examples given by the Buddha Shakyamuni:

Acts of the body:

- acting out of desire or anger : unpleasant appearance, premature old age.
- cultivating contentment or compassion : beauty, gracefulness
- acting violently towards others or stealing their goods : weak health, often ill
- nursing others or protecting their goods : health and vitality
- killing or assassinating : life is shortened by lack of vitality
- protecting life : longevity, health
- behaving arrogantly, without respect: inferior, primitive rebirth
- behaving respectfully while accepting true authority : superior rebirth, respect
- acting out of avarice, possessiveness : poverty, lack of support
- practicing generosity, supporting others : wealth, material ease
- acting out of jealousy, not rejoicing in others good fortune: lack of ability and talent
- acting without rivalry, rejoicing : many skills, easy learning
- killing with little awareness of the value of life : accidental death
- protecting lives with awareness of their value : protection from accidents
- taking alcohol or drugs: lack of mental clarity and intelligence, madness
- preserving and developing mental clarity: being surrounded by wise friends.

Acts of speech :

- scheming, creating quarrels : encountering quarrels and discord
- creating harmony, supporting good relations, faithfulness: easy friendships, stable relations
- lying, slandering : being fooled, trespass of one's confidence
- talking with sincerity: meeting honest people, worthy of truth
- insulting, despising: being a subject of scorn and disdain
- talking gently and kindly: friendly encounters, being treated politely
- chattering, useless gossip : fruitless dialogues that waste time
- useful, judicious speech: useful, profound and effective encounters
- speaking without listening to real needs : lack of attention to one's own speech
- speaking after listening from the heart : support from others, acceptance, integration
- speaking with feigned, hypocritical interest : meeting 'closed doors', no support
- speaking with authentic benevolence : interest and openness from others, receiving support
- blaming, reproaching others : meeting with criticism, blame
- praising true qualities: receiving praises, encouragement
- being obstinate in one's views, incapability to yield : non-recognition from others
- accepting other's views, learning, ability to give way and integrate: valued, good reputation

Acts of mind:

The result is generally close to what the mental attitude was, for example generous thoughts: feelings of richness; avaricious thoughts: feelings of poverty etc.

These examples only give us the basic points of how karma develops within the context of a human life. Nevertheless they can help us to come to a better understanding of what is happening in this life and how we can create a more harmonious life in the future.

Explanation to be continued with a teaching on the 10 beneficial actions: the 10 precepts of dharma practitioners or "10 pillars of Buddhist practice". END