

Three Principles of Karma

December 29, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

kamma, action, consequences, U Pandita, choice, ethics, rebirth

Gil Fronsdal

Good day. It was nice to meditate here with you all. I feel much better now. I had a shingles shot yesterday and I was warned that it might have a big impact, and it did. If I slur my words or I'm not quite coherent, maybe it's still the effect of the shingles shot.

I want to talk about karma. It's one of the big topics in Buddhism. Some people feel that it's one of the most central teachings of Buddhism or the Buddha. Sometimes Western teachers like myself are criticized for not teaching it enough, not emphasizing it because it is so central. So I want to talk about it.

I want to say that there are three major aspects of the karma teaching. Understanding these three different areas will help you find your way when people start talking about karma. You'll start saying: "Well, which of these three are they addressing? Is it all three? Is it just

one of them or two of them? What are they actually talking about?” Sometimes people talk about karma assuming you know what they mean. So this maybe helps.

The first aspect is that the Pali word *kamma* – karma in Sanskrit – literally means action. (The Sanskrit and Pali languages are very closely related. Sometimes there is just a softening of some of the consonants.) That’s the basic meaning. It means how we act. Later by extension the word has become associated with theories of action – theories of understanding how actions work.

One of the aspects of this theory of action is the idea that actions have consequences. What we say and what we do, and also what we think – what goes on in our mind – is not impact-free. Whatever we do has an influence. It has results that can happen.

For example, if you race around for a whole day trying to do many things in a hurry, and at the end of the day you’re exhausted and have a headache, that’s the consequence of having rushed around all day. If instead you do things calmly and mindfully, and you come to the end of the day and you still feel calm and settled and not so exhausted, that’s partly the consequence of the actions you do. Or if you lie to your best friend and your best friend now doesn’t trust you, your lying had a

consequence. So the teaching of karma has this idea that all your actions have consequences.

What this implies is that you should be careful not only about what you do, but also about what you do in terms of the consequence it has. What impact does it have on others? What impact will it have on you? Seemingly innocent things we do are not so inconsequential. Everything we do has some kind of value in it. It's part of the conditioning factors. It creates an influence. It creates a lingering effect.

One of the ways that karma works – its consequences – is not just consequences in the world, but the most important part is consequences to ourselves. We might want to say in Western terms that it has psychological consequences. What we do regularly becomes a habit. It becomes a momentum and force in our mind so that we're more likely to do that again.

For instance, if we complain a lot, and that's what we're always doing, our complaining has a consequence. Maybe it has some kind of consequence in the world. People may feel a little hesitant to talk to us if we are always complaining. But also complaining is a stressful activity of the mind, and we're compounding that stress if we do it regularly. We make it more likely that it becomes a habit to complain. And then we find

ourselves complaining without having planned to complain. It has just become a habit.

For some of these things that we do regularly, the influence they have goes underground for a while and then comes out later. We may go along merrily living our lives, and then we meditate. At some point in meditation, we realize that we now have to take into account the fact that we hurt someone twenty years ago. We know we hurt them, but we never really recognized the impact that our action had on us or them. There is something about meditation, sitting quietly, and being attentive, that brings us the realization.

Sometimes – especially on retreat – things long ago come up really big and then we have to deal with them. They've been living underneath there, living kind of underground and waiting their turn. It's not inconsequential they've been living there. They're kind of simmering there in the background. Now they come to the foreground, and we have to deal with our actions somehow and work with them.

My teacher in Burma, U Pandita, loved to frequently tell stories of people who came to meditate with him. In Burma, guerrilla fighters were fighting the government. Both the guerrillas and the soldiers would come to meditate with him, and the consequence of the violence

they'd done would come and impact them in their meditation. They'd have to sit with it, and be with it, and work through it to the other side. For some of them, it was a challenging time to sit with the inner landscape of the consequences of what they'd done.

So the first principle of karma is that actions have consequences, and we can be careful with the choices we make about what we do in deeds, speech, and thoughts.

It's harder in our thinking, but with meditation, we start learning that we actually have some ability to choose. Having more and more choice of how we live our lives is one of the consequences of mindfulness meditation. The more choice we have, the more freedom we have. People who don't see that they have choice don't have choice. They just do things on automatic, or they do things and they don't even know why they say and do things. It's just kind of like, this is what happens. It comes out of them. But as we get quieter and more attentive, more and more we see there is lots of choice in all kinds of small ways in our lives.

When I came back from three years or so in the Zen monastery where everything was choreographed, everything was very organized – how you stood, how you walked, how you bowed, when you bowed, when you sat. Everything was on a schedule for much of the

day. You didn't have to think a lot about "Do I stand now?" The bell rang and you stood.

When I left the monastery, I realized right away all kinds of things that I'd done on automatic pilot before the monastic training. Now I saw there was a choice. I went to the abbot and told him this, that how I sit down in a chair, I never thought about it before. But now when I sit in a chair, I'm aware of the choice about how I sit there, the posture I take. I see all this choice. Then the abbot did something that he'd never done to me before. When I said that to him, he reached forward and shook my hand. He was really pleased, I guess, by this realization.

The second principle of karma is that the consequences of our actions are influenced by the quality of the actions. If what we think, say, or do is characterized by something unskillful, unwholesome, unethical, or that is going to harm someone, then the consequences will have a flavor of being also unskillful, unhelpful, unethical, or harmful. So if we live a life that's harming, the consequences are going to be harming to ourselves and maybe to others.

The opposite is also true. If we live a life that's wholesome, skillful, non-harming, and beneficial to self and others, then the consequences of our actions will carry with them some of those skillful, wholesome qualities.

The consequences of our actions are shaped by the ethical quality of the actions that we do. It's important to be even more careful because if we do things that are unhealthy, then the consequences will be unhealthy. We just perpetuate that through time. It's sometimes a cyclic thing where if you do something unhealthy or unethical, the consequences will carry with them some of the unhealthy or unwholesome qualities of the original action.

I think this is particularly true about the impact of our actions on our own psychology. It's cyclic because as something unhealthy happens, the consequence is that we are predisposed to do more things that are unhealthy. If we do things that are healthy and wholesome, then when the consequences are wholesome, that predisposes us to do more of the same.

So that's the second principle of karma: the idea that the consequence is influenced or shaped by the quality of the original action.

The third principle of this karma theory is that the consequences of our actions – the consequences of our wholesome actions and unwholesome actions – come into play also over lifetimes. The idea is that there are multiple lifetimes and that the way that you'll be reborn

when you die will be very much influenced by the quality of the actions you did in this lifetime. The things you did and whether the quality of them was ethical or unethical, wholesome or unwholesome will influence how you get reborn. It's something of an extension of the second principle, but it's extended into rebirth.

When some people talk about karma, they are talking about all three of these aspects. And some people talk about only the first two because the idea of rebirth is not so important to them. So when people talk about karma, you have to listen to them carefully and consider whether they are talking about only the first two principles or the third principle as well. Then it's up to you to decide if this teaching on rebirth has any value or importance for you, and if it motivates you to live a better life.

Regardless of whether you believe or don't believe in rebirth, the first two principles are foundational to this teaching of karma. Your actions have consequences, and the consequences are shaped by the ethical quality of the action itself. It's a call then to be careful and attentive, while you appreciate that you have choice.

The calmer you are, the more steady you are, the more awake you are, then the more you'll see all the choice points throughout the day. You'll start choosing to live more wisely, ethically, and kindly.

It might seem like a lot of work to make all these choices. But it becomes more like second nature and obvious that we're making choices all the time anyway, but we're not so conscious of it. What we do with meditation practice is that we become more conscious. Hopefully, as we become more conscious, we will be more aware of unnecessary energy and effort. This living a life of choice becomes more and more effortless over time, because we can live from a place of ease.

May you engage in good actions, good karma. Sometimes when the Buddha talked about karma, he talked about beautiful actions. Sometimes it gets translated as good actions, but the word *kalyāṇa* means beautiful. If you live with beautiful actions, then there will be beautiful results. May you live a beautiful life.

Thank you.