

The Buddha's Baggage

Everything you wanted to know about karma but were afraid to ask.

-Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Karma and rebirth are often treated as Buddhism's cultural baggage: a set of Indian beliefs that—either because the Buddha wasn't thinking carefully, or because his early followers didn't stay true to his teachings—got mixed up with the dharma even though they don't fit in with the rest of what he taught. Now that the dharma has come to the West, it's time, we believe, to leave all this unnecessary baggage unclaimed on the carousel so we can focus on the Buddha's true message in a way that will speak directly to our own cultural needs. However, the real problem with karma and rebirth is that we tend to misunderstand what these teachings have to say. This is because Buddhism came to the West at the same time as other Indian religions, and its luggage got mixed up with theirs in transit. When we sort out which luggage really belongs to the tradition, we find that the bags marked "Karma" and "Rebirth" actually contain valuables. And to help show how valuable they are, here are my answers to some frequently asked questions on these topics.

1. What is karma? The word karma has two meanings, depending on context. Primarily, it means intentional actions in thought, word, and deed; secondarily, it refers to the results of intentional actions, past or present—results that are shaped by the quality of the intention behind those actions.

2. How do actions determine results? Skillful intentions tend toward pleasant results, and unskillful intentions toward painful results. It's important to stress the word tend here, since there's no ironclad, tit-for-tat deterministic connection between an intentional act and its results. The causal principle underlying

actions and results is actually very complex. Your present experience is shaped by three karmic factors: the results of past intentions—and this includes all your sense spheres; present intentions; and the results of your present intentions. Past intentions provide you with the raw material or potentials for your present experience, but your present intentions are what shape those raw potentials into your actual experiences. Because the results of many past actions could be offering all sorts of raw materials at any point in time, and because you're potentially free to create any type of new karma at all, these conditions can interact in many complex ways. In fact, in your experience of the present, your current intention arises prior to your awareness of the senses. Without present intentions, you'd have no experience of space and time. You'd be free from their limitations. On the ultimate level, this fact is what makes awakening possible. On the immediate level, it means that even though you may have bad "karma seeds" from past unskillful intentions ripening in your "karma field," you have some freedom in how you treat the ripening seeds so that you don't have to suffer from them. You can be proactive in preventing suffering. This is why we meditate: to sensitize ourselves to our present intentions, some of which are very subtle. This sensitivity enables us to expand the range of our freedom in the present, training the mind in the skills it needs to create positive present karma, to deal positively with the raw material from past negative karma, and eventually to go beyond the karma of intentions entirely.

3. If your intentions influence the quality of the result, does this mean that every action done with good intentions will tend toward a good result?

For an intention to give good results, it has to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion. Now, it's possible for an intention to be well-meaning but based on delusion, in which case it would lead to bad results:

believing, for instance, that there are times when the compassionate course of action would be to kill or to tell a lie, or for a teacher to have sex with a student. To give good results, an action has to be not only good but also skillful. This is why the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, to develop three qualities in his actions: wisdom—acting for longterm happiness; compassion—intending not to harm anyone with his actions; and purity—checking the actual results of his actions, and learning from his mistakes so as not to be fooled by an intention that seems wise and compassionate but really isn't. This is how good intentions are trained to be skillful. Beyond that, there are two main levels of skill: the skillful actions that lead to a good rebirth, and those that lead beyond rebirth entirely, to the deathless.

4. Is it possible to burn off old karma? No. In the Buddha's times, the Jains believed that they could burn off old karma by not reacting to the pain of their austerities, and the Buddha reserved some of his sharpest ridicule for that belief. As he said, they should have noticed that the pain experienced during their austerities ended when they stopped the austerities, which meant that the pain was the result not of old karma being burned off, but of their present karma in doing the austerities. Still, it is possible to minimize the results of bad past karma. The Buddha compared past bad karma to a big lump of salt (Anguttara Nikaya 3.101). If you put the salt into a small glass of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. But if you toss it into a large, clean river, it doesn't make the water of the river too salty to drink. The river stands for a mind that has developed infinite goodwill and equanimity, grown mature in virtue and discernment, and has trained itself not to be overcome by pleasure or pain.

5. Does karma shape everything you experience? The Buddha used the teaching on karma to explain only three things: (1) your experience of pleasure and pain; (2) the level of rebirth you take after death, in terms of such things as your wisdom or lack of wisdom, wealth or lack of wealth, and the length of your life span; and (3) what to do to get out of the

cycle of rebirth. The noble eightfold path is this last type of karma: the karma that puts an end to karma. Beyond that, he said that if you tried to work out all the implications of the results of karma, you'd go crazy. Because his teaching deals simply with suffering and the end of suffering, that's as far as he took the issue.

6. Is it true that “if you want to see a person's past actions, look at his present condition; if you want to see his future condition, look at his present actions”? That's much too simplistic. It implies that you have a single karma account, like a bank account, with your present situation showing the running balance. Remember that karma is like seeds in a field. You're planting karma seeds in your field with every intention, and those seeds mature at different rates. So you've got lots of karma accounts at different stages of development. All you can see at any one moment are the seeds that are currently sprouting. As for the other seeds that haven't yet sprouted, good or bad, you can't see those at all.

7. Doesn't the teaching on karma teach people to be callous toward the sufferings of others? Since you have both good and bad seeds in your field that haven't yet matured, the teaching on karma teaches you to ask this question instead: what's the wisest way to view other people whose bad seeds are currently sprouting? And the answer is: with compassion. Is your compassion so rarified that you give it only to people who have never done anything wrong? If it were, you wouldn't find anyone to receive it. So when you see someone suffering, you don't say, “They deserve it,” and leave them to their suffering. Actions yield results, but nobody “deserves” to suffer. The path is for putting an end to suffering, “deserved” or not. You look for the potential good seeds in other people's fields that are about to mature, and try to give them whatever aid you can that will help them not to suffer from the bad seeds. After all, that's how you would like them to treat you when your bad seeds start to mature.

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8. But can't karma be used to justify social injustices? Only by people who don't really believe in karma. If someone has the karma that tends to poverty or a painful death, there are plenty of natural causes or accidents that will provide an opportunity for that karma to bear fruit. But if you decide to oppress that person economically or bring about his painful death, that bad karma now becomes yours.

9. Don't people believe in karma just because they want the universe to seem just? If they do, they're in for a disappointment. When you sow seeds in your karma field, you get the same kind of plant whose seed you sow, but the size of your harvest will vary in line with many other factors—for example, other actions you do before or after, or your state of mind when the seed ripens. This means that a minor action might yield huge results, or a major action, small results. One discourse (Majjhima Nikaya 86) tells of Angulimala, who murdered many people but then had a total change of heart and became an arahant. The only karmic result of all those murders was that people threw things at him when he was on his alms round. The relatives of those he killed probably didn't think that justice was served, but that was how karma worked in that case. And we're fortunate that karma isn't always just. As the Buddha said, if we had to pay back all the bad karma we've done in the past before reaching awakening, no one would ever awaken.

10. Other people's actions are experienced through the senses, which are shaped by your old karma. But you say that people have freedom to choose their actions in the present. Isn't there a conflict here? Like you, other people are free to choose their intentions in the present, but you don't directly experience their intentions. You experience actions inspired by their intentions, and how you experience those actions will be filtered by your past and present karma. Your good seeds may sprout in time to help you not to suffer from someone's bad intentions toward you, or your bad seeds may be sprouting in a way that interferes with their efforts to help you.

Lotus Bud. Courtesy of Hiroshi Wantanabe

11. Can the Buddha's teachings on karma be divorced from his teachings on rebirth? Not really. If there were no life before birth, karma would have no role in explaining pleasure and pain early in life. And as the Buddha said, many people are rewarded in this lifetime for doing unskillful things—he cited people who kill the enemies of a king, or who steal from an enemy of a king, or tell a lie that entertains a king—and you can probably think of similar examples in modern politics. Sometimes the results don't even show in the next lifetime—because the causal principle underlying karma is so complex.

12. But karma and rebirth are metaphysical issues. Didn't the Buddha avoid metaphysical issues? There's no word for "metaphysics" in ancient Indian languages. The Buddha avoided two sorts of issues that we would call metaphysical—the size of the cosmos and the identity of the self—because they were distractions on the path. But because he taught a path of action to put an end to suffering, he had to explain the metaphysics of action: whether it's real, whether it gives results, what determines those results, and how far action goes in causing suffering in the first place. If he hadn't taken a stand on these matters, he wouldn't have been able to explain how action had the power to bring suffering to an end.

13. If there's no self, what gets reborn? The Buddha never said that there is no self. He also never said that there was a self. The whole question of whether or not the self exists was one he put aside. There's a common misconception that the Buddha started with the idea of there being no self and, in the context of no self, taught the doctrine of karma, which makes no sense: If there's no self, nobody does the karma and nobody receives the results, so actions wouldn't matter. But that's putting the context backward. Actually, the Buddha started with the reality of karma and then viewed ideas of "self" and "not-self" as types of karma within that context. In other words, he focused on seeing the way we define our sense of self as an action. Then the question becomes this: When is the activity of identifying things as your self skillful, and when is it not? When is the activity of identifying things as not-self skillful, and when is it not? Similarly with rebirth: He avoided talking about what

gets reborn—which, however you defined it, wouldn't be anything you were responsible for anyway—and instead focused on how it happens, as a process. Because the process is a type of karma, this is something you are responsible for, and it's also a skill you can master: either with relative skill, reaching a comfortable rebirth, or with consummate skill, learning how not to be reborn at all.

14. Didn't the Buddha teach people to believe only things they can see for themselves? How can people see karma and rebirth for themselves? The Buddha was very clear on the point that some of his teachings couldn't be proven until you had put them into practice. This means that they have to be adopted as working hypotheses. A discourse on this topic (MN 60) includes teachings on topics like these: karma, the results of karma, fatalism, the experience of formlessness, and the reality of nirvana. In each case, you have to take a position on these issues if you want to put an end to suffering, so you choose whichever side seems most conducive to following a path toward that end. Similarly, when the Buddha was teaching the Kalamas to test views for themselves (AN 3.65), the test was this: When this view is adopted, does it lead to skillful or unskillful actions? So the same principle applies to the teaching on karma and rebirth: If you adopted these views as a working hypothesis, would they lead you to be more careful or less careful about your actions? A good experiment would be to devote a year to living as if you really believed in karma and rebirth, and to see how that affected the way you lived your life.

15. Didn't the Buddha simply pick up his ideas on karma and rebirth from the culture around him? It's true that the word karma already existed in his culture, but the questions of whether karma was real, whether it bore results, and whether you had any control over your karma were all hotly debated. Similarly with rebirth: Some people believed in it, others didn't, and even those who did believe in it didn't agree as to whether karma had any impact on it. So given that there was no general agreement on these topics, we can't say that the Buddha simply absorbed his teachings on them unthinkingly from his environment.

Instead, he saw on the night of his awakening that people's intentional actions did have an impact on their rebirth, and that if they didn't believe in karma and rebirth, they tended to create bad karma that led to the suffering of bad rebirths. That's why he taught karma and rebirth as the major points of basic right view.

16. But how could a human mind possibly know these things? There are two ways to answer this question: the typical way and the Buddha's way. The typical way—which has been typical from ancient India until now—is to define what a human being is, or what the mind is, and from that definition to decide what a human mind can know. If, for instance, you define the mind as just a brain, and a brain is just a bunch of atoms, there's not much that it can know for sure. But the Buddha's approach was the other way around. As he said, if you define yourself, you place limitations on yourself. So instead of starting out with a definition of the mind, he explored the skills that the mind could develop, to see what those skills could enable it to know. That's how he learned that there was a lot more to the mind than he had originally thought, and that it was capable of knowing many things that he hadn't imagined possible. By his example, he's showing how to drop some of your own cultural baggage—such as materialistic, Romantic, or Judeo-Christian views of what you are—and to try on views that will allow you to test whether he was right: by developing the same skills he did.

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17. Can't I just be an agnostic about karma and rebirth, and practice without taking a position on these issues? Even though you can't know the truth of karma and rebirth prior to your first taste of awakening, you're placing bets on these issues all the time. Every time you act, you're calculating whether the results will be worth the effort. The fact that you're expecting results means you believe in the power of karma to at least some extent. Even if you deny that you're acting with any expectation of results, part of the mind is calculating that your denial will give good results of one sort or another. If you do something you know is unskillful, but tell yourself it won't matter, you're taking a position

against karma. If your calculation of the results doesn't include the possibility that they could extend into future lifetimes, you're taking a position against rebirth. So you're taking positions on these issues all the time. The Buddha's simply pointing out that you'll benefit from adopting his position consciously and consistently.

18. But karma and rebirth focus on past and future. Doesn't the dharma teach us to focus totally on simply being mindful—fully present—in the present moment? The Buddha talks about the importance of focusing on the present moment only in the context of karma: You focus on the present because you know that there's work to be done in training the mind in developing skillful present intentions, and you don't know how much more time you have to accomplish that training. If you don't train it now, you'll suffer both now and on into the future. And it's important to note that mindfulness doesn't mean being fully present in the present moment. It means keeping something in mind. Right mindfulness means keeping in mind lessons from the past—either teachings you've learned from others, or lessons you've learned from your own experience—so that you can apply them skillfully in shaping your present intentions. When the Buddha discusses karma, his references to past and future almost always come back to the present. He discourages people from asking what particular actions led to their present state, or what particular future state they can expect from their current actions. Instead, he asks them to keep the general principle in mind—that skillful actions lead to good results, and unskillful actions to bad—and to focus on being as skillful as possible in the present moment, ideally for the sake of reaching awakening through the level of skill that puts an end to karma. So the present isn't divorced from the past and future in the practice. It's tied to the past and future through the dynamics of karma, and the goal of the practice is to get beyond past, present, and future entirely.

19. Why try to get out of karma and rebirth?

Because the unawakened mind is so quick to change that it can't really trust itself to act consistently on

skillful intentions. The only happiness that's truly reliable—and genuinely harmless all around—is the happiness of nirvana, which isn't dependent on karma at all.

20. Why focus on issues of skillful and unskillful actions when we can instead open up to the sense of emptiness or space that already surrounds us?

That emptiness is conditioned. It, too, is the result of actions—subtle perceptions, but actions nonetheless. The freedom that's truly unconditioned lies right next to our freedom of choice in the present moment. The only way to know unconditioned freedom is to get more sensitive to our freedom of choice. And we do that best by trying to get more sensitive to what's skillful and what's unskillful in our actions. As this sensitivity develops, we'll be in a better position to judge when we're still making subtle choices, and when we're experiencing something in which no act of intention was involved at all.

21. Does this mean that awakened people have no intentions? There's no intention at the moment of awakening. But when fully awakened people return to the world of the senses, they experience old karma. They also have new intentions, but they destroy the potential for those intentions to yield karmic results. In the Buddha's image, they destroy the seeds as they create them. But to understand what that means, you have to gain awakening yourself.