

**Q** Hmm! I think I understand it now. But in what sense, is the law of karma important in our religious life?

**A** The Buddha taught karma when he walked along the Eight-fold Noble Path. The Dhammapada says, "What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: Our life is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow." So, karma is actually within ourselves and flows like a stream from past to present and from present to future. Although we have a free choice, that decision is also creating a new karma which might cause your future choice. When I train my children, I am trying to change their behaviors. If I thought for a moment that the children's behaviors were unchangeable by training, I might give up trying.

A lemon tree grows because the seed of the lemon was sown. The seed is the cause of the lemon. Therefore, a lemon is the result of the seed. In Buddhist terms, we call this seed "IN"-the inner and direct cause. But in order to grow, it needs sunlight, air, ground, water. These "EN" - the external and indirect one. Human beings receive life-breath from our parents; that could be said to be the inner and direct cause. However, while we grow up, we receive a multitude of external and indirect causes. According to the teaching of the Buddha, every action occurs in the harmony of both IN and EN. Your past karma influences your present life, which, in turn, influence your life in future. Consequently you must strive always for your good future.

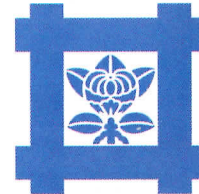
**Q** I'm now more relaxed. But our life is so difficult and sometimes my plans do not go smoothly. At those times, I often think it is my destiny not to succeed. But you taught me that was a wrong idea.

**A** You should have a strong will. Reflecting on your past experiences, you should work harder. Prof. J. Takakusu wrote in "The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy", "According to

Buddhism, all living beings have assumed the present life as the result of self-creation, and are, even at present, in the midst of creating themselves. In other words, every being is a stage of dynamic becoming."

How do you like these words - a stage of dynamic becoming? Each of us is on the stage. You are making your karma, your family is making the family karma, and your community is making your community karma and so on. If more people were to realize this fact and put desire for the welfare of others above their own desires, the world would be a better place. The chain of cause and effect will become a golden chain.

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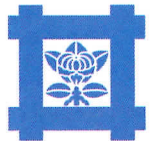
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Karma



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Q These days, I often hear the word “Karma”. I think that the word is a Buddhist term. Can you explain the meaning of karma?

A Karma is an important teaching of the Buddha. Simply put, it is the law of cause and effect. However, many people misunderstand the meaning of the word. Webster Dictionary states: “Karma is the totality of a person’s actions in any one of the successive states of his existence, thought of as determining his fate in the next; loosely, fate; destiny” . . .

Q Wait a minute! Do you mean that karma is the same as fatalism? You have often talked to me about the importance of the Eight-fold Noble Path. So, I have tried to do good things and avoid bad conducts. If my life is predestined, then my efforts would be useless.

A That is the reason I said that many people misunderstand the meaning of karma. Even the dictionary quoted above has misinterpreted the meaning. It is important to observe the Eight-fold Noble Path because we believe in karma. karma can be defined as a deed which is produced by an action of the mind. So, the Buddha says, “As we sow, so must we reap.” Therefore, each of us has his own karmic path and reaps the consequences of his deeds: good, bad, or indifferent.

Q I’m getting more confused. Could you explain it more simply and clearly by using some examples?

A Here is a story which is written in a Buddhist classic, “Milindapanha”. “Venerable Nagasena,” asked the King, “Why are men not all alike, but some short-lived and some long, some sickly and some healthy, some ugly and some handsome, some weak and some strong, some poor and some rich, some base and some noble, some stupid and some clever.”

“Why, your Majesty,” replied the Elder, “are all plants not alike, but some astringent, some salty, some pungent, some sour, and some sweet?”

“I suppose, your Reverence, because they come from different seeds.”

“And so it is with men! They are not alike because of different karma. It is said that beings each have their own karma, they are . . . born through karma, they become members of tribes and families through karma, each is ruled by karma, it is karma that divides them into high and low.” This story might help you to understand. Therefore, some scholars say that all things result from something that happened before, that is to say, from a previous cause. While, in many cases, we may never find the initial cause, nevertheless the cause exists.

Q It is almost like Fatalism! If there is a set of conditions leading up to every event in the universe, then repeating the same conditions would result in a duplicate event. If we know the conditions completely, then we would know what would follow as a consequence of those conditions, just as we predict the time of sunrise and sunset.

A Of course, the fact of sunrise and sunset is also karma for itself, but not my karma. Here, I must more deeply clarify what karma is. Karma does not say that every event is caused by conditions outside our control, but only that every event is caused. For instance, eclipse occur outside our control, and there is nothing we can do about them. They are not my karma. However, around us there are many happenings which can be said to be related to us. For those happenings, there are so many causes and one of causal factors is by our karma.

Q Well, if everything is the result of something, I must say that every human act is caused, as well as every desire, every thought, and everything we ever do or think or feel. If everything that happens is determined by a prior cause, what place is left for human action, human choice, and human will?

A It is simple. If you had not decided to do it, you would not be doing it. If you want to do it, you just do it. Your existence at this moment is determined by your past actions. Your future existence will be affected, in large part, by your present actions.

Q But you said that my action was the result of some previous cause, my thoughts, words, and action. Then I would be never free.

A Are you talking about freedom? I know many people seek freedom. But free from what? While there are restraints such as time and place on us, we are free to do, free to choose, and free to desire within those limits. In our surrounding, we find all kinds of restraints which limit our actions. For example: I cannot do what is Empirically impossible: You can’t draw a square circle. Technically impossible: You can’t jump over the moon. Timely impossible: You can’t go to Mars by a rocket ship today. Ethically prohibited: You can’t steal anything which belongs to others. But within those limits, there are many things I am free to do, free to choose, and even free to desire.

Q What I want is freedom from causality itself.

A Ah. You might think karma does not permit freedom. But remember! Freedom is not the opponent of karma, but the other side of the same coin. Karma says, “my acts are caused by me.” Freedom says, “I cause my acts.”

For instance, suppose I decide to go to Yosemite rather than to Lake Tahoe for a vacation. I can decide freely in the sense that nobody forces me to do the one rather than the other. I weigh the alternatives carefully and then I make my decision. If this is not free choice, what is? Doubtless it was caused by all sorts of considerations: a comparison of the two regions, reading of the road maps, the wish for temporary isolation or enjoyment, the reflection that I have already been to Lake Tahoe but not to Yosemite. So, I can decide it freely, but that decision is influenced by my past karma and my surroundings.