

Karma, The Past and The Present Moment, Right Now

When the Recovery Dharma book mentions karma (*kamma* in Pali) in the discussion of wise understanding, it defines karma as "what our actions create." While that phrasing is accurate, it places a strong emphasis on the outcome (what is created) over the creative aspect of the act. Karma itself is the cause - not the result. This is a very important distinction as it distinguishes karma as being related to the origin of suffering (second noble truth) rather than suffering itself (first noble truth). Karma is offered as a system for understanding causes and conditions - it is describing the verb more than the noun. Investigating the nuances of karma can be very helpful to our recovery from the suffering of addiction.

Karma itself is *cetanā* - intentional volition - and its worth breaking down what that means exactly. Right away - it is clear that intentional volition cannot be the result. Our intentions and volitional actions are not the same as their outcomes whatever they may be. Past experiences have shown us time and again, that we don't really have any control over how our things play out.

But all is not hopeless - karma conditions future arising. It's the process of conditioning - not some kind of ledger. By careful application of the eightfold path - our karma can consist of more wholesome - less harmful - conduct. In doing so we don't guarantee good outcomes, but we can do our best to influence them away from unwholesome outcomes.

It is tempting in translation to break *cetanā* into intention and volition separately. But *cetanā* itself resists that split — there is no volition without intention behind it, and no intention that doesn't eventually express itself in action. They are always woven together. This is why Wise Intention, Wise Action and Wise Mindfulness don't operate independently either — each branch of the path is shaping the same unified act of conduct, from its orientation in the mind all the way through to how it lands in the world.

It can be helpful to consider a simile - of a plate with the last piece of cake on it at a party. Our karma arises in our conduct with regards to taking that last piece of cake. Many questions probably arise with just that simple scenario - have I already had cake? has every one had cake? am I still hungry? do I take

the slice? do others want the slice? do I take just part of it? am I sneaking? Even just asking those questions - can be a significant shift from how we behaved historically. How we behave right now and why is what will ultimately manifest as our karma.

So what does that mean about our past actions? Actions that happened before encountering the Dharma - were conditioned by *avijjā* - ignorance, often operating at full strength. Of course, its possible to still act from a place of ignorance even with a dharma practice. Ignorance and karma is not an excuse for our conduct, but it can help to approach the past with more self-compassion. There were causes and conditions for our past behaviors.

Buddhism sometimes describes the three poisons – greed, hatred and delusion – as roots to our suffering. Our pasts likely have many examples of unwholesome conduct where these poisons played out unchecked, with no real strategy to counterbalance their impact on our lives. What are we supposed to do now with whatever pains of regret and remorse we carry over how we used to be?

Karma helps us to see what we can do right now. The past is fixed, and there many ways we can engage with it in this present moment. Rumination that collapses into self punishment is not remorse nor is it helpful. It is a flavor of hatred directed at self, which is harmful. Carrying guilt as ongoing suffering only creates unwholesome new karma - and does nothing to cancel the old. We can look at the past, but we shouldn't stare.

Our conduct right now — what we do and why — is all we ever have control over. Karma means that actually matters.

Questions

What comes up when considering karma as a cause rather than a consequence?

What would it mean to treat your past conduct as conditioned rather than as a definition of who you are?

Sources

Recovery Dharma 2nd Edition, p18

The Four Noble Truths - Geshe Tashi Tsering p70-82

Milindapañha - Questions of King Milinda