

Topic: Complexity of Karma

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Karma

What is Karma?

The word karma (業) is Sanskrit and means action or act, it also has the meaning of function. Also see “karman” in the Sanskrit dictionary (<https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2014/web/webtc/servepdf.php?page=258>)

Karma implies a moral view that there is cause and effects, there is right and wrong. The definition of karma in Buddhism is not the same as in the other Indian religions. The Buddha’s teachings on karma are based on dependent co-arising and rejects the notion of a soul or self. Moreover, karma is not a fixed fate.

Establishing a firm understanding and having conviction in the teachings of cause and effect, will serve as a strong moral compass to guide our every action and thoughts. The teachings on karma are linked with morals and places responsibility for our future in our own hands.

Types of Karma

Manifested and Unmanifested Karma

When we carry out an action in ways others can see and have contact with, this is called manifested karma (表業). All such karmic actions produce a karmic force, and this is sometimes referred to as unmanifested karma (無表業). Karmic forces left behind by our actions provide the potential for future results.

Three Karmas: Body, Speech, Mind

The activities of the body, speech, mind is called the three karmas. Karma of the body (身業) includes unwholesome actions and wholesome actions. Karma of speech (口業), or language, relates to how we communicate with others both verbally and in written form. There is unwholesome speech and wholesome speech. Karma of the mind (意業) is the activities in our mind, which can initiate the karma of body and speech.

Wholesome, Unwholesome and Tranquil (Inactive) Karma

Wholesome (善業) and unwholesome karma (不善業) reflect whether the karma brings benefits or harm. In addition these karmas lead to rebirth in the desire realm. Tranquil or inactive karma (不動業) reflects the deep meditative states where one's mind becomes tranquil. The karmic force from tranquil or inactive karma is able to result in rebirth in the form and formless realms.

Three Realms and Six Realms

The Buddhist cosmos contains the system of the six realms: hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, heavenly and asura realms. The heavenly realm and the hell realms contain many different levels and each progressively higher/lower level of heaven/hell experiences relatively more sublime/painful states of existence.

These six realms are further grouped into the three realms: desire, form and formless realms. The desire realm includes the hells to the lower heavenly realms. The desire realm is so named because the main characteristic of beings in that realm is desire, particularly lust. The form and formless realms are the

upper levels of the heavenly realm where the bliss of meditation is the main characteristic.

General and Specific Karma

Rebirth in any of these six realms is a result of general karma (引業). This type of karmic force determines which realm and we are born in, and what general species we take on.

Within the same species there are also differences among individual beings. These differences in our physical appearances, innate skills, family etc are a result of specific karma (滿業). Specific karma has a bearing on our bodies and lives, but there is some scope to move. The karmic actions we choose to carry out in the present life will also affect our bodies and lives.

Determinate and Indeterminate Karma

Determinate karma (決定業) is where either the time of the result is known, or the result is known or both time and results are known.

Lighter karmic forces where the time and/or form of the results are unknown are indeterminate karma (不定業).

Individual and Collective Karma

The karma that we alone experience is referred to as individual karma (不共業), while the actions that affect others are referred to as collective karma (共業).

Collective karma manifests in the complex relationships we have with others such as the trends in our society, cultural practices, accepted ideologies and the situations we experience collectively. Collective karma requires our collective effort if we want to change the situations that we all experience.

Characteristics of Karma

Growing Karmic Forces

A weak karmic force can become a strong karmic force. In the *Dharmapada*, Verse 121 teaches that we should not dismiss a minor bad deed and think it does not amount to much, drop by drop a pot can be filled with water. Verse 122 provides the opposite situation of a small good deed. This is similar to an ancient Chinese saying, “don’t think because the bad deed is minor it doesn't matter if we commit it, and don’t slight a good deed because it is small and therefore not do it.”

Karmic forces can be created simply by delighting in another's action, whether it is your past action or someone else's actions. Nāgārjuna teaches that to delight refers to when one person does a good deed and you see or witness or learn about that deed, your mind becomes filled with joy and you praise that person for doing such a good deed. But some people delight in others' bad deeds and this can create bad karmic forces too.

Timing of Results

The rewards and retributions from our good and bad karma are not limited to our present life. The results can come in the present life, immediate next life or some life in the future. There is a common saying, "one who does evil but experiences fortune is because their bad karma is yet to bear fruit, when that fruit ripens, then they will experience suffering." Conversely, "one who does good but experiences hardship is because that good karma is yet to bear fruit, when that fruit ripens, they will enjoy happiness."

Light Karma and Flower Results of Strong Karma

Karmic results borne out in this life could be from karmic deeds that are light, or it could be from karma that is very strong and the results experienced are what is known as flower results (花報). This follows from the simile of a flower which precedes the actual fruit. The flower result is a preliminary result and the actual result comes in the next/future life.

Karma and Three-Life Cycle

In order to properly understand the workings of karmic forces we need to have faith in the three-life cycle. The three-life cycle is the view that there are multiple lives, from past to present and into the future.

Moving from This Life to the Next

When we approach the end of this life, there are three main types karma that will affect where we go next.

1. Karmic force from a very strong deed.
This can be from a very noble and good deed, or it could be from an extremely evil deed, such as the five extreme faults.

2. Karmic force from habitual tendencies.

Ordinary people don't carry out anything extreme, but in the mix of good and not so good deeds we do in our lives, there may be some behaviour that we repeat often, and it develops into a habit. The karmic force from such habits is the next kind of karmic force to determine our next destiny. (*Samyuktāgama, Sūtra 930*, Buddha's teaching to Mahānāma)

3. Karmic force from the last thought.

If one has neither of the above strong karmic force from a very noble/evil deed, or from habitual tendency, the very last thought is critical. If that thought is wholesome, it will help their wholesome karmic forces to ripen and lead them to a good next life, and vice versa.

Defilement: Karma's Catalyst

How do our actions create karmic forces and what triggers past karmic forces to ripen and bear fruit? Defilement.

Defilements are the unwholesome elements in our minds and can relate to knowledge, emotions, intentions etc. Karmic forces do not yield fruits at random. Defilement plays a key role in producing karmic forces and bring past karmic forces to bear fruit. When we talk about causes and conditions coming together resulting in suffering, one primary condition is defilement.

Three Categories of Defilements / Three Poisons

Ignorance

In Buddhism a key defilement is ignorance. Ignorance is in reference to lacking understanding about the truth. As human beings with ignorance, the things we don't know can be grouped as follows:

- not knowing cause and effect,
- not knowing what is wholesome and unwholesome,
- not knowing about karma and its results,
- not knowing there are ordinary beings and noble enlightened sages, and
- not knowing there is practice and principles concerning the Dharma.

Hatred

The second major defilement is hatred. This is an emotion or attitude of ill-will towards things we encounter and dislike. Hatred is extremely grave. It is the source of many harmful deeds. It can also hinder one from carrying out good

deeds. The sūtras teach that “a single thought of hatred opens the gates to 80,000 obstacles.” Hatred is likened to a wildfire that burns all wholesomeness to ashes.

Greed

The third defilement is greed. Sometimes it is referred to as desire or cravings. This defilement is an attachment or clinging to anything that has a connection to oneself, including ourselves. Greed (love) can lead us to do good things, such as helping the people we love and helping the causes we believe in etc, but greed is grounded on an attachment to the self, so it is not the ideal form of kindness. Greed can turn into hoarding, being overly possessive and controlling, which then has undertones of hatred in the form of jealousy and so forth.

Having attachment to things will bring suffering when that thing changes. Hence where attachment arises, suffering will follow.

Four Categories of Defilement: Views, Desire, Arrogance, Ignorance

The three poisons: greed, hatred and ignorance, are largely taught with respect to the realm of desire, and particularly in terms of human beings. There is another system of categorising defilements to capture all beings in the three realms. This other system groups defilement into four categories: views, desire, arrogance, ignorance. There are different explanations of these four defilements. Below are three.

Four Subtle Roots

The ancient masters collectively call these four defilements “the four subtle roots”. Under this system, these four defilements refer to the extremely subtle forms of defilement. Although these defilements do not manifest strong unwholesomeness, they are still defilements. Hence, they are also referred to as subtle coverings. These four defilements are also called self-ignorance, self-view, self-arrogance, self-desire.

- Self-ignorance means that essentially there is no permanent existing “I”, but sentient beings think there is a real self.
- Self-view arises because of the belief there is a real self, one attaches to this view.
- Self-arrogance develops due to the attachment to this self, one develops the sense of pride and arrogance.
- Self-desire also develops due to the attachment to this self, that is they cling to this identity.

Theory and Practice, Subtle and Course

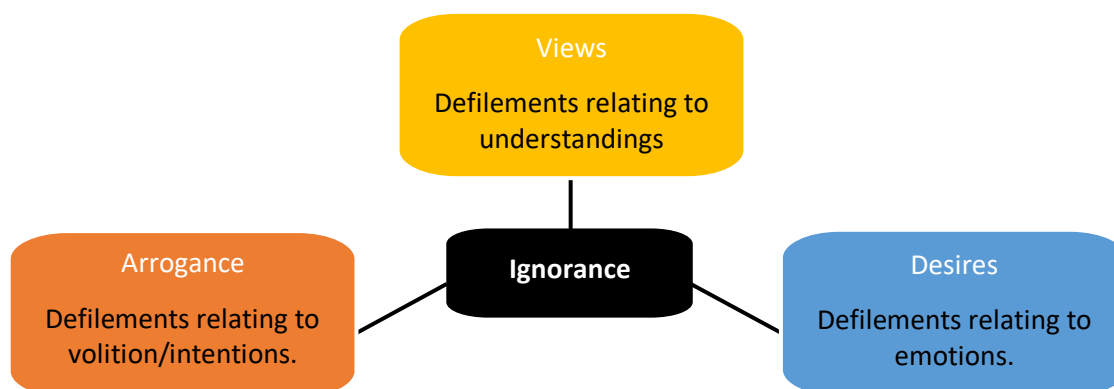
The defilements and errors of humans can be largely split into two types. The first type is theory, which relates to errors in views, understanding, comprehension, or perceptions, so this is from a theoretical or knowledge aspect. These errors can be corrected with proper teachings and explanations. The other type is practice, which relates to errors from desires, experiences and our interactions with things, so this is more of the practical aspect. To correct these errors, one needs to first correct their views and then diligently practice and train oneself in their daily activities. Only through correct views and practice can errors from experiences be remedied. Knowing about emptiness does not mean we automatically realise it in practice.

Defilements that are more course and obvious are relatively easier to sever with practice, but there will still be subtle defilements, particularly arrogance. Here arrogance is referring to a very subtle sense of a self and this is the cause for all selfish or self-focused behaviours. Overcoming subtle arrogance will yield liberation. However, even for the arhats, they still have residual habits, which are extremely subtle forms of ignorance. These kinds of ignorance relate to not knowing certain things compared to the Buddha, and such subtle gaps in wisdom do not hinder liberation.

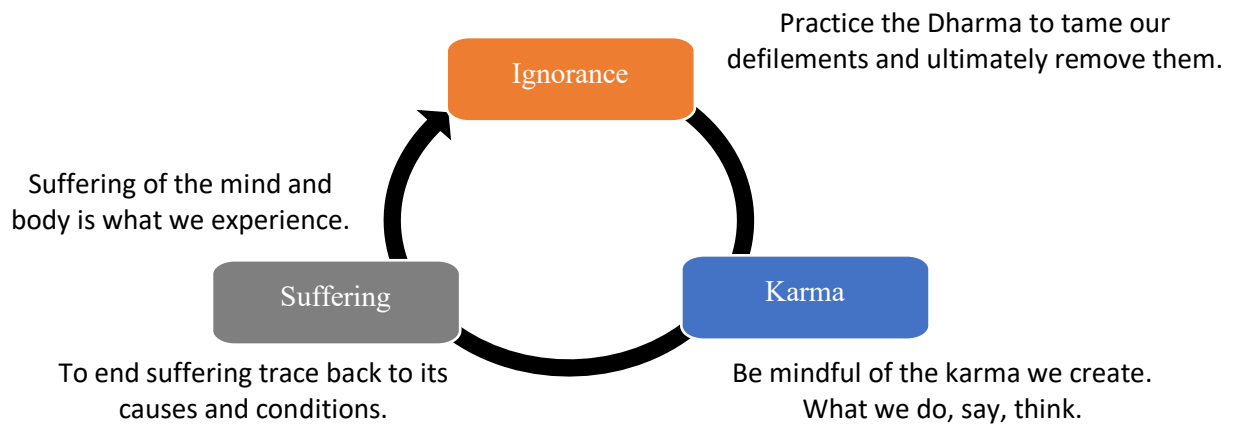
	Course	Subtle
Theory	Views	Ignorance
Practice	Desires	Arrogance

Ignorance is the Source of All Defilements

The third way of looking at these four defilements is to take ignorance as the absolute source of all defilements. That means ignorance gives rise to all defilements and defilements can be further grouped into views, desire and arrogance.



What Does It Mean for Our Practice?



The basic cycle of cause and effect is that from ignorance we create karma and from karma we endure suffering. So tracing back the steps, if we want to avoid suffering, we must change our karma and if we want to end suffering altogether, we must tackle our defilements. Apart from putting effort into controlling and taming our daily defilements of laziness, envy, anger, greed, selfishness etc, we also need to have the greater goal of tackling the root defilements of ignorance and desire.

To address ignorance we need to develop wisdom. With wisdom we can address the defilement of desire. Wisdom becomes our eyes that guide us away from creating bad karma and to carry out actions that are wholesome. The sūtras teach that when we overcome desires this is liberation by the mind (心解脫) and when we overcome ignorance, it is liberation by wisdom (慧解脫). When we perfect both, liberation is also perfected.