

Karma/Kamma: Teachings on Action and its Consequences

Introduction to Readings for November 21 Class
Suttas 98, 61, 45, 41, 135, 136, 86, 130
(Optional: 57, 60, 101, 129)

*Beings are owners of actions (kamma),
heirs to actions, bound to actions.
They have actions as (their) origin/womb; actions are their arbitrator.
MN 135.4*

The concept of karma (*kamma* in Pali) is central to teachings found in the Middle Length Discourses. It emphasizes that actions have consequences. What we do with our body, speech and mind directly effects what we experience. The ability to follow the path of practice is contingent on this idea, *i.e.*, how we act affects how we move along a path of liberation.

What happens to us is not random; impermanence does not mean out of control. The choices we act on make a difference. Because the changing world follows the laws of cause and effect, we can create new causes and conditions that will have a consequent effect on what we experience. Though the word 'karma' may suggest metaphysical ideas, karma can be seen in the pragmatic activities of our daily human life. It makes a difference whether we brush our teeth or not. To believe that brushing our teeth is beneficial is to believe in karma, that is, that actions have consequences and that certain actions are more helpful than others. We are also acting on the idea of karma when we practice a musical instrument or study a new language. Because of our practice or study, we make progress in learning to play the instrument or speak the new language. We acquire new skills due to our efforts.

The Buddha equated *kamma* with the mental factor of "intention" (*cetana*; AN iii 415). This means that the Buddhist notion of karma is first and foremost about psychological causality more than physical or metaphysical causality. It has to do with the consequences set into motion by the intentions we act on. If two people perform exactly the same action but with different intentions, the intentions and thus the consequences of those intentions that are what constitute the domain of karma.

The teachings on karma also emphasize that the quality of the intentions always shapes the quality of their consequences. Healthy intentions always have healthy consequences; unhealthy intentions have unhealthy consequences. A more traditional way of saying this is

The kind of seed one sows determines the fruit one receives:
Those who do good, receive good;
Those who do evil, receive evil. (SN i 227)

It is important to see how this invariable pattern plays out in our lives. As you do the readings for this month please consider these questions:

- Since intentions are mental, is karma only about psychological causality?
- If karma somehow plays out in the physical world, how large a role does karma have on our physical experience?
- Does karma explain everything that happens to a person? Please notice how the different suttas describe the range of causal influence that karma includes.
- What are your beliefs about karma? If you do believe in karma, how much of your life do you think originates from karma/intentions you had in the past and which you have in the present? Does the teaching on karma encourage or discourage you? In what way might it give direction to your practice?

Please re-read the account of the three knowledges the Buddha realized during the night of his Awakening (MN 4.28-33). What do you think these three knowledges teach about karma?

All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
And suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind,
And happiness follows
Like a never-departing shadow.

Dhammapada verses 1 and 2