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Karma: Cause & Effect

Understanding Intention, Moral Causality, and Responsibility in Buddhist Teachings

DEFINITION

What Is Karma (Kamma)?

- **Action, Not Fate:** Literal translation from Pali/Sanskrit means "action" or "doing"—not pre-written destiny

- **Volitional Activity:** The dynamic natural law of moral cause and effect governing mind and body

- **Natural Law (Niyāma):** Operates impartially without a cosmic judge, rewarder, or punisher

The Buddha's Core Declaration:

"Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi."

"Intention, O monks, is what I call karma. Having intended, one performs action through body, speech, and mind."

— Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.63

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CLARIFICATION

Dispelling Common Misconceptions

Not Fatalism

Past karma conditions the present, but does not dictate your current choice or response.

Not Cosmic Retribution

There is no deity keeping score; outcomes follow natural psychological & moral order.

Not the Only Cause

Karma is just one of five natural laws (Niyāmas); not every event or illness is karmic.

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THE ENGINE

Volition (Cetanā): The Heart of Action

Intentionality Matters

• **Accidental Actions:** Stepping on an insect unintentionally does not create heavy unwholesome karma

• **Psychological Seeds:** Intention plants a seed (Bīja) in the mind stream that shapes future perception

The Mind Leads All States

"Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows..."

— Dhammapada 1-2

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EXPRESSION

The Three Doors of Karma (Kammadvāra)



1. Mental Karma (Mano-kamma)

Thoughts, intentions, covetousness, ill-will, and views. The most potent door as it drives body and speech.



2. Verbal Karma (Vacī-kamma)

Words spoken, written, or communicated—truthful or deceptive, gentle or harsh, unifying or divisive.



3. Bodily Karma (Kāya-kamma)

Physical deeds performed in the world—protecting or harming, giving or taking, peaceful or violent.

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MORAL QUALITY

Kusala & Akusala: The Roots of Action

Unwholesome Roots (Akusala-mūla)

Greed / Craving (Lobha): Attachment & grasping

Hatred / Aversion (Dosa): Anger & hostility

Delusion (Moha): Ignorance of reality

Wholesome Roots (Kusala-mūla)

Non-Greed (Alobha): Generosity & renunciation

Non-Hatred (Adosa): Loving-kindness & compassion

Non-Delusion (Amoha): Wisdom & clear seeing

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MECHANISM

Action (Kamma) & Result (Vipāka)

1. The Seed (Kamma): Volitional action performed in present moment
2. Conditions (Paccaya): External environment, supporting causes, and time
3. The Fruit (Vipāka): Experiential result felt as pleasant, painful, or neutral

"As the seed is sown, so is the fruit harvested; doer of good gathers good, doer of evil gathers evil." (Samyutta Nikāya 11.10)

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UNIVERSAL LAWS

Four Cardinal Rules of Karmic Law

1. Karma Is Definite

Unwholesome actions always yield unsatisfactory results; wholesome actions yield peaceful results.

2. Karma Expands

A small intentional seed can yield vast experiential consequences over time through habitual momentum.

3. No Unperformed Result

One never experiences the karmic result of an action that one did not perform oneself.

4. Performed Karma Is Not Lost

Intentional seeds do not vanish automatically; they ripen when meeting requisite conditions.

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COSMIC ORDER

The Five Natural Orders (Pañca Niyāma)

Utu Niyāma
Physical & inorganic laws (weather, seasons)

Bīja Niyāma
Biological & genetic laws (seeds & growth)

Kamma Niyāma
Moral law of volitional cause & effect

Citta Niyāma
Psychological laws & mental processes

Dhamma Niyāma
Universal laws (gravity, impermanence, non-self)

Crucial Insight: Karma is one dimension of physical & mental reality, not an explanation for every single event.

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SUTTA TEACHING

The Parable of the Salt Crystal (Loṇaphala Sutta)



A Lump of Salt in a Small Cup

If a spoonful of salt is dropped into a tiny cup of water, the water becomes unpotable and salty. This represents a mind with little virtue or developed wisdom.



A Lump of Salt in the River Ganges

If the same spoonful of salt is dropped into a vast river, the water remains pure and drinkable. This represents a mind expanded through virtue, meditation, and goodwill.

Key Teaching: Developing expansive virtue and wisdom mitigates the painful impact of past unwholesome karma.

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CONTINUITY

Karma, Rebirth, and Non-Self (Anattā)

Rebirth Without a Soul:

- **No Permanent Transmigrating Soul:** Buddhism denies an unchanging "soul" (Attā) moving from body to body

- **Continuity of Cause & Effect:** Like one candle lighting another—the flame is neither strictly the same nor entirely different

- **Karmic Momentum:** The final mental volition at death conditions the first moment of consciousness in the next existence

Dependent Origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda)

Ignorance (Avijjā) conditions volitional formations (Saṅkhāra), which condition consciousness (Viññāṇa), perpetuating the wheel of wandering (Saṃsāra).

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PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT

Moral Agency: Owner of Your Actions

> *"I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma, related to my karma, abide supported by my karma. Whatever karma I shall do, for good or for evil, of that I shall be the heir."*
>
> **— Upajjhatthana Sutta (AN 5.57)**

Fosters Self-Reliance: Freedom from fear of external curses or reliance on arbitrary divine favors.

Cultivates Compassion: Seeing others trapped in reactivity inspires active aid, not cold judgment.

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PURIFICATION

How to Purify Past Negative Momentum

1. Honest Recognition (Apattha)

Acknowledging unskillful behavior clearly without denial, self-hatred, or justification.

2. Restraint in Future (Saṃvara)

Making a firm determination to abstain from repeating unwholesome actions through ethical training.

3. Cultivating Positive Counterweights

Actively engaging in generosity (Dāna), loving-kindness (Mettā), and ethical integrity (Sīla).

4. Insight Meditation (Vipassanā)

Direct perception of impermanence disrupts the underlying habit patterns of craving and aversion.

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DAILY PRACTICE

Applying Karma Wisdom in Daily Life

- Pause before speech or reaction
- Examine underlying motives & intentions
- Sow seeds of quiet generosity daily
- Protect the mind from anger and ill-will
- Accept present conditions with equanimity
- Use current freedom to steer the future

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ULTIMATE GOAL

Ending Karma: The Path Beyond Causality

Four Types of Karma (AN 4.232)

- **Dark Karma:** Unwholesome action leading to dark result
- **Bright Karma:** Wholesome action leading to bright result
- **Dark & Bright Karma:** Mixed action leading to mixed result
- **Neither Dark nor Bright:** Volition leading to the exhaustion of karma

Actions of an Arahant (Kiriya)

Fully enlightened beings continue to act out of pure compassion, but because ignorance and craving are destroyed, their actions leave no karmic trace (Inoperative / Functional Action).

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Mastery of Mind and Destiny

"By oneself is evil done, by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone, by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another."

— Dhammapada 165

