

Karma 101: Responsibility without Blame

By Peter B. Williams

My view is as vast as the sky, but my attention to the law of cause and effect is as fine as a grain of barley flour.

- Padmasambhava, a saint of Tibetan Buddhism

Picture yourself in the following fantasy. An unusual spell of grey and rainy weather moves into Boulder in mid-July, causing the normally sun-drenched faces of the Front Range to droop with depression. Friends bumping into each other express bewilderment at the awful weather. You keep thinking things like, "It's so weird, in the middle of summer, to see snow pasted to the Rockies like powdered sugar."

It's bad enough that everyone's mood is fouled by the weather, but you have the added confusion of blaming yourself for it. For some reason, you have decided that the weather is your fault. Maybe it was because, on the last sunny day you can remember, you were in a sour mood, or because you did not thank Mother Earth for all her blessings at your last meal. In either case, you slink around town, hoping people don't realize your terrible secret, feeling guilty every time you see someone's dour face.

Imagine waking up from this Twilight Zone episode and realizing with great relief that you were back to your normal state of mind. How absurd to think that the weather was your fault! Even though it is gray and cloudy, you can now walk breezily through town you are so uplifted by your newfound freedom. Wouldn't this be a huge relief?

This is exactly how you might feel if you understood karma at a deep level. You would see that it is ludicrous to blame yourself for your mind states. You would see that all the personality traits and bad habits and negative emotions were all arising lawfully out of the mental imprint of past actions and that you were not making them happen.

On what grounds can we let ourselves off the hook like this, and doesn't it lead to a lack of responsibility for one's actions? Let's start with the first question. Here is an exercise to demonstrate how little control we have over our mind states. Read the first word and notice the first word association that comes to mind in response. Then do the same for the second phrase. Pay attention to the process of what happens in your mind and not so much the content of what occurred.

BASKET ...

THE ROLLING ...

Did you decide to place a word in response to mine, or was it more automatic? In other classes, when doing this out loud, responses to "basket" were "ball," "weaving," and "case.". Responses to "the rolling" were "Stones" and "hills." People who noticed the process of their minds said that it was automatic.

One did not choose to respond with "ball;" one just noticed the response as soon as you heard "basket." This exercise is a simple glimpse of how your mind works and can be extended to all our mental activities.

So what decided "ball" if we ourselves did not? The answer is the past conditioning of our minds. The sports jock among us might have responded with "ball" and the crafts person with "weaving." A French person might have thought about croissants. Our thoughts are essentially a cascade of impressions that spill out of each other in a never-ending stream of associations. Our moods are similarly conditioned. For instance, if someone makes a joke at your expense, on a good day it might roll right off your back, but on a bad day you might get hurt feelings. You don't decide to have either reaction. They are conditioned by how you already feel that day. Blaming yourself for taking offense is as logical as thinking the weather is your fault. You don't order up hurt feelings anymore than you order up a cloudy day.

Karma and Conditions

To understand karma, we need to begin by distinguishing karmic and non-karmic past conditions. All past conditions come to bear on one's current experience, but not all are karmic. Karmic conditions are all mental, involving either purely mind events such as thoughts, or behaviors, which are mental events coupled with physical action. Many past conditions are not mental but are the unfolding of natural events. Nevertheless, these conditions still play an immense role in conditioning our present. Modern science has documented the unbroken string of conditions that has led to your existence today. One of the most exquisite and enthralling mysteries of existence is that the universe pretty much exploded into being 15 billion years ago and has since

evolved to a stunning level of complexity and order. The world is not pre-given. It has been birthed in millions of ways. The earth began five billion years ago as the gravitational collecting of one of the nine bands of dust that encircled a young star. The moon was birthed not long after when the still molten earth ejected a glob of its protoplasm when it was struck by a large meteor. Life began as the simplest of bacteria and has evolved into the beauty of you.

It is a wonderful contemplation to reflect on how much our bodies are a product of evolution. It can help you realize how this thing you think of as so distinctly you is actually just an impersonal repository of past conditions. You are a grand museum of evolution, and you can read your entire body as a chronicle of its workings. Evolutionary biology teaches that our hair is common to all mammals, even dolphins, and appeared about 200 million years ago. Your fingernails were invented 55 to 65 millions years ago, appearing in primates. Your opposable thumb appeared in apes about 18 millions years ago. Why do you walk on two legs? Because of the weather patterns in East Africa five million years ago. A drying and warming spell led to the transformation of thick forest into open savanna, and a formerly tree-dwelling species of ape began to move along the ground, eventually evolving an upright gait. Our bodies belong to nature, but take them so personally!

Karma

Now that we have separated out natural law from karma, we can ask what karma is. The Buddha said karma is very easy to misunderstand and that if you think about it too much you will go crazy. So, we'll take a very common sense approach and talk about what one can experience directly.

The law of karma says that actions of mind and body carry consequences. All our previous actions come to bear on our present lives and make up the moral context in which we find ourselves. Karma is the moral law of cause and effect, the notion that you reap what you sow, or "What goes around comes around." Although karma literally means action, Buddhism says that the karmic force of any action is the motivation or intention behind it. Thus, actions themselves are not what propel karma but the intentions behind them. (Of course, an intention is stronger if acted out than if restrained.) A surgeon can cut someone open with a knife and a robber can do the same, with very different motivations. The different motivations lead to very different karmic results.

The most common sense interpretation of karma is this: the mind is a creature of habit. It is continually reconditioning itself. Think negative thoughts, and you are greasing the skids for more negative thinking. Think positive thoughts, and you are greasing the skids for more positive thinking.

Now let's get back to the very good news that you can stop blaming yourself for your mind states. The figure I gave you in class (Karma 101 below) shows that past actions lead to present results. How this actually happens is deeply mysterious. You cannot control how your past actions bear fruit in the present. Since this is out of your control, how can you blame yourself for this? Since you don't decide to be irritated when a sweaty man sits next to you on a bus, why give yourself a hard time for the irritation? This would be like blaming yourself for the weather.

Responsibility

This leads to the next important

question. If we take no blame for our actions, then aren't we just going to abdicate responsibility for them, inflicting harm on others with no concern for the consequences? After all, one could think, "It's all out of my control. I am just a puppet on a karmic string." But, to truly understand karma is to do just the opposite – to act with exquisite responsibility for one's actions. What bridges this paradox?

We need to understand that the only real control we have is how we respond to the moment we just awoke to. This response is labeled a present action in the figure I gave you. Karma is not a law of determinism. It recognizes there is choice in life and that we can determine our future. But it says that our control is far more limited than we commonly believe. Just as we cannot control how our past actions bear fruit as present results, so we cannot control how our present actions will bear fruit in the future. We can plant a seed that will sprout at some undetermined time as happiness, but we can't go out into the future and pull on the leaves of the happy plant. The only real certainty we have is how we deal with this moment. Thus, we must take extreme care with our present actions.

The Buddha called seeds that lead to happiness wholesome actions and listed many of them – mindfulness, concentration, calmness, generosity, morality, renunciation, effort, wisdom, patience, truthfulness, resolve, kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, empathy, remorse over harm you have caused, gratitude, tolerance of differences, and so on. He called seeds that lead to suffering unwholesome actions. Unwholesome actions are all versions of clinging. Clinging, as we know, is the aversive response to unpleasantness, the desirous response to pleasant, and the

ignoring of neutrality. Each response has many derivatives - desire, addiction, lust, and longing are all forms of greed; fear, hatred, irritation, worry, and sadness are forms of aversion; and restlessness, laziness, wrong view, comparing, envy, avarice, and doubt are all forms of ignorance. Unwholesome actions sever our connections with others and lead to stress in the mind. Any clinging response to present results plants a karmic seed of more clinging, thus the picture of the guy shoveling in the diagram. He is shoveling more negative karma into his mind stream, which will bear fruit in some form of suffering, depicted by the unhappy face in future results.

I want to stress that a reaction to the arising of an unwholesome mind state (present result) is also a karmic act (present action). The trick is to respond with a wholesome action when an unwholesome result, like fear, arises in the mind. Typically, we meet negativity with more negativity – judgment, rejection, denial, anger, or fear. I would not agree with FDR's famous WWII quote that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. "Fear of fear is still fear," says vipassana teacher Joseph Goldstein. Fear of fear just reinforces the habit of fear in the mind. Instead, can we embrace our fear, accept it with compassion, and just watch it with interest and mindfulness? What is it like to be afraid? Where do I feel it in my body? This is a wholesome response and plants a positive seed in your future.

Mindfulness: As Good as it Gets

The figure illustrates the Buddhist assertion that the most wholesome response to anything is mindfulness. If the lists above feel too long and cumbersome, you can telescope them down to the most fundamental teaching the Buddha gave, "Just be mindful." Mindfulness

both contains and develops all the wholesome qualities of mind.

Mindfulness conditions a happy future in three ways. It is satisfying in the moment, even if the object is a negative emotion. It feels intimate and fulfilling to just sit with fear, feeling it fully, and watching it without elaborating the story associated with it. Second, a moment of mindfulness conditions the habit of mindfulness. The more you are mindful, the more you become mindful. And third, you are de-conditioning the arising and the intensity of the fear itself. The flame above the mindfulness box illustrates the burning of negative karma.

Unworthiness used to be an emotion that I struggled with a lot. Over the course of my meditation practice, it has become less and less difficult. Vipassana teacher Carol Wilson once told me in an interview on retreat, "You know your practice has really changed you when you can be with unworthiness and not care if it disappears or stays forever." "Yeah, right," I thought. However, as I have sat with this emotion over and over, feeling it in my body, and letting go of the story, the emotion has become less and less intense. It has slowly lost its charge, after being seen hundreds of times. Now, when unworthiness arises, I know I can be with it in the space of mindfulness. I can often approach it with lightness, thinking "Oh that poor old suffering thing I do. It's not true, it's just a habitual response." I know unworthiness is bearable moment to moment. I also have confidence that it liberates itself. Each time it arises it also disappears, just because I watch it and do not feed it. It might take 10 seconds, or 10 minutes, but all the same, away it goes! What's amazing is that I experience this emotion much less frequently than before, and when it does arise it is less intense than before. It has truly been de-conditioned. Its karma has

been burned in the fire of mindfulness.

The fantastic news is that mindfulness reduces negative mind states and leaves behind only that which is unconditioned, which is your Buddha nature, which is only love and awareness and openness. The miracle of the universe is that when you fully relax and give up all attempts at changing your experience, you become loving, happy and aware. Thus, the picture of the Dalai Lama in the future. Mindfulness takes you a step closer towards being like him. Even if it is a baby step, it is a step towards the complete eradication of negativity from your heart. Isn't that amazing!

Summary

Not blaming yourself for your actions and taking full responsibility for them are the same thing. They are both distillations of a basic teaching of the Buddha: karma controls your happiness. Blame is about the past, and you can't control the past. Therefore, blame is not just a bad approach to happiness, it is a fundamental hallucination. It is like blaming yourself for the weather. Responsibility is directed at the future. Since karmic seeds will sprout in the future out of our control, we'd better take responsibility for what we can control: planting wholesome seeds with our present actions.

Karma 101

- Today is tomorrow's yesterday
- Responsibility without blame

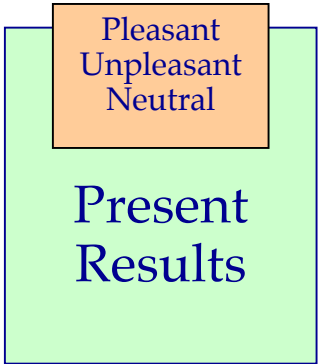


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Clinging

Mindfulness



Unwholesome roots of greed, aversion, delusion, and variants: Conceit, envy, fear, restlessness, laziness, doubt, cruelty, deceit, arrogance, etc.

Wholesome roots of generosity, love, wisdom, and variants: Mindfulness, kindness, compassion, equanimity, effort, patience, truthfulness, faith, etc.

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Wholesome and Unwholesome Actions and Mind States in Theravada Buddhism

	Wholesome	Unwholesome
Actions Of:		
Body	Not killing Not stealing Not harming with sexuality Not harming with intoxicants	Killing Stealing Harming with sexuality Harming with intoxicants
Speech	Speaking truthfully Abstaining from divisive speech Abstaining from harsh speech Abstaining from gossip and idle chatter	Lying Divisive speech Harsh speech Gossip, idle chatter
Mind	Mindful Generous Kind, loving Wise Relaxed Not worried Non-conceit, non-comparing Not angry Not revengeful Not contemptuous Not domineering Not envious Not avaricious Not fraudulent Not deceitful Not obstinate Not arrogant Not covetous Not wishing harm Diligent Easy to admonish Faithful	Not mindful Greedy Aversive Deluded Restless Worried Conceit, as in comparing Angry Revengeful Contemptuous Domineering Envious Avaricious Fraudulent Deceitful Obstinate Arrogant Covetous Ill will, wishing harm Negligent Difficult to admonish Doubtful

	Shameful (healthy remorse) Fear of causing harm Being of great learning Energetic Not clinging to views	Shameless No fear of causing harm Being of little learning Sloth and torpor Clinging to views
Social	Association with the wise	Association with fools
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Other Sets		
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	Wholesome	Unwholesome
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Eightfold Path	Wise view Wise intention Wise speech Wise action Wise livelihood Wise effort Wise mindfulness Wise concentration	Wrong view Wrong intention Wrong speech Wrong action Wrong livelihood Wrong effort Wrong mindfulness Wrong concentration
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Divine Abodes	Lovingkindness Compassion Sympathetic joy Equanimity	Ill-will Envy Reactivity
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Factors of Enlightenment	Mindfulness Investigation Energy Rapture Tranquility Concentration Equanimity	Delusion Non-investigation Sloth and torpor Non-rapture Restlessness Non-concentration Reactivity
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Perfections	Generosity Morality Renunciation	Greed Harming Indulgence

Wisdom	Non-wisdom
Effort	Laziness
Patience	Impatience
Truthfulness	Deceitfulness
Resolve, determination	Non-resolve
Lovingkindness	Aversion
Equanimity	Reactivity

Abhi- dhamma	Tranquility of mental body
	Tranquility of mental body
	Tranquility of consciousness
	Neutrality of mind
	Lightness of mental body
	Lightness of consciousness
	Malleability of mental body
	Malleability of consciousness
	Wieldiness of mental body
	Wieldiness of consciousness
	Proficiency of mental body
	Proficiency of consciousness
	Rectitude of mental body
	Rectitude of consciousness

Primary Source: The Buddha, *Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 8: Effacement*.

Additional Source: *A Comprehensive Manual of the Abhidhamma, The Abhidhammattha Sangaha*. Bikkhu Bodhi, Editor.

The "Other Sets" such as the Seven Factors of Enlightenment are found throughout the Pali Canon.