

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR OUR ENLIGHTENMENT: THE POWER OF POSITIVE KARMA

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Beings evolve through karma, take birth because of karma,
enjoy (life, the fruits of) karma, and (function) through karma.

---Karmavibhanga-sutra

Buddhism teaches that in our true nature, we are enlightened -- totally open, peaceful, joyful, compassionate, and omniscient. We see all phenomena simultaneously, as they are, without limitations of dualistic concepts or emotions. The Buddha proclaimed:

Profound, peaceful, and free from concepts,
Luminous and uncompounded -
A nectar-like nature - that I have realized!

This aspect of our mind is “the true nature of the mind.” When we become aware of and perfect it, we become blossoming Buddhas.

We are all attracted to these highest views. But some students just want to meditate on the nature of the mind, emptiness-wisdom, free from concepts, without opening their hearts to the conceptual merit-making practices that are indispensable to liberation.

There are many ways to make merit, or positive karma. The most comprehensive are the six perfections (paramitas) that Mahayana Buddhism prescribes as the path to enlightenment. They are: giving (generosity), discipline (morality), patience (fearlessness), diligence (eagerness), tranquillity (contemplation), and wisdom (the true nature as it is).

The first five perfections, collectively referred to as “skillful-means,” are especially for

accumulating merits. They include any positive act or thought, such as generating devotion and compassion, and are generally conceptual (*dMigs bchas bsod nams kyi tshogs*). The sixth perfection, wisdom, involves realizing the true nature of mind, union of awareness and emptiness. It includes any meditation on the absolute truth and is free from concepts (*dMigs med ye-shes kyi tshogs*).¹

Some students regard merit-making practices like praying, generating devotion, and doing prostrations as “theistic” and “dualistic.” So they skip skillful means. Or they treat it as chores to be discarded after a certain number of repetitions: “I just need to get through these so I can get to meditation on the nature of the mind.” Hence we hear these trainings put in the past tense: “Oh, I already did those.”

This undervaluation of skillful means is unfortunate. Its purpose is to refine and transform our mind, not keep us busy counting. Prostrations uproot arrogance. Devotion opens our hearts. Compassion dissolves ego. Prayer unites us with our enlightened presences and qualities. Pure perception transforms our view. Serving others, especially those who rely on us, is the purpose of dharma. There’s no such thing as a Buddha who doesn’t help others. So the more we open our hearts to skillful means, the more quickly and surely we realize wisdom and reach Buddhahood. We should never abandon it, for the path of skillful means is perfected in the goal of enlightenment, just as bricks become the finished house.

I am not saying that we should not meditate on the nature of the mind. My point is that we should do so in conjunction with skillful means. Buddhist masters have always said that Buddhahood, the form-body and ultimate-body, is the result of two accumulations--both of skillful means and wisdom. Merits and wisdom are each as indispensable to attaining enlightenment as two wings are to a bird’s ability to fly. Chandrakirti (7th Century AD) writes,

¹ Powerful ways to accumulate merits, such as generating devotion, compassion, and pure perception and putting them into action, should always be incorporated with the Six Perfections as we can. Meditating on devotion, for instance, can include training on all Six Perfections, as it has aspects of generosity, discipline, patience, eagerness, contemplation, as well as wisdom -- when we realize the true nature of devotion as it is.

With two widely opened white wings
Of relative truth (skillful means) and absolute truth (wisdom)
The Kings of swans (bodhisattvas) and their flock of swans (disciples)
Soar through the ocean of supreme Buddha qualities.

And so Nagarjuna (1st-2nd Century AD) aspired,

May I realize the two Buddha-bodies,
Which are created by merits and wisdom.

Why do we need dualistic practices to reach a state that transcends duality? Because we have to start from where we are. Our mind's true nature is covered by karmic turbulence caused by our "grasping at self" and negative mental habits. "Grasping at a self" refers to the way we grasp at mental objects as truly existing, perceiving them dualistically as subject and object. The aspect of our mind that perceives this way is "conceptual mind." Conceptual mind and the nature of the mind are like the surface and depths of the ocean. The surface is choppy with wind-tossed waves. Beneath it is still and peaceful.

Most of us can't glimpse into the depths, our true nature, because our conceptual mind is constantly churning out turbulence. Grasping at self tricks us, like a nightmare, into believing that we are separate from the world and each other. This triggers negative emotions, from craving and anxiety to jealousy and aggression, which spill out into unhealthy words and actions.

Every dualistic perception, every negative thought, feeling, word, and deed leaves a negative karmic imprint in our conceptual mind that walls us off from our true nature. Positive mentalities leave positive karmic imprints that open our mind, loosen grasping at self, and thin out the barriers to our true nature.

Skillful means is a powerful way to create positive karma. The more wholeheartedly we devote ourselves to it, the deeper its positive imprints go in our mind and the more walls we break through.

Trying to meditate on emptiness without accumulating merits may not make an impact on the walls barricading our true nature. So its effect is uncertain at best. Saraha (1st Century AD) writes,

Without compassion (merits), the view of emptiness
Will not lead you through the sublime path.

Gampopa (1079-1153) says,

Great wisdom will not take birth in you
If you have earned little merit.

Attempting to meditate on emptiness without merits can invite self-deception. We might think that we are in a state of awareness without grasping, when we are grasping at a subtle level at meditative experiences like clarity, joy, and no-concepts. It is grasping, or attachment, that keeps us in samsara. Tilopa told Naropa (11th Century AD),

Son, appearances are not the issue.
Rather, attachment to them is.
So Naropa, cut (your) attachment.

Or we could drift into the absence of thoughts. Contemplating in this state creates no merits. It leads to rebirth in samsara's formless realms. Jigme Lingpa says, "If you are attached to 'no-thoughts,' you will fall into the formless realms." Beings there remain semi-unconscious without making progress for possibly millions of years.

"But why bother making good karma if everything is illusory?" some ask. The world is like an illusion only to enlightened ones who have transcended concepts and emotions. External circumstances don't affect their inner peace and joy. Even when they are apparently suffering, like some adepts whose lives I chronicle in *Masters of Meditation and Miracles*, they experience joy. As Shantideva (7th - 8th Century AD) writes,

Merits make the body healthy.
Wisdom makes the mind joyful.
So even if Bodhisattvas live in samsara,
How could they be distressed?

As long as we have dualistic concepts and emotions, the world is solid to us. Our suffering is all too real. Circumstances matter. If our surroundings are chaotic, it will be hard to find tranquility. If we experience peace and joy, however, we will be inspired to generate even more peace and joy. Then whatever we say and do will be the words and deeds of joy and peace. We progressively loosen our grasping at self. Eventually, we glimpse the luminous nature of our mind. If we perfect this realization, we uproot grasping at self and become fully awakened.

So we need to create circumstances conducive to our evolvment. Since we live in a world that is created by and operates through karma, we have to abide by its laws and travel the path of positive karmas. To emphasize the importance of making merits, even Buddhas observe karma. Guru Padmasambhava said, “My realization is higher than the sky. But my observance of karma is finer than grains of flour.”

Some people think karma is fate. “It must be my karma,” they sigh, resigning themselves to some calamity. But karma doesn’t have to be bad. It can be good. And we make our own karma. Every thought, feeling, and deed sows a habitual karmic seed in our mind that ripens into a corresponding positive, negative, or neutral experience. Anger and jealousy manifest as painful, unhappy experiences. Selfless, joyful thoughts and feelings flower into wondrous, fulfilling experiences.

So we don’t have to resign ourselves to “our karma.” We control our karma. Every moment is a new juncture, a chance to improve our way of thinking and thus our circumstances. This principle of interdependent causation is the bedrock of the Buddha’s first teachings, the Four Noble Truths.

We sometimes think that karma depends only on what we do. But what counts most is our mind. The Buddha said,

Mind is the main factor and forerunner of all actions.

Whoever acts or speaks with a cruel mind will cause miseries for himself; . . .

With a pure thought, will cause happiness for himself.

Karma has its greatest chance to change our lives when we leave our body at death. When we enter the bardo, the transitional passage between death and our next incarnation, all we are is mind. Freed from the strictures of our physical surroundings and body, our mind runs its own show. Our karmic habits unfold as the terrain, sights, and sounds of the bardo and propel us to our next birth.

If we have cultivated compassion and devotion, loving images will greet us. Flowers may shower upon us from the sky. Buddhas and teachers to whom we prayed could appear. Negative mental habits, however, will manifest as frightful images.

People often assume that they will come back as people. But a human rebirth requires many merits and aspirations. It doesn't happen automatically. There are six realms in samsara, and infinite Pure Lands or paradises outside samsara. We go where our karma impels. Nagarjuna says,

Greed, hatred, and ignorance give rise to unvirtuous deeds.

(Thoughts with) no greed, hatred, and ignorance give rise to virtuous deeds.

Unvirtuous deeds cause all suffering and (births in) inferior realms.

Virtuous deeds (cause births in) higher realms and happiness in all our lives.

In particular, Nagarjuna explains,

Hatred leads you to the hell realm.

Greed leads you to the hungry ghost realm.

Ignorance mostly leads you to the animal realm.

Some modern Buddhists don't accept rebirth and karma. These teachings, however, go back to the Buddha. The Lankavatara-sutra says,

There are six realms of transmigration where beings take birth.

They are the realms of gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell.

You take birth in those realms because of superior, middling and evil karmas.

There is much evidence to support the notion of rebirth. Many masters remember their past lives and see where they will be reborn. Apang Terton (1895-1944/5) told his family, "I will be reborn in the Sakya family. Come visit me when I am three." Sure enough, Kyabje Sakya Trizin (1945-) was later born in the Sakya family and remembered details of his life as Apang Terton.

When my teacher, Kyabje Dodrupchen Rinpoche (1927-), was a toddler, he described details of his previous life and Guru Padmasambhava's Pure Land, which he had visited between lives.

Tibet also has a remarkable tradition of delogs, or returners from death. Delogs travel extensively in other worlds until they revive, days later, to share what they learned. My new book, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, includes 11 such first-hand accounts. Although they never met, their descriptions of the six realms, Pure Lands, and bardo are strikingly similar.

No matter how seemingly pleasant, samsara is a delusory nightmare of confusion and suffering. Nothing lasts. In some lives we may be reborn in higher realms; in other lives we go to lower realms, depending on which of our karmas are ripening and how we lived our preceding life. Our cycling in samsara stems from grasping at self. Nagarjuna writes,

If we grasp at the (five) aggregates, we are grasping at self.

If we grasp at self, from that (arises) karma, and from (karma arises) birth.

Through these three, without a beginning, middle or end,

Revolves the fire-brand circle of samsara

By depending on each other as the cause.

So Shantideva asks,

All the violence, fear, and suffering that exist in the world
Come from grasping at self.
What use is this great evil monster to us?

To uproot grasping at self, we need to realize wisdom. To realize wisdom, we need merits. Merits release us from negative emotions, the cause of samsaric suffering, and loosen our grasping at self. As that happens, we glimpse the true nature of our mind. Once we do, we can meditate on the true nature to make merits and to perfect the realization of wisdom. Until then, we need to make merits.

If we don't tackle our negative emotional patterns, we are bound to repeat them and remain in samsara. Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) writes, "The root of all ills is taking rebirth in samsara. That must be stopped. Stopping it depends on preventing its causes, which are karma and negative emotions. Between these two, if there is no negative emotion, karma will not become the cause of rebirth. However, if you have negative emotions, then even if there is no accumulated karma, new ones will quickly pile up."

So we need to check ourselves and start from where we are. There are three possible mindsets: negative, positive, and perfect. By perfect I mean total wisdom, non-conceptual realization of our true nature.

Chances are, we're a mix of positive and negative, as only realized masters are perfect. As long as we are mired in negative emotions, we can't leap to perfection, just as we can't jump from the mountain base to the peak. We need to go from negative to positive to perfect. Acting as though we were near spiritual perfection when we aren't is just fooling ourselves. Atisha (982-1055) once said, "The ultimate meaning of all teachings is emptiness, of which compassion (skillful-means) is the essence." "Then how come," his disciple asked, "so many people say that they have realized emptiness when they haven't

made a dent in their hatred and attachment?" "Because," Atisha replied, "their claims are mere words."

Some object, "But I like meditating on emptiness. Merits are not for me. And anyway the Buddha said: 'Just as the wise test gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it, so too should you accept my teachings after examining them – not just out of respect for me.'"

The point of the Buddha's statement, however, is not to pick and choose those parts of Buddhism that we like and reject those we don't. The point is to scrutinize Buddhism. If it makes sense, we should follow those teachings that are good for us, not just what we like. If we don't know what is good for us, we can ask a teacher. But once we accept Buddhism, at some point we should stop doubting, for, the Buddha said, "No virtues will arise where there is no trust."

Our ego is solid like a rock. The more we generate compassion, devotion, and make merits, the softer it gets. Eventually it becomes intangible. One day, it dissolves. All the cloud-like traces of negative karmas vanish from our sky-like mind, and our sun-like unstained enlightened nature shines forth spontaneously. The Buddha says,

Sentient beings are Buddha in their true nature.

However, (their true nature) has been covered by adventitious obscurations.

When their obscurations are cleared, they are the very Buddha.

It is at death that merits make the greatest difference for our future. If we made merits and aspirations, we could go to a Pure Land, a paradise of light and love where beings become enlightened in one lifetime.

Many of us like it here. For all its attributes, however, the human realm is filled with struggle and uncertainty. Who knows, if we come back here next time, whether we will have the leisure to practice. Also, human beings are highly emotional. There is no telling whether we might make some big mistake in a fit of passion and regress.

In the Pure Lands, supported by countless enlightened beings, we never regress or experience negative emotions. We evolve until we become enlightened. It is the ultimate example of positive karma building on itself until perfection is attained.

Some people have the misimpression that going to the Pure Land is selfish. When beings first take rebirth there, they have clairvoyance and can help those with whom they were linked in their previous lives. As they grow, they do more. When they become enlightened, they become a source of boundless service for all beings through infinite manifestations. Their manifestations appear wherever they can help. As the Vimalakirtinirdesha-sutra says, "It is impossible to liberate others while you are bound. It is possible to liberate others when you are free."

In Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth, I focus on the Blissful Pure Land, Sukhavati, as that is the easiest Pure Land to take rebirth in. Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, body of love and wisdom, manifested it so that beings with good karma could take rebirth there without needing high spiritual realization. All we need are four causes.

First we need to repeatedly think in detail about and visualize Amitabha and his Pure Land. If these perceptions become part of our mental habit, they will arise before us when we die.

Second, we need merits, as the fuel to ferry us there.

Third, we need to commit to lead all beings to the Pure Land, thus magnifying our merits.

Fourth, we need to make strong aspirations and dedicate our merits as the cause of our and all beings' rebirth in the Pure Land. This augments our merits manifold and ensures that our merits go towards rebirth there, just as we invest in a specific fund.

Sometimes our obstructions and resistance to practice feels insurmountable. But if we stay on the path of training, accepting the teachings as they are, we will make progress, and the goal of peace, joy and enlightenment will be ours to share with all.