

# HOW AND WHY KARMA WORKS



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## TEACHING ONE: WHAT IS KARMA?

### I. Why Things Happen

- A. From the *Abhidharmakosha* by Master Vasubandhu, with commentary by Gyalwa Gendun Drup, His Holiness the First Dalai Lama (1391-1474).

#### **Deeds cause the multitude of worlds. [IX.1]**

One may begin with the following question: "You have just described a multitude of worlds—both the great vessels of the outer worlds and the living beings they contain. Where do they all come from?" They do not come from no cause at all, and they do not come from causes that are inconsistent with their own nature. This is because they stay for some time, then go away; and as the root text said itself, "Not an almighty one or the like, because of stages and such."

What then *does* cause them? It is the past **deeds** of living beings that **cause** all the **multitude of worlds**—both the places and the people.

### II. The Laws of Karma

- A. From the *Yoga Sutra* by Master Patanjali:

ते ह्लादपरितापफलाः पुण्यापुण्यहेतुत्वात् ॥

te hlādaparitāpaphalāḥ puṇyāpuṇyahetutvāt||

There is a connection of cause and effect. The seeds ripen into experiences refreshingly pleasant or painful in their torment, depending on whether you have done good to others, or done them wrong instead. (2.14)

- B. From Lord Krishna's teaching in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

नेहाभिक्रमनाशोऽस्ति प्रत्यवायो न विद्यते ।

nehābhikramanāśo'sti pratyavāyo na vidyate|

स्वल्पमप्यस्य धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ॥

svalpamapyasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt||

No action in this world goes for nought or brings about a contrary result. Even the smallest religious practice protects against great fear. (2.40)

C. From a commentary on Je Tsongkapa's *The Three Principal Paths (Lam-gtzo rnam-gsum)* by Pabongka Rinpoche (1878-1941):

This contemplation is done by considering, very carefully, the four principles of action which the Buddha enunciated:

- 1) Actions are certain to produce similar consequences.
- 2) The consequences are greater than the actions.
- 3) One cannot meet a consequence if he has not committed an action.
- 4) Once an action is committed, the consequence cannot be lost.

Once a person has gained a well-founded belief in these principles, he will automatically in his daily life avoid doing wrong things and begin doing right things. . . .

So this brings us to the four most general principles in our contemplation of actions and their consequences:

- 1) If the cause involved is a virtuous act, then the consequence it produces can only be pleasure, and never pain. If the cause involved is a non-virtuous act, then the consequence it produces can only be pain, and never pleasure. Thus the first principle is that *actions are certain to produce similar consequences*.
- 2) The causes involved may be virtuous or non-virtuous acts which are relatively minor, but the consequences they each produce—the pleasure or the pain—will be of tremendous power. The second principle then is that *the consequences are greater than the actions*.
- 3) If one never performs the virtuous or non-virtuous action to act as a cause, he will never experience a consequence of either pleasure or pain. Thus the third principle: *One cannot meet a consequence if he has not committed an action*.
- 4) The fourth principle states that once a person has collected a virtuous or non-virtuous action to act as a cause, *once an action is committed, the consequence cannot be lost*—so long as the power of a good deed, for example, is not destroyed by an emotion like anger, or a bad deed by applying an appropriate antidote.

### III. Motivating and Motivated Karma

#### A. From the *Abhidharmakosha*

**They're movement of the mind and what it brings.  
Mental movement is a deed of thought;  
What it causes, deeds of body and speech.  
These are either communicating or not. [IV.2-5]**

"In the line above," one might continue, "you said that `deeds cause the multitude of worlds.' Just how many types of deeds are there?" **They**—deeds—**are** of two different types: deeds consisting of **movement of the mind, and** the deeds that **it brings**—those that the mind motivates.

One may ask about each of their basic natures. **Mental movement is a deed of the thought**, for it consists of a deed linked with consciousness of the thought. **What it causes**—that is, deeds motivated by the mind—are of two kinds: these are **deeds of the body and** deeds of **speech**. **These** two themselves can be further divided into two types each: they **are either** what we call "**communicating**" or not. . . .

### IV. Pleasant, Unpleasant, and Neutral (or Mixed) Karma

#### A. From the *Abhidharmakosha*:

**Deeds for the pleasant, unpleasant, and other--  
Virtuous, non-virtuous, and other. [IV.177-8]**

"Just how," one may ask, "do you describe virtuous, non-virtuous, and ethically neutral **deeds**?" Deeds that lead to a **pleasant** experience are **virtuous** deeds. Those that lead to an **unpleasant** experience, an experience of suffering, are **non-virtuous**. Deeds that lead to some "**other**" type of experience—that is, which bring on a neutral experience—are themselves the "**other**" type of deeds: those which are ethically neutral.

#### B. From the *Yoga Sutra*:

कर्माशुक्लाकृष्णं योगिनः त्रिविधम् इतरेषाम् ॥

karmāśuklākṛṣṇaṃ yoginaḥ trividham itareṣām||

Deeds done by a true practitioner are neither white nor black. Those done by others are of three kinds. (4.7)

## V. Projecting and Finishing Karma

### A. From the *Abhidharmakosha*:

#### **A single one projects a single birth.** [IV.377]

Does a single deed project but a single birth, or many different births? And do a number of deeds project a number of births, or just a single birth? The answer is that **a single deed projects a single birth**; it cannot project a number of births. And since they would function to project a whole group of similar births, a number of deeds on the other hand is never something that projects but a single birth. . . .

#### **Those that act to finish them off are many.** [IV.378]

It is but a single energy of deeds that projects a birth having a nature consistent with the deed; **those** deeds though **that act to finish off** the finer details of this future life **are many**. A master painter for example can sketch out the canvas with a single piece of chalk, and then a number of other people can come and fill it in with various different colors.

Any given group of people is similar in being human, but some of them who've had the details of their lives finished by virtuous deeds will have more attractive bodies, all their senses complete, greater material wealth, freedom from illness, positions of greater authority, and so on. Others in the same group who've had the details of their lives finished by non-virtuous deeds will have bodies with a repulsive appearance and so on.

Thus we can say that all four combinations between the two are possible: projection of a life by virtue but finishing by non-virtue, the reverse, a case where both are virtue, and a case where both are non-virtue. An example of the first would be persons born as pleasure beings or humans but who possessed certain sufferings.

An illustration of the second would be either the "Lord of All Things"—the Lord of Death—or the kings of the serpent-like *nagas*, those like the "Prince of Opulence." An example of the third combination would be "Hundred Offerings"—lord of the great pleasure beings. And a case of the final combination would be the beings in the lowest hell, known as "No Respite."

## TEACHING TWO: HOW KARMA WORKS

### I. Three Presentations of the “Chain of Pain”

- A. From the *Overview of the Middle Way*, composed by Master Kedrup Tenpa Dargye (1493-1568), quoting Maitreya’s presentation of karma in the root text and the commentary of the *Higher Line*:

Due to the mental seeds for the two kinds of tendencies to grasp to some self-nature, these two tendencies themselves spring up.

Due to the fact that they have sprung up, an impression with a wrong way of looking at things springs up, and some things seem as though they are pleasant from their own side, and other things seem as though they are unpleasant from their own side.

Due to the fact that this impression has sprung up, the emotion of liking springs up, where you focus on a pleasant object and don't want to lose it. And the emotion of disliking springs up, where you focus on an unpleasant object and want to avoid it.

This then forces you to collect karma.

And karma forces you to spin around in the wheel of suffering life.

And this is why the Buddhas have said that this suffering life is something forced on us because we have not been able to see, directly, the essence of the Ones Gone Thus [that is, emptiness].

- B. From the *Yoga Sutra*:

अविद्यास्मितारागद्वेषाभिनिवेशाः पञ्च क्लेशाः ॥

avidyāsmitārāgadvēṣābhiniveśāḥ pañca kleśāḥ ॥

The five negative thoughts are ignorance, selfness, liking, disliking, and grasping. (2.3)

अविद्या क्षेत्रम् उत्तरेषां प्रसुप्ततनुविच्छिन्नोदाराणाम् ॥

avidyā kṣetram uttareṣāṃ prasuptatanuvicchannodārāṇām ॥

Ignorance is the field for the ones that come after it, whether they are dormant, dwindling, interrupted, or flourishing. (2.4)

अनित्याशुचिदुःखानात्मसु नित्यशुचिसुखात्मख्यातिरविद्या ॥  
anityāśuciduḥkhānātmasu nityaśucisukhātmakhyātirvidyā॥

In ignorance we misunderstand our world. Things that cannot last, things which are unclean, and painful, and which are not themselves, seem to us as if they will last, and as if they were clean, and pleasant, and very much themselves. (2.5)

दृग्दर्शनशक्त्योरेकात्मतेवास्मिता ॥  
dṛgdarśanaśaktyorekātmatevāsmitā॥

Selfness is where the strong impression of someone seeing something and the something someone sees make is seem as if each one were itself. (2.6)

सुखानुशयी रागः ॥  
sukhānuśayī rāgaḥ॥

Assailed by what feels good, we begin to like things. (2.7)

दुःखानुशयी द्वेषः ॥  
duḥkhānuśayī dveṣaḥ॥

Assailed by what feels bad, we begin to dislike things. (2.8)

स्वरसवाही विदुषोऽपि तथारूढोऽभिनिवेशः ॥  
svarasavāhī viduṣo'pi tathāruḍho'bhiniveśaḥ॥

Grasping is a thought that comes on all of its own, even from those who understand, and then grows ever stronger. (2.9)

C. From the *Bhagavad Gita*:

ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।

dhyāyato viṣayānpumsaḥ saṅgastesūpajāyate।

सङ्गात् संजायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥

saṅgāt sañjāyate kāmaḥ kāmātkrodho'bhijāyate।।

Attachment to the objects of the senses arises in one who is always thinking about them.  
From attachment comes desire, and from desire anger arises. (2.62)

क्रोधाद्भवति संमोहः संमोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः ।

krodhādbhavati sammohaḥ sammohātsmṛtivyibhramaḥ।

स्मृतिभ्रंशाद् बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति ॥

smṛtibhramśād buddhināśo buddhināśātpraṇaśyati।।

From anger comes confusion, and because of confusion one's mindfulness is wavering.  
Because of the wavering of mindfulness, the intellect is destroyed. And because of the  
destruction of the intellect, one is ruined. (2.63)

रागद्वेषवियुक्तैस्तु विषयानिन्द्रियैश्चरन् ।

rāgadveṣaviyuktaistu viṣayānindriyaiścaraṇ।

आत्मवश्यैर्विधेयात्मा प्रसादमधिगच्छति ॥

ātmavaśyairvidheyātmā prasādamadhigacchati।।

But a self-controlled person, whose sense powers are under control and who is detached  
from ignorant desire and aversion, obtains serenity. (2.64)

शक्रोतीहैव यः सोढुं प्राक्शरीरविमोक्षणात् ।

śaknotīhaiva yaḥ soḍhum prākśarīravimokṣaṇāt ।

कामक्रोधोद्भवं वेगं स युक्तः स सुखी नरः ॥

kāmakrodhodbhavaṁ vegaṁ sa yuktaḥ sa sukhī naraḥ ॥

One who is able even here, before giving up his body, to endure the attacks which arise from desire and anger, is a real yogi; he is a happy person. (5.23)

## TEACHING THREE: KNOWING THE SYSTEM

### I. The Karmic Correlations

#### A. From the *Yoga Sutra*:

अहिंसासत्यास्तेयब्रह्मचर्यापरिग्रहा यमाः ॥

ahimsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ॥

The different forms of self-control are avoiding harm to anyone, always telling the truth, never stealing from another, keeping sexual purity, and overcoming possessiveness.  
(2.30)

जातिदेशकालसमयानवच्छिन्नाः सार्वभौमा महाव्रतम् ॥

jātideśakālasamayānavacchinnāḥ sārvabhaumā mahāvratam॥

These various forms of self-control are might codes of conduct meant for people in every stage of their personal development. They go beyond differences in race or social status; they go beyond the borders between countries; they go beyond what is modern, or old; they go beyond the various creeds and convictions. (2.31)

शौचसंतोषतपःस्वाध्यायेश्वरप्रणिधानानि नियमाः ॥

śaucasantōṣatapaḥsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni niyamāḥ॥

The commitments are to be clean, to be contented with whatever we have, to embrace hardships for higher goals, to engage in regular study, and to seek our Master's blessings.  
(2.32)

अहिंसाप्रतिष्ठायां तत्सन्निधौ वैरत्यागः ॥

ahimsāpratiṣṭhāyām tat sannidhau vairatyāgaḥ॥

If you make it a way of life never to hurt others, then in your presence all conflict comes to an end. (2.35)

सत्यप्रतिष्ठायां क्रियाफलाश्रयत्वम् ॥

satyapraṭiṣṭhāyām kriyāphalāśrayatvam ॥

If you make it a way of life always to tell the truth, then anything you undertake will have a successful result. (2.36)

अस्तेयप्रतिष्ठायां सर्वरत्नोपस्थानम् ॥

asteyapraṭiṣṭhāyām sarvaratnopasthānam ॥

If you make it a way of life never to steal from another, then there will come a time when people just come to you and offer you all the money you need. (2.37)

ब्रह्मचर्यप्रतिष्ठायां वीर्यलाभः ॥

brahmacaryapraṭiṣṭhāyām vīryalābhaḥ ॥

If you make it a way of life always to keep sexual purity, then you will always have strength. (2.38)

अपरिग्रहस्थैर्ये जन्मकथंतासंबोधः ॥

aparigrahasthairye janmakathāṅtāsambodhaḥ ॥

If you persevere in overcoming possessiveness, you will be able to see your other lifetimes. (2.39)

शौचात् स्वाङ्गजुगुप्सा परैरसंसर्गः ॥

śaucāt svāṅgajugupsā parairasamsargaḥ ॥

If you stay clean, then you will never find yourself in crowds of the filthy. (2.40)

सत्त्वशुद्धिसौमनस्यैकाग्रयेन्द्रियजयात्मदर्शनयोग्यत्वानि च ॥

saumanasyaikāgryendriyajayātmadarśanayogyatvāni ca ॥

Truth, purity, sweet thoughts, single-pointedness, and mastery of one's senses are all qualities that make you suitable for seeing your true self. (2.41)

संतोषाद् अनुत्तमः सुखलाभः ॥

santoṣād anuttamaḥ sukhālābhaḥ॥

If you stay contented, then you achieve happiness which is unsurpassed. (2.42)

कायेन्द्रियसिद्धिरशुद्धिक्षयात् तपसः ॥

kāyendriyasiddhiraśuddhikṣayāt tapasaḥ॥

Embracing spiritual hardships destroys your impurities, allowing you to master both body and senses. (2.43)

स्वाध्यायाद् इष्टदेवतासंप्रयोगः ॥

svādhyāyād iṣṭadevatāsamprayogaḥ॥

If you engage in regular study, then you come to be with the Angel of your deepest dreams. (2.44)

समाधिसिद्धिरीश्वरप्रणिधानात् ॥

samāhisiddhirīśvarapraṇidhānāt॥

If you seek your Master's blessing, you attain final meditation. (2.46)

B. From the First Chapter of Arya Nagarjuna's "Precious Garland"  
(*Ratnavali*)

हिंसया जायतेऽल्पायुः बह्वाबाधो विहिंसया ।

चैर्येण भोगव्यसनी सशत्रुः पारदारिकः ॥१४ ॥

himsayā jāyate'lpāyuḥ bahvābādho vihimsayā  
cairyena bhogavyasanī saśatruḥ pāradārikaḥ (14)

A short life is obtained through killing, and much suffering through hurting;  
Unlucky with the goods of life through stealing.  
Having lots of enemies comes from adultery.

प्रत्याख्यानं मृषावादात् पैशुन्यान्मित्रभेदनम् ।

अप्रियश्रवणं रौक्ष्यादपार्थाद्दुर्भगं वचः ॥१५ ॥

pratyākhyānam mṛṣāvādāt paiśunyānmitrabhedanam  
apriyaśravaṇam raukṣyādapārthāddurbhagam vacaḥ (15)

From speaking falsely one will be repudiated;  
From divisive speech comes the splitting apart of friends.  
Having to hear disagreeable things arises from harsh speech,  
And because of meaningless speech, your own words are disregarded.

मनोरथान् हन्त्यभिध्या व्यापादो भयदः स्मृतः ।

मिथ्यादृष्टिः कुदृष्टित्वं मद्यपानं मतिभ्रमः ॥१६ ॥

manorathān hantyaabhidhyā vyāpādo bhayadaḥ smṛtaḥ  
mithyādṛṣṭiḥ kudṛṣṭitvaṁ madyapānaṁ matibhramaḥ (16)

Greed destroys what one wishes for,  
Ill will is brought to mind as paranoia.  
Wrong views result in stupidity,  
And drinking brings about a befuddled mind.

अप्रदानेन दारिद्र्यं मिथ्याजीवेन वञ्चना ।

स्तम्भेन दुष्कुलीनत्वमल्पौजस्कत्वमीर्ष्याया ॥१७ ॥

apradānena dāridryam mithyājīvena vañcanā  
stambhena duṣkulīnatvamalpaujaskatvamīrṣyayā (17)

Through not giving comes poverty,  
One becomes the victim of fraud because of wrong livelihood.  
From being stuck up, one obtains a birth in degenerate family,  
Through envy, one is born with very little beauty.

क्रोधादुर्वर्णता मौख्यमप्रश्नेन विपश्चिताम् ।

फलमेतन्मनुष्यत्वे सर्वेभ्यः प्राक् च दुर्गतिः ॥१८ ॥

krodhāddurvarṇatā maurkhyamapraśnena vipāścītām  
phalametanmanuṣyatve sarvebhyaḥ prāk ca durgatiḥ (18)

A bad complexion comes from anger,  
Block-headedness from not going to the learned with one's inquiries.  
These are the karmic results for humans,  
But prior to all is a bad rebirth.

एषामकुशलाख्यानां विपाको यः प्रकीर्तितः ।

कुशलानां च सर्वेषां विपरीतः फलोदयः ॥१९ ॥

eṣāmakuśalākhyānāṃ vipāko yaḥ prakīrtitaḥ  
kuśalānāṃ ca sarveṣāṃ viparītaḥ phalodayaḥ (19)

The ripenings of these non-virtues are thus declared;  
Their opposites are the fruits that arise from all the virtues.

लोभो द्वेषश्च मोहश्च तज्जं कर्मेति चाशुभम् ।

अलोभामोहाद्वेषाश्च तज्जं कर्मेतरच्छुभम् ॥२० ॥

lobho dveṣāśca mohaśca tajjaṃ karmeti cāśubham  
alobhāmohādveṣāśca tajjaṃ karmetaracchubham (20)

Desire, hatred, ignorance, and the actions they give rise to  
Are not conducive to one's welfare.  
Non-desire, non-hatred, non-ignorance and the actions they give rise to  
Are truly beneficial.

अशुभात्सर्वदुःखानि सर्वदुर्गतयस्तथा ।

शुभात्सुगतयः सर्वाः सर्वजन्मसुखानि च ॥२१॥

aśubhātsarvaduḥkhāni sarvadurgatayastathā  
śubhātsugatayaḥ sarvāḥ sarvajanmasukhāni ca (21)

All suffering, and also all bad births, come from what is non-virtuous.  
And all good births and all the pleasures of life come from what is virtuous.

नरकप्रेततिर्यग्भ्यो धर्मादस्माद्विमुच्यते ।

नृषु देवेषु चाप्नोति सुखश्रीराज्यविस्तरान् ॥२३॥

narakapretatiryagbhyo dharmādasmdvimucyate  
nṛṣu deveṣu cāpnoti sukhaśrīrajyavistarān (23)

Because of one's spiritual practice one is freed from  
Birth in hell, as a hungry ghost, or as an animal.  
Reborn as a human or pleasure being  
One gains extensive happiness, fortune, and dominion.

## II. Four Different Ways Karma Ripens

From the *Great Book on the Steps of the Path (Lam Rim Chenmo)*, composed by Lord Tsongkapa (1357-1419):

Now each one of the ten paths of karma can itself be divided into three kinds—lesser, medium, and greater—depending on the intensity of the three poisons. The *Main Stage of Levels* states that, from the ten greater instances of killing and the rest, one is born into the hells. It says that from medium instances of each of the ten you take birth as an insatiable spirit; and from the ten lesser instances, you are born as an animal.

The *Sutra on the Ten Levels* however states the consequences of two of the kinds of instances, the lesser and the medium, in reverse of this.

The "consistent" consequences are as follows. Even if you do manage to escape the realms of misery and take birth as a human, the following respective results occur to you:

- 1) Your life is short.
- 2) You don't have enough to live on.

- 3) You have problems keeping your partner from others.
- 4) People don't believe what you say, even when you're telling the truth.
- 5) You lose friends easily.
- 6) You hear things as bad sounds.
- 7) No one listens to you.
- 8) Your personality is dominated by desire.
- 9) Your personality is dominated by anger.
- 10) Your personality is dominated by stupidity.

The *Chapter on the True* and the *Sutra on the Ten Levels* state that there are two such consequences for each of the ones given here; even if you do manage to take birth as a human,

- 1) Your life is short, and you get sick easily.
- 2) You don't have enough to live on, and what you do have is all just common property with others.
- 3) The people who work around you are "inconsistent," which here means unreliable, and you find yourself having a lot of competition for your partner.
- 4) No one believes what you say, even when you are speaking the truth, and others are always deceiving you.
- 5) The people around you are always fighting against one another, and have an undesirable character.
- 6) You hear many unpleasant things, and when others talk to you it always seems to you as if they want to start a fight.
- 7) No one respects what you say—no one thinks that what you say has any particular value, and you are afflicted with a lack of confidence.
- 8) Your personality is dominated by desire, and you are never satisfied with what you have.
- 9) You are always finding yourself without help, or never find the help you need; and you are always hurting others, or always being hurt by others.

10) You become a person who keeps harmful views, or a deceitful person.

Great lamas of the past have expressed the position that it is a consequence of consistent *action* where as a karmic result of killing you become someone who takes pleasure in killing and the rest. It is a consequence of consistent *experience* then when you have to undergo the results just listed.

Next is what we call the "environmental" or "dominant" consequence. Here for example the consequence of killing expresses itself in the outer world around you. Food, drink, medicine, the crops in the fields, and other such things have very little power; they are always inferior; they have little nutrition or potency; they are hard to digest, and they cause disease in you. Because of this the majority of the living beings around you die before reaching the end of a full life.

Because you have stolen, then the crops are few and far between; the crops have no power to remove hunger; they spoil; they never come up; dry spells stay on too long; it rains too much; the crops dry up, or die off.

Because you have done wrong sex, you live in a place where there is piss and shit all around, and mud and dirt and filth, and everything stinks, and everywhere seems unpleasant and distasteful.

Because you have lied, you live in a world where, when you undertake farming or some work in cooperation with other people, in the end the work fails to prosper, and the people can't work well together, and for the most part everyone is cheating one another, and is afraid, and where there are many things to be afraid of.

Because you have split people up with your talk, the very ground in the place you live is all uneven, covered with crags and gullies, full of highs and lows, so that you can travel only with difficulty, and where you are always afraid, and there are many things to be afraid of.

Because you have spoken harsh words, the ground where you live is covered with obstacles like the trunks of fallen trees, and thorns, and stones, and clods of dirt, and lots of sharp broken pieces of glass; it's rough, and dreary; no streams, or lakes, or springs of water; the whole earth is parched, poisoned with salt and borax, burning hot, useless, threatening; a place where there are many things to fear.

Because you have talked meaninglessly, fruits refuse to grow on the trees, or they start to grow at the wrong times, never at the right times, and seem ripe when they're still not ripe, or their roots are frail, or they can't stay long; there are no places to take your leisure, no parks, no glades, no pools of cool water, and many things around to make you afraid.

Because you have coveted what others have, then each and every good thing you ever manage to find starts to get worse, and less and less, never more, each one of them, with the passing of each of the four seasons, and in every month, and even day by day.

Because you have wished bad things on others, you live in a world of chaos, where diseases spread, and evil is everywhere, and plague, and conflict, and fear from the armies of other nations; where there are many lions or leopards or other dangerous animals; where there are everywhere venomous snakes or scorpions or poison biting worms; you live surrounded by harmful spirits, and thieves or muggers, and the like.

Because you have held wrong views, then you live in a world where the single highest source of happiness is steadily disappearing from the earth; a world where people think that things that are unclean and things that are suffering are actually nice, and happiness; a world where there is no place to go, no one to help, nothing to protect you.

## TEACHING FOUR: WORKING THE SYSTEM

### I. What We Can Change. . . And What We Can't

#### A. From the *Yoga Sutra*:

हेयं दुःखम् अनागतम् ॥ १६ ॥

heyam duḥkham anāgatam||

The pain that we are ridding ourselves of is all the pain that would have come to us in the future. (2.16)

#### B. From the *Bhagavad Gita*:

न कर्मणामनारम्भान्नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्नुते ।

na karmaṇāmanārambhānnaiṣkarmya puruṣo'snute|

न च संन्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति ॥

na ca sannyasanādeva siddhiṁ samadhigacchati||

A person does not escape karma by just not doing anything. It is not through mere renunciation that one achieves perfection. (3.4)

न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत् ।

na hi kaścitkṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt|

कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः ॥

kāryate hyavaśaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijairguṇaiḥ||

There's no one who exists even for a moment without doing some action. Everyone, however unwillingly, is forced to act due to the constituents of nature. (3.5)

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।

śreyānsvadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmātsvanuṣṭhitāt |

स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥

svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyaḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ ||

It is better to do one's own duty imperfectly than to do the duty of another well. It is better even to die doing one's own duty; the duty of another is perilous. (3.35)

अनाश्रितः कर्मफलं कार्यं कर्म करोति यः ।

anāśritaḥ karmaphalaṁ kāryaṁ karma karoti yaḥ |

स संन्यासी च योगी च न निरग्निर्न चाक्रियः ॥

sa sannyāsī ca yogī ca na niragnirna cākriyaḥ ||

One who does what needs to be done while remaining unattached to the results of this action is a true renouncer and a yogi, not the one who has merely abandoned the sacrificial fire or eschews religious rites. (6.1)

यं संन्यासमिति प्राहुर्योगं तं विद्धि पाण्डव ।

yaṁ sannyāsamiti prāhuryogaṁ taṁ viddhi pāṇḍava |

न ह्यसंन्यस्तसङ्कल्पो योगी भवति कश्चन ॥

na hyasannyastasaṅkalpo yogī bhavati kaścana ||

You should know, Arjuna, that yoga is what they call renunciation. No one becomes a yogi who has not renounced expectation of selfish advantage. (6.2)

## II. Factors that Strengthen Karma

### A. From the *Abhidharmakosha*:

**Those are definite which involve fierce  
Mental affliction or faith, an object of special  
Qualities, anything done on a  
Continual basis, killing father or mother.  
Deeds with results which are something seen,**

**Due to features of the object or thought;  
Anything which was something certain to ripen,  
Where completely free of the level's desire. [IV.213-20]**

"Just what," one may ask, "do you mean when you mention types of deeds that are certain to ripen?" **Those deeds are definite** (will definitely ripen into a future experience) **which involve** any of the following:

- 1) **fierce** emotions, of either **mental affliction or faith**;
- 2) **an object of special qualities**—that is, deeds performed with respect to the Gems;
- 3) **anything done on a continual basis**; and
- 4) **killing** one's **father or mother**, even when this is done with meritorious intent.

"In the lines above," one may continue, "you mentioned that `one is the type with results that you see.' Can you describe this further?" **Deeds with results which are something seen** in the same life are this way **due to special features of the object or thought** involved.

A case of a deed which, because of the special features of the object involved, turned into the type that gives a result in the very same life would be as follows. In one of his former lives, our Teacher was once a certain monk who had mastered all three sections of the canon. There had been a steady increase in quarreling among the community of monks. One monk—who had himself committed the sections of the canon to memory—managed to bring the different sides to an agreement. This angered the other monk (the one who was a master of the canon), who made the sarcastic statement that "A woman has settled a women's quarrel." Because of this deed the monk turned into a woman in that very life, and took five hundred births thereafter as a woman as well.

An instance of a deed which, because of special features of the thought involved, turns into the type that gives a result that you see in this very life would be as follows. King Kanaka had a certain eunuch by the name of "Longwa." He met someone driving a herd of five hundred cattle and asked the man what he planned to do. "We're going to castrate them," was the reply. Overcome with compassion, Longwa managed to save all the cattle from their fate: as a result, his own organ was restored in the very same life.

Aside from the above, **anything which was something certain to ripen** at any particular level can also constitute a deed which gives a result that you see in the very same life, in cases **where** the person has become **completely free of** any **desire** for this **level**. . . .

**Conclusion, one who's acted toward, commission;  
Undertaking, thinking, and intention:  
The power of the deed itself's exactly  
As little or great as these happen to be. [IV.473-6]**

Here we might touch by the way on what determines how serious a given deed will be. The first factor that can make a deed serious is what we call "performance in **conclusion**," which means to continue a particular act well after the original course of action.

The **one who's acted toward** in any particular deed—someone who may have lent one great aid in the past—is also a factor in making the deed a serious one. Deeds which are more serious because of the basic type involved in the actual **commission** of the act would include cases like killing (among the different deeds of the body), lying (among the deeds of speech), and mistaken views (among the deeds of thought). Even among the different types of killing there are those which are more serious—killing an enemy destroyer, for example—because as *Close Recollection* states,

...it leads one to the lowest hell, "Without Respite." A less serious type of killing would be to take the life of a person who had reached any of the paths. And the least serious type would be to kill an animal, or a very immoral person.

Deeds made serious by the stage of their preliminary **undertaking** would be those which involved actually applying oneself physically or verbally. Deeds made serious by the **thinking** involved would be those where one's thoughts in carrying out the act were particularly strong. And deeds which turn more serious because of the **intention** involved would be those where one undertakes an act with particularly strong thoughts of motivation.

We can summarize by saying that **the power of the deed itself is exactly as little or great as these** six factors of conclusion and the rest **happen to be** in their own force. One should understand that deeds where all six factors are present in force are extremely serious.

B. From the *Great Book on the Steps of the Path*, by Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419):

Here is the first. One may ask, "How do you define the act of killing?" The *Abbreviation* says that five parts are involved: the object, the conception, the thinking, the bad thought, and the conclusion. These five can be shortened into four: the middle three can be included into the thinking, and we can add the stage of undertaking; this makes the presentation easier, and in no way violates the intention of the original text.

Now the object for killing is a sentient being: anything with life. The *Levels of Practitioners* does state "another living being," but is only referring to the fact that, when the murderer is murdering himself, there is a wrong deed of undertaking, but not one of completion.

The part of the thinking has three components of its own. Conception can be of four different types: to conceive of the object, say a living being, as being a living being; to conceive of a living being as something other than a living being; to conceive of something other than a living being as being other than a living being, and to conceive of this same thing as a living being. The first and third types of conception here are unmistaken; the second and fourth are mistaken.

This is a particular feature of the motivation. Suppose, for example, that you think to yourself, "I only want to kill John," and undertake the deed. Then you mistake Joe for John, and kill Joe. In this sort of case, there is no "actual-commission" stage; so we can see that, for this stage, the conception you have must be unmistaken. If on the other hand you undertake the deed with some general kind of motivation, if you think to yourself, "I'll kill anyone I happen to meet," then this detail of the conception having to be unmistaken need not be complete. You should understand that this point applies to the other nine as well.

The second component of the thinking is the bad thought involved. In this case, it can be any of the three poisons.

A third component is the motivation; here, it is the wish to kill.

Here are the different aspects of the undertaking. As far as the one who undertakes the deed, it doesn't matter whether you perform it yourself, or get someone else to do it for you, it's all the same. The essence of the undertaking is when the deed is initiated, either with some kind of weapon, or poison, or spell, or whatever the case may be.

The conclusion occurs when, due to this undertaking of the deed, the other person dies, either at the time of the undertaking, or later on.

### III. Purifying Past Negative Karma

#### A. From the *Yoga Sutra*:

वितर्कबाधने प्रतिपक्षभावनम् ॥

vitarkabādhane pratipakṣabhāvanam ॥

When the images start to hurt you, sit down and work out the antidote. (2.33)

वितर्का हिंसादयः कृतकारितानुमोदिता लोभक्रोधमोहपूर्वका मृदुमध्याधिमात्रा

दुःखाज्ञानानन्तफला इति प्रतिपक्षभावनम् ॥

vitarkā hiṁsādayaḥ kṛtakāritānumoditā lobhakrodhamohapūrvakā  
mṛdumadhyādhimātrā duḥkhājñānānantaphalā iti pratipakṣabhāvanam ॥

The images – people who hurt me or the like – come from what I did myself, or got others to do for me, or what I was glad to hear that others had done. And what came before them was either craving, or hating, or dark ignorance. Say to yourself then, “Who knows what pain I have planted for myself?” Sit and work out the antidote. (2.34)

#### B. From the *Entry Point for Children of the Victorious Buddhas*, a commentary by Gyaltsab Je Darma Rinchen (1364-1432) on the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* by Master Shantideva (c. 700 AD):

You should from the very beginning make efforts to see that you are not sullied by performing any harmful actions. Despite your efforts, however, such an action may occur, due to some instance of carelessness, an attack of mental afflictions, or the like. It would be a mistake in such a case to simply ignore the bad deed; you should rather exert yourself in the various methods of repairing the damage. These methods were taught by our compassionate Teacher.

Instances in which you have committed some transgression of your vows, at whichever level of vows you may have, should be repaired according to the methods prescribed for those particular vows. For repairing the damage caused by other kinds of bad deeds you should utilize the four powers. As the Sutra on the Four Practices states,

If, oh Loving One, some great bodhisattva has succeeded in the four practices, then even those bad deeds which have been both committed and collected can be overcome. What are the four practices? They are as follows: the activity of destruction; the activity of applying the antidote; the force of restraining from the particular bad deed; and the force of the foundation.

The expression "committed and collected" refers to actions whose karmic results are "certain to be experienced." If even these types of karmic results can be overcome by the four practices, then there is no need to mention those which are not certain to be experienced.

The first of these four forces involves feeling strong regret over having committed some negative action. In order to achieve this level of regret, you must contemplate carefully the way in which negative actions trigger three different karmic results.

The second force, as described in the Compendium of Trainings, consists of performing practices such as studying the profound scriptures of the canon, meditating on emptiness, reciting secret words, preparing physical representations of the holy bodies of enlightened beings, making offerings, and reciting the names of high beings.

The third force is to restrain yourself perfectly from ever committing these negative actions again in the future.

The fourth consists of meditating upon the wish for enlightenment, and similar practices.

#### IV. Overcoming Obstacles

व्याधिस्त्यानसंशयप्रमादालस्याविरतिभ्रान्तिदर्शनालब्ध

भूमिकत्वानवस्थितत्वानिचित्तविक्षेपास्तेऽन्तरायाः ॥

vyādhistyānasamśayapramādālasyaāviratibhrāntidarśanālabdha  
bhūmikatvānavasthitatvānicittavikṣepāste'ntarāyāḥ ॥

Obstacles occur when the mind is distracted, and this can be caused by illness, fogginess in the mind, having doubts, carelessness, laziness, mistaken views of the world which are left uncorrected, failing to reach specific levels, or not being established in them firmly.

(2.30)

तत्प्रतिषेधार्थम् एकतत्त्वाभ्यासः ॥

tatpratiṣedhārtham ekatattvābhyāsaḥ ॥

And if you wish to stop these obstacles, there is one and only one crucial practice for doing so. (2.32)

मैत्रीकरुणामुदितोपेक्षणां सुखदुःखपुण्यापुण्यविषयाणां

भावनातश्चित्तप्रसादनम् ॥

maitrīkaruṇāmuditopekṣaṇām sukhaduḥkhaṇyāpūṇyaviṣayāṇām  
bhāvanātaścittaprasādanam ॥

You must use kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Learn to keep your feelings in balance, whether something feels good or whether it hurts; whether something is enjoyable or distasteful. This practice makes the mind bright and clear as pure water.

(2.33)

## TEACHING FIVE: WHY KARMA WORKS

### I. Karma and the Glass of Liquid

From the *Overview of the Middle Way*, composed by Master Kedrup Tenpa Dargye (1493-1568):

Here we will analyze the statement [from *Entering the Middle Way*, by Master Chandrakirti (650 AD)] where it says, "The mind of a craving spirit as well, which sees a stream of water as pus." . . .

Now suppose three different types of beings—a pleasure being, a human, and a craving spirit, each with their own karma—sit down together and look upon a glass filled with water, the thing we define as "wet and flowing." The glass of water is not at this point one thing which is simultaneously three different objects. Neither is it necessary in this situation for there to be three identical valid perceptions. And when the glass full of wet and flowing water occurs, it occurs with three different, distinct parts to it.

It is not though the case that, from the time it first started, the glass of water came with the three different parts, or that they stay with the glass of water until it eventually ends. What happens is that one of the parts of the glass filled with wet and flowing water provides a material cause, and the karma of the craving spirit provides a contributing factor; and then based on both of these the later continuation of one part of the glass of water starts being blood and pus.

Another part of the glass of water again provides a material cause, and the karma of the human provides a contributing factor; and then based on both of these the later continuation of one part of the glass of water starts being water.

Yet another part of the glass of water provides a material cause, and the karma of the pleasure being provides a contributing factor; and then based on both of these the later continuation of one part of the glass of water starts being ambrosia, and so on.

At this point, the glass full of wet and flowing water is something with three different parts. Nonetheless, it is not the case that all three different beings see all three parts. The craving spirit is forced by the bad karma he has collected to see the glass of water as pus and blood; and he doesn't see the other two things. One should understand that a similar case holds with the latter two types of beings.

What we just described as happening is only with reference to where a glass of something wet and flowing is an object shared by the three different beings, as they look at it together. When the craving spirit himself though picks up the glass in his hand and begins to partake of its contents, the glass of liquid is no longer something that exists with three different parts. Since at this point it is something that the craving spirit is experiencing exclusively, its continuation starts being pus and blood.

How the glass of liquid exists originally all depends on the particular outer world from where it has been taken, for each of the three different beings has a different outer world, depending on the specific karma he himself has collected. If the glass of liquid were sweet, cool water taken from the world of humans—a world created by the specific karma of the human in the group—then that would be its original condition, and so on.

## II. Emptiness, Karma, and Projection

### A. From the *Yoga Sutra*:

परिणामैकत्वाद् वस्तुतत्त्वम् ॥

pariṇāmaikatvād vastutattvaṃ ॥

Since all the possible permutations of things are but one, their basis is suchness. (4.14)

तदसंख्येयवासनाभिश् चित्रम् अपि परार्थं संहत्यकारित्वात् ॥ २४ ॥

tadaśāṅkhyeyavāsanābhiś cittram api parārtha saṁhatyakāritvāt ॥

Countless seeds within our minds make us see the great variety of things around us. The way it works is that they organize other parts in a certain way. (4.24)

### B. From the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*:

सङ्कल्प मात्र कलनैव जगत्समग्रं सङ्कल्प मात्र कलनैव मनो विलासः ।

saṅkalpa mātra kalanaiva jagatsamagram saṅkalpa mātra kalanaiva mano  
vilāsaḥ ॥

सङ्कल्प मात्र मतिमुत्सृज निर्विकल्पम् आश्रित्य निश्चयमवाप्नुहि राम शान्तिम् ॥

saṅkalpa mātra matimutsrja nirvikalpam āśritya niścayamavapnuhi rāma  
śāntim ॥ ॥

The entire world is nothing but a fabrication of our thoughts. And the play of the mind itself is nothing but a fabrication of our thoughts. Give up this belief in what is nothing more than your thoughts. Learn to depend upon that which is beyond all thoughts. Then, surely, Ram you will attain peace. (4.58)

### III. The Unity Underlying Diversity

#### A. From the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*:

कर्पूरमनले यद्वत्सैन्धवं सलिले यथा ।

तथा सन्धीयमानं च मनस्तत्त्वे विलीयते ॥

karpūramanale yadvatsaindhavaṁ salile yathā |  
tathā sandhīyamānaṁ ca manastattve vilīyate ||

Think of the way that camphor dissolves in a fire, or salt into a cup of water. This is how the mind then merges, except that it dissolves into suchness. (4.59)

मनो दृश्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्चित्स चराचरम् ।

मनसो ह्युन्मनी भावाद्वैतं नैवोलभ्यते ॥

mano dṛśyamidaṁ sarvaṁ yatkiñcitsa carācaram |  
manaso hyunmanī bhāvāddvaitaṁ naivolabhyate ||

Everything here, everything that the mind can see – all that exists at all, whether it moves or stands unmoving – is completely free of duality when the mind goes into the state beyond the mind. (4.61)

### IV. Penetrating the Illusion and Seeing Reality As It Is

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥

yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ ||

We become whole by stopping how the mind turns. (1.2)

क्षीणवृत्तेरभिजातस्येव मणेर्ग्रहीतृग्रहणग्राह्येषु तत्स्थतदञ्जनतासमापत्तिः ॥

kṣīṇavṛtterabhijātasyeva maṇergrahītrgrahaṇagrāhyeṣu  
tatsthatadañjanatāsamāpattiḥ॥

Those extraordinary people who shatter the way the mind turns things around use a balanced meditation, which is fixed and clear on its object. And this object is like a crystal, with the one that holds it, and what it holds, and the holding itself as well. (1.41)

स्मृतिपरिशुद्धौ स्वरूपशून्येवार्थमात्रनिर्भासा निर्वितर्का ॥

smṛti pariśuddhau svarūpaśūnyevārthamātranirbhāsā nirvitarka॥

Stay in that one pure thought, and never forget it; that single most important thing. Things are empty of being what they are by themselves. This is the clear light, beyond all conceptual thought. (1.43)

तद् एवार्थमात्रनिर्भासं स्वरूपशून्यम् इव समाधिः ॥

tad evārthamātranirbhāsaṁ svarūpaśūnyam iva samādhiḥ॥

Perfect meditation then sees this same object as its simple self, its clear light, totally void of any nature of its own. (3.3)

पुरुषार्थशून्यानां गुणानां प्रतिप्रसवः कैवल्यं स्वरूपप्रतिष्ठा वा चितिशक्तेरिति ॥ ३४ ॥

puruṣārthaśūnyānāṁ guṇānāṁ pratiprasavaḥ kaivalyaṁ svarūpapratiṣṭhā vā  
citiśakteriti॥

Total purity is where those who have grasped the emptiness of the person and of things develop each of the high qualities. It too is something that comes through the power of the mind, for those who dwell in their own true nature. (4.34)

V. Actions Without Actors: Transcending Karma

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः ।

prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ ।

अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताऽहमिति मन्यते ॥

ahaṅkāravimūḍhātmā kartā'hamiti manyate ॥

All actions are done just by the constituents of nature, but one who is deluded by the ego thinks, “I am the doer.” (3.27)

नैव किम् चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित् ।

naiva kim citkaromīti yukto manyeta tattvavit ।

पश्यञ्शृण्वन्स्पृशञ्जिघ्रन्नश्नन्गच्छन्स्वपञ्श्वसन् ॥५॥८॥

paśyañśṛṅvanspṛśañjighrannaśnangacchansvapañśvasan ॥5॥8॥

Whether he is seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking, sleeping or breathing, the disciplined one who knows how things really are would think, “I’m not doing anything at all.” (5.8).

प्रकृत्यैव च कर्माणि क्रियमाणानि सर्वशः ।

prakṛtyaiva ca karmāṇi kriyamāṇāni sarvaśaḥ ।

यः पश्यति तथात्मानमकर्तारं स पश्यति ॥

yaḥ paśyati tathātmānamakartāraṁ sa paśyati ॥

One who sees that all actions are actually done only through the workings of nature and thus that the self is not an actor at all, truly sees. (13.29)