

DHARMA ESSENTIALS, COURSE V
HOW KARMA WORKS
Reading Three

READING THREE: How Karma is Carried According to the Mind-Only School; How Emptiness Allows Karma to Work According to the Middle-Way School; Black and White Deeds; The "Path of Action"

The first reading is taken from *Illumination of the True Thought*, written by Lord Tsongkapa (1357-1419).

They (the Mind-Only school philosophers) speak first of the mental seed, the energy, from which the "mind of the eye" (which refers to the consciousness of the eye) comes forth. Another case of consciousness, as it is in the process of stopping, in the next moment plants this mental seed in the foundation consciousness.

Here is the second part [of a different] discussion [about where the Madhyamika school believes the mental seeds from karma are planted, since they do not accept the concept of foundation consciousness]. One may begin with the following question:

Suppose you deny then the existence of a foundation consciousness. Nonetheless you must accept that mental seeds from virtue or non-virtue do get planted, and that consequences do arise from the ripening of these mental seeds. After all, the autocommentary to *Entering the Middle Way* does state that "For time without beginning, in the suffering cycle of life, the mental seeds for things have been planted, and have then ripened, and have then been interpreted by people as the things themselves." There are as well many other quotations which mention the same thing. And it would be incorrect to say that there existed no basis or place where these mental seeds were planted. What then, according to your view, provides this place for the seeds to be planted?

According to those who accept the idea of a foundation consciousness, the thing called "afflicted mind" focuses on foundation consciousness and holds it to be "me"; they say that this foundation consciousness then is the place

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where the mental seeds stay. In our [Madhyamika] school too we have a similar concept; we say that the base which is stained with the mental seed is exactly that thing that you focus on with your simple, natural awareness of yourself and call "me."

The autocommentary to *Entering the Middle Way* states that the stream of the mind is the basis where the mental seeds are planted. How does this fit into what you have just said? The very thing we call the simple "me" is something which results from a label being applied to the *mind*, or consciousness. It also goes on in a *stream*. From this point of view then we can also refer to it as the "stream of the mind." And even if what you mean by a "stream" is the continuation of later, similar instances of mind itself, you can say that it too is the basis which is stained by mental seeds of particular occasions. . . .

It's similar to what happens with sesame butter or flowers; you may already remove these things from the scene, but the vase in which the flowers were, or the piece of cloth that the butter stained, still retain some subtle trace of them due to the previous contact. How then could there be any sense to saying that there is another basis, a second one, on top of the one mentioned here, where other types of mental seeds, like those of virtuous deeds and non-virtuous deeds and the rest, are planted?

Here is the second point [of still another discussion]. One may ask the following:

Those who believe that entities have no natural existence [meaning the Madhyamika Prasangika (or Consequence) School] do not accept the concepts of a foundation consciousness and the like; how then is it that they can still assert that all the workings of karma and its consequences are totally right and proper?

All the Buddhist schools, whether higher schools or lower schools, accept the principle that the consequences of pleasure and pain and so on arise from virtuous and non-virtuous karma or actions, even though the original karma and its eventual consequences may be separated by a very long period of

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time. The problem though is that, if the karma stays around during the entire period up to the point at which it gives its consequence, it would have to be unchanging. An unchanging thing though is incapable of affecting anything, and so you could never have a relationship where karma gave rise to any consequence.

From the moment after you complete a karma or deed, that deed is finished and gone. During the entire period from that point up to the point at which the consequence actually occurs, the deed no longer exists. A deed which is already gone is no longer a thing that can have any affect on anything. How then does a deed or karma ever produce any kind of consequence? Here is how we explain this problem:

Let's consider the deed or karma as it exists up to the point right after the moment in which the deed is completed; that is, let's consider the deed as it approaches its end. The energy of the deed has to be stored somewhere, and so some thinkers have invented the idea of some kind of foundation consciousness for it to stay. . . .

According to someone now of the Madhyamika Consequence school, the deed or karma is not something which arises in and of itself, and so, for this very reason, neither is it something which finishes through any nature of its own. Nonetheless it is no contradiction to say that something which never finishes through any nature of its own can still produce a consequence. As such a consequence can come from a deed even if we never accept the idea of a foundation consciousness or the like. You must understand then that this is why the two kinds of karma can already have finished in the mental continuum of any given sentient being, and yet still after a long time—even after the passing of many millions of years—these deeds can nonetheless produce their consequences "perfectly," which is to say, without any confusion. [That is, good deeds lead to pleasure, and bad deeds lead to pain, and there is never any case where this law somehow goes wrong, and good deeds lead to pain, or bad deeds to pleasure.] Given all this, the connection between deeds and their consequences is, in this school, purely and totally correct. . . .

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And so it is spoken, that all the living beings of the universe are produced by karma. And if somehow you could stop all minds, then karma itself would cease to be, for it is only through mind and what comes along with it that karma can be collected. Therefore karma itself depends on the mind. So the statement from the *Sutra of the Ten Levels*, where it says that there is no great master of all things, and no great maker of all things, conveys one meaning of the word "only" in the expression "mind-only"; the point is that there is no other creator of things than the mind itself. . . .

Thus we can see that it's the mind which is the one single principal cause that sets all life into motion. The principal cause is not something other than the mind. Therefore when the sutras speak of "mind only," they are making the point that mind is the main thing, and not matter. Although we do of course admit that physical matter exists, this matter is not the one prime creator of sentient beings in the way that mind is. Therefore all these scriptural references are denying that the opposite of the mind, something other than the mind, could be the creator. They are not though saying that there are no outside physical objects at all.

The next selection is from the *Overview of the Middle Way*, composed by Master Kedrup Tenpa Dargye (1493-1568).

This then is the ultimate idea within the root text and the commentary of the *Higher Line*, [written by Maitreya and Asanga]:

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

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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.

Someone else might make the following claim:

Suppose a pleasure being, a human, and a craving spirit sit down together and look at a glass filled with water: the thing that we define as "wet and flowing." Since to the perceptions of each different type of being it is real, the glass full of wet and flowing water is in reality pus and blood to the eyes of the craving spirit, and in reality water to the eyes of the human, and in reality ambrosia to the eyes of the pleasure being.

We ask you then a question: in the situation you've just described, is it that the visual consciousness of all three beings are a valid perception, or is it that only one or two of them are a valid perception? Suppose you say all three are valid. Well then, the glass of wet and flowing water must be full of something that is all three different things: pus and blood, and each of the others. And then too it must be possible for there to be multiple and yet still valid perceptions which see one thing in two completely incompatible ways. And finally there must be such a thing as a valid perception which correctly perceives that the glass is filled with something which is simultaneously water and yet not water. Why so? Because, according to your view, the three differing cases of visual consciousness possessed by the three different beings would all have to be valid perception.

And if you try to agree to these absurdities, you are wrong, for the quality of being pus and blood is incompatible with the quality of being either one of the other two substances mentioned. Moreover, the quality of being water and the quality of not being water are directly incompatible in such a way that, if something exists and lacks one of these qualities, it must then possess the other. . . .

Here secondly is the section where we establish our own position. Now

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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

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at this point it is something that the craving spirit is experiencing exclusively, its continuation starts being pus and blood.

The following selections are from the First Dalai Lama's commentary to the *Treasure House of Knowledge (Abhidharmakosha)*, entitled *Illumination of the Path to Freedom*. They include the root text of Master Vasubandhu.

**Non-virtue as well as virtue itself taken
In by the form and desire represent
Respectively deeds which are black, white, and both.
The unstained is what brings it to an end. [IV.237-40]**

Just how do we describe these four types of deeds? **Non-virtue represents** a type of **deed which is black** and ripens into something **black**. It is black in that its very nature consists of something afflicted. It also ripens into something black, for it ripens forth into an undesirable result.

Virtue taken in by the realm of form represents a type of **deed which is white** and also ripens into something white. This is first of all because of its basic nature: it is unmixed with afflicted types of things, within the mental stream in question. And it ripens forth into a desirable result; with the one mental stream, it is not mixed together with any suffering.

Virtue taken in by the realm of desire represents a type of **deed which is both** white and black, and which also ripens into something both white and black. Since its basic nature is free of affliction it is white but—since within a single mental stream it is also mixed with afflicted things—it is black as well. It ripens into something white because it gives forth a pleasant result but—since within the particular mental stream this is also mixed with suffering—we can also say it ripens into something black.

Deeds which are **unstained** never ripen into anything either white or black. Their nature is to be **what brings "it"**—that is, the black kind of deed—**to an end**.

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One may ask why the expression "path of action" is used **in** reference to "**them**"—to the group of ten [of the major misdeeds] just listed. The name derives first of all from the fact that the **three** involved with thought [i.e., coveting, ill will, and wrong views] **are paths** by which the "action" or deed of mental movement is expressed. Moreover, the **seven** involved with body and speech [i.e., killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle speech] are action or **deeds** themselves, **as well** as paths through which mental movement is expressed. Thus they are all "paths of action."

The following selections are from the *Great Book on the Steps of the Path*, composed 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.

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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 unmistakable. 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 unmistakable 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. As the *Treasure House of Knowledge* says,

There is no actual stage for those who die
Before or together, for another body's been born.

Three of the ten—killing, harsh words, and harmful intent—can be initiated by any of the three poisons, and are brought to a conclusion by disliking.

Three of them—stealing, sexual misconduct, and coveting—can be initiated by any of the three poisons, but are brought to a conclusion only by desire.

Three more—lying, divisive speech, and meaningless speech—can be initiated and brought to a conclusion by all three.

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One of the ten—wrong views—can be initiated by any of the three poisons, but is brought to a conclusion only by dark ignorance.

The movements of the mind are an action (karma) but not a path of action. The seven of body and speech are both an action and—because they are the basis in which the movement of the mind engages—are also a path of action. The three of coveting and so on are a path of action but not themselves action (karma).