

Karma

(Dharma talk – July 28, 2007)

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Good morning.

On this rainy July summer day, my talk is going to be on how some Buddhists and non-Buddhists use certain Buddhist words in their everyday language without really knowing their true meaning. It is quite common that words from different languages wind up in English and lose some or all of their original meaning.

Can you guess the two Buddhist words I am thinking of? We hear these words in songs, in movies, on the radio and read them in novels and see them used in poetry.

Right now, I can only think of one song but I am sure there are others with these Buddhist words in the title.

The two words I am thinking of are “karma” and “nirvana.”

You hear these words a lot especially in casual conversations – to suggest a feeling or used as an expression, like “You must have bad karma.” I recently read in a newspaper article, “Make straight for the dining-saloon and there, over a cup of coffee, you will be eased into nirvana.” On CBS radio the other day I heard “doggie nirvana.”

Since time will not permit me to really go into the meaning and history of these two words, I will focus my talk on one of them.

In ancient India, Hindus and Buddhists commonly used the word “karma.” Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning **actions determining future state...** in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, the quality of somebody's current and future lives as determined by that person's behavior in this and in previous lives.

Most people think of karma as the law of cause and effect, which is only touching on the surface of its deeper meaning.

John Lennon wrote a song entitled, “Instant Karma.” John expresses some of karma's meaning. Here are some of the lyrics:

Instant karma's gonna get you
Gonna knock you right on the head
You better get yourself together
Pretty soon you're gonna be dead
What in the world you thinking of
Laughing in the face of love
What on earth you tryin to do
Its up to you, yeah you

Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Yeah we all shine on
Come on and on and on on on.

As you can see, John's theme and message in this song is our continued birth and rebirth.

To truly understand karma you have to know the Indian culture of rebirth. Indians believe in samsara, a Sanskrit word meaning "wandering" from one life to another. To keep our morality in check they believe that how we live our lives in this lifetime will determine our life in the next. If you do good deeds, you will have good karma and doing bad deeds will manifest your evil karma. In Christianity, one believes in an eye for an eye. God will punish you for doing bad deeds.

In Buddhism, karma is interpreted to mean mental, verbal and physical actions, in our thoughts and deeds. Therefore, every action we do good or evil will influence our present and future lives.

Buddhists believe in karma as being either mutable or immutable.

Mutable karma or non-fixed karma is the opposite of immutable karma. This is a karma where the result is not entirely fixed, or destined to appear at a set time. It is our lighter karma.

Immutable karma however, inevitably produces fixed results. There are four causes of immutable karma that can be either negative or positive:

- * Actions motivated by exceptionally strong earthly desires or by a profoundly pure mind
- * Actions, done habitually whether they be good or evil
- * Actions that will benefit the three treasures (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha)
- * Actions causing harm to one's parents

Mutable and immutable karma manifest itself in three forms:

- * karma that is destined to appear in this lifetime
- * karma whose effects are destined to appear in the next lifetime
- * karma that can come from any one of your past lives. Karma is always there and you will never know when it will manifest itself. It is just a matter of time.

An example of mutable karma could be when you do something foolish and immediately get hurt from your action.

Westerners might think of karma in positive terms especially from a materialist point of view. They might think, I can accumulate good fortune and wealth in this life and get to do it all over again, or if I don't get rich in this lifetime, I will do it in my next. They do not see the burden of continued rebirth as foolish beings.

I heard on the radio the other day that Bill Gates is not the richest man in the world. The title goes to a Mexican who owns a communication network. This Mexican's worth is more than \$68 billion. I wonder if this man is truly happy or is he driven by power and wealth.

One summer, when I was 11 years old, my father drove the entire family to California and back. I remember it took us forever to get to the west coast. In those days there was no air

conditioning in the car and as dad drove through the hot deserts of New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and Southern California he hung a canvas bag filled with water over the ornament on the hood of his old Chrysler.

Every time we stopped for gas dad would give us all a drink from the canvas bag. I can still remember how delicious and cold the water tasted. Then, when we reached the west coast we stayed in a motel that was right on the water facing the Pacific Ocean. The first thing my brother and I did was run down to the beach in our bare feet to feel the cold Pacific waters. It was wonderful.

It was our mutable karma of good fortune, which no amount of money, power or fame could replace at that moment. These little experiences in life give us a deeper sense of gratitude. I am thinking every one of you has had moments like this.

In *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, karma is associated with the elementary belief that closely aligns with its original meaning. If you do good deeds good things will come to you. For the commoners this was sufficient.

As Mahayana evolved, it took on a deeper more spiritual meaning relating to the Bodhisattva or Buddhas-to-be.

Bodhisattva is someone who has come back to selflessly help others without thinking of his or her self motivation. As Alfred Bloom wrote in an essay on karma, the Bodhisattva does not ask, "What is the meaning of my life, but how can I be meaningful to others?" The Bodhisattva is not concerned about his life, rather, "What can I give to others (dana)?"

A deeper reality emerges from the Bodhisattva, by accepting all his past karmas and only wanting to help and serve others without going to the bliss of Nirvana and ending the cycle of rebirth. The Bodhisattva shows us a more profound and deeper perceptive into the understanding of karma.

Therefore, Mahayana has taken the concept of rebirth to a higher level. Even though we are bond by the laws of karma, Amida's Vow cuts through our birth and rebirth *samsara* cycle. Shinran Shonin clearly understood how to transcend our karmic evils as written in the *Tannisho*. Karmic evil (*zaigo, zaiaku*) is defined by Taitetsu Unno as the fathomless ignorance deep within us, which regulates our life according to the laws of cause and effect.

Quoting from the *Tannisho*, "Under the influence of our karmic past we human beings will do anything." So, by practicing good deeds or giving into our bad deeds is the result of our current condition and one does not have to lament over it because it is the nature of our karma. Amida's Primal Vow is the only true reality. Everything else is blind passion.

Again quoting the *Tannisho*: "In the person of nembutsu opens up the great path of unobstructed freedom. The reason is that the gods of heaven and earth bow before the practitioner of true entrusting, and those of the world of demons and rival paths cannot obstruct his way. The consequences of karmic evil cannot bear fruit, nor does any form of god equal his. Thus, it is called the great path of unobstructed freedom."

Here Shinran is not encouraging one to commit evil acts, but rather to better understand the wisdom and compassion of entrusting in Amida's Vow. Selfless giving is the goal rather than expecting some kind of reward or praise for one's actions. Not to be burdened by your past karma but to live in this world knowing that Amida Buddha is your true motivator.

Karma is not an easy concept. It is deep and beyond our human ability to understand all of its implications. As a foolish being (bonbu) no matter what my motivations are – good or bad – they are ultimately driven by my evil karma. It is my continued cycle of birth and rebirth. I do not know how deep my karma goes or how high is the compassion of the Tathagata. I know that I am a foolish being living with blind passions in a world that is impermanent, empty and untrue. The only real truth is the nembutsu.

Let's put our palms together as I read another passage from Shinran:

“When I ponder on the compassionate vow of Amida, established through five kalpas of profound thought, it was for myself, Shinran, alone. Because I am a being burdened so heavily with karma, I feel even more deeply grateful to the Primal Vow which is decisively made to save me.”

Namu Amida Butsu.