**Four Laws of Karma**

From experience, we may observe that karma – the law of cause and effect – functions in four discernible ways. These four aspects of karma can be referred to as the "four laws of karma".

First, *karma and its results are certain and unfailing* – with the results at all times being similar to the cause. Positive actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the positive results of some form of happiness and benefit. Negative actions of body, speech, and mind will always bring the negative results of some form of suffering. Karma and its results are exactly like a seed and its fruit.

Second, *karma expands.* Once we have an imprint of an action in our mind, it tends to be habit-forming.

Third, *no results come without a cause*. Actions not engaged, will not brings results. In other words, if the cause has not been created, the effect will not be experienced – and things do not just appear out of nothing.

Finally, *once an action is done, the result is never lost*. An action performed is not lost – it will ripen and bring results.

These *four laws of karma* are now described in further detail.

**Karma Is Definite – Reaping What Is Sown**

Karma is fixed and *definite*. If an intention (compared to a seed planted in the mind stream) is positive, then the mental state, as well as any bodily or verbal action, will be correspondingly positive, creating well-being and happiness. These actions also create more karmic seeds in the mind to ripen in the future.

By contrast, if an intention is negative, the resulting mental state, as well as any actions or words, will be harmful and unhelpful, creating unhappiness and suffering.

Either way, a karmic result is inescapable – it is definite. In the *Vinaya Sutras*, the Buddha expressed it this way: "For every action we perform we experience a similar result."

Agriculturally, when a farmer plants celery seeds, celery plants will result – not garlic plants. Likewise, happiness cannot come as a result of a non-virtuous cause, and suffering can *only* come from a non-virtuous cause.

In sum, as Yangsi Rinpoche states: “Since karma is definite, all negative actions, no matter how small, bring suffering, and all positive actions bring happiness. Whatever we sow, we will reap. Whatever the cause is, so is the result.”

**Karma Is Dynamic – Reaping More Than Is Sown**

Karma *increases* and *expands*. The karmic seed we plant in our mind stream will not only produce a result – rather, there will be results greater than the cause.

As an illustration, my father, who delighted in home gardening, each spring planted tomato seeds in carefully cultivated soil furrows. It never ceased to amaze me, seeing my father during late summer standing among the fully grown plants, harvesting tomatoes by the basketful. The few seeds he planted were nothing in comparison with the baskets full of red ripe tomatoes!

“The increasing nature of karma,” writes Yangsi Rinpoche, “means that even a very small negative action can bring forth a tremendous negative effect. In the same way, even a very small virtuous action can bring forth a very powerful positive effect. . . . For this reason, we should work very hard to purify even our most minor negative actions, and rejoice in and cherish even our most minor virtuous acts.”

The fact that karma is expandable is heartening if it is good karma. A person performs a virtuous action. This immediately brings them peace in their mind and more beneficial results in the future. It is an expanded result from one deed. By contrast, a non-virtuous action, such as one prompted by anger, can yield vastly destructive negative results.

In the sayings of the Buddha, it is written:

Do not think 'The small sins I do will not return in my future lives.' Just as falling drops of water will fill a large container, the little sins a churl accumulates will completely overwhelm him.

Likewise from the sayings of the Buddha:

Do not think 'A small virtue will not return in my future lives.' Just as falling drops of water will fill a large container, the little virtues the steadfast accumulate will completely overwhelm them.

In sum, recognizing how karma greatly increases can prompt one to wholeheartedly desire to practice virtues and to abandon non-virtues.

**Karma Is Specific – Not Reaping What Is Not Sown**

Karma is *specific*. When my father planted his vegetable garden in the spring, he enacted the specific causes that would bring about the specific effects. Planting pea, lettuce, and onion seeds meant that he could fully expect to harvest peas, lettuce, and onions in the summer. And, year after year, this is what precisely occurred.

Likewise, a person will experience the result for which they created the cause. By contrast, a person will *not* experience a result for which they have not created the cause. However, this correlation is definitely not always clear.

When puzzling events develop in life, some people draw on the premise of past and future rebirths to help explain difficult situations. For example, a man is faced with having been swindled in a business deal, costing him his life's savings. The law of karma, seen across lifetimes, could suggest the possibility that the swindled man himself had acted dishonestly in a previous time.

Since karma is specific, it is *not* transferable. Even if a person desired to take on other peoples' karma, they cannot do so. Beings cannot be relieved from their negative karma by others' wishes. Similarly, a Buddha (an enlightened being) cannot take on one's negative karma. If enlightened beings were able to, they would have done so out of their great compassion, and all living beings would be enlightened. However, the attitude of desiring to take on others' suffering and giving happiness, trains one to be able to do the work of a Buddha.

In sum, one does not meet with something if one has not created the karma for it to happen.

**Karma Is Never Wasted – Reaping Now and Later**

Karmic seeds may be *dormant* for a time, but they are *never lost*. They will come to fruition when the right conditions arise for ripening.

An example in nature from inland Australian highlights this. Normally, rainfall in central Australia is minimal, and acutely so during years of drought. Then, once in about a generation, heavy rains come. The entire landscape is carpeted in spectacular floral beauty. Interestingly, all during the drought years, the seeds existed, lying dormant in the ground – but the necessary condition of rain did not allow them to bloom.

Whenever we engage in any action, the karmic imprint of that action is established in our consciousness. This is an immediate consequence. The karmic imprint will then continue to be carried in the consciousness until the conditions are right for it to ripen.

In other words, once karma is created, it will not disappear of its own accord. "Karma does not grow stale after a long time," writes Pabongka Rinpoche, "nor does it lessen, become non-existent, and so on." Clearly, being mindful of all our actions is vitally important.

For those who contemplate the possibility of past lives, the causes for certain outcomes may be created in one life, but the results will come forth in another life. Therefore, due to its delayed fruition, karma remains a hidden factor, veiled and unknown.

An example illustrates. A person might observe that some people are well-off, but also stingy, and conclude “I don’t believe in karma.” However, such wealthy, but miserly, people do *not* disprove karma. Since there is a law of cause and effect, one may conclude that their wealth has come from generosity in the past. True, they may be tight now, which is opposite to the cause of their wealth. Their miserliness may well cause them financial difficulties and loss in a future life. In other words, karma is an unseen factor, operating across lifetimes, and peoples' present wealth is not related to their current miserly approach.

In sum, an action is never wasted. Actions cannot simply vanish and we cannot give them away to someone else and thus avoid our responsibility. The Buddha stated: "The actions of living beings are never wasted even though hundreds of eons may pass before their effects are experienced."

**Closing Comments**

When we see how karma works, it prompts faith and conviction in the inevitable law of cause and effect – as well as a corresponding desire to change our behavior accordingly.

The spiritual classic, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, describes virtuous and non-virtuous karma. The ten non-virtues, or behaviors to abandon, are: killing, taking things not given, and sexual misconduct (non-virtues of the body); lying, divisive speech, harsh words, and idle gossip (non-virtues of speech); and covetousness, harmful intent, and wrong views (non-virtues of the mind).

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