

Karma and Morality



Human beings are not alone in their ability to differentiate between good and evil, but we have developed a much stronger moral conscience than other creatures. This conscience is not necessarily inherent to being human, and it needs to be developed within a social context. For instance, we can see that a child's conscience and sense of morality is quite underdeveloped, as seen by children needing to be taught that bullying other children or hurting animals is a bad thing. This suggests that, on some level, being good or bad are qualities that are learnt and acquired.

In the past, religion took the role of attempting to teach people how to be good. For instance, the first two steps of classical yoga are Yama and Niyama, which are rules of conduct that outline which actions are desirable and which should be avoided. Religion usually motivates people to behave morally by threatening them with the wrath of god or some other form of punishment. In both Christianity and Buddhism, there are quite frightening descriptions of the hells which await fallen souls.

Morality: Artificial Goodness

Morality is about distinguishing between conduct which is good and right versus that which is bad and wrong. People often experience various contradictions in what it means to act morally because these rules often need to be bent, or even broken, in real life situations. Life is often a struggle and competition for survival, and societal mores can easily be in conflict with the requirement to fulfill our baser needs.



In past articles, we have described morality as a necessary substitute for the soul's innate love and goodness. Morality is necessary for people who are disconnected from the soul so that society can function with some degree of harmony. However, from the spiritual standpoint, we must look beyond these imposed moral conditionings to find the true source of goodness, compassion, and love. Morality is not goodness, but rather an attempt to tame and control human selfishness either through introducing higher values and ideas to the mind or through fear.

Embracing Irreconcilable Moral Contradictions

Many struggle to reconcile their idealistic principles with real life, and no one has yet found a satisfactory final solution to this paradox. As an example, the principle 'Thou shalt not kill' is present in all of the major religions, but life on earth is based on the merciless food chain, and the taking of life in some form or another is unavoidable for survival. The Jain religion is an extreme attempt to live by this principle. A Jain monk is not even allowed to kill an insect, and sweeps the path in front of him when he walks so as to not step on any small creatures. When these rules were started, people were not aware of the microorganisms that are constantly being killed, even those inside of us by our white blood cells. It would be impossible for Jains to comply with this rule in light of current scientific knowledge. Jainism also happens to be the only religion which allows one to commit suicide by starving oneself to death. One wonders how taking one's own life is different from the taking of other ones. Jainism is an example of such extreme idealism that it has lost touch with the reality of the physical world.

It is fashionable in spiritual circles to refrain from eating meat. Not many people question killing plants because they are so different to us. Similarly, some vegetarians happily eat seafood. Because seafood is also very different to us, eating it does not cause the guilty conscience that eating animals would. This interpretation of vegetarianism is obviously hypocritical, but many other lifestyles and behaviors of people are also far from rational.

Anyone who looks deeper into the history of human race can see that we were always carnivores (or omnivores, to be precise). Hunting and gathering were activities of all humanoids for more than the last million years. It only changed to farming and pastoral lifestyles during the last ten thousand years. To think that eating meat creates bad karma is to close our eyes to how we, as humans, have managed to survive for most of our evolution. While agriculture has enabled us to live on less meat, it has also caused more animal species to disappear from the face of earth than all of the hunting that had been previously done. By being able to grow and store wheat, rice, and other grains, the human race multiplied exponentially, forcing animals out of their natural environments. Vegetarianism and its more extreme forms, such as veganism and fruitarianism, are more ideologies than diets. Nowadays, it does not really matter what we eat from a scarcity point of view, because there is enough food for everyone to survive.

In some places, like Tibet and the Arctic Circle, they did not have the choice in the past to stop eating meat since the foods available were so limited. Buddha himself had to solve the moral issues connected with eating meat because his monks obtained their food through begging, food which sometimes would include meat. His solution was to accept the meat which had not been especially killed for him or his monks. This does seem to be a rather half measure solution to reconciling an ideological stance with the hard facts of life.



Karma: Internalized Reward and Punishment

While Western and Middle Eastern civilizations usually connected moral principles with the concept of god's judgment, in the East that judgment was internalized and based on karma. It was even present in atheistic religions like Buddhism. The term 'karma' has wider connotations than 'morality', and it is often understood as being based on a cosmic law of cause and effect. This cause and effect has generally been viewed in a moral context, where one either pays a penalty for wrongdoings or receives rewards and blessings for good deeds.

In reality, there are indeed natural laws which govern that we reap what we sow, sooner or later. However, we need to apply careful discrimination in our interpretation of how such laws operate, and things become more complicated when we try to determine where the dividing line between right and wrong is. Since life is never black and white, it is often difficult to be sure of the right course of action. We must be careful not to be trapped by the linear mind trying to fix its simplistic and dogmatic ideas onto reality. Rather, we must be imaginative and flexible.

It is not always possible to know from appearances what creates negative karma. For instance, sometimes violations of the moral code we normally live by could be the right and best means available to us. Rather than defining it according to a type of action, we can say that negative karma is created from any action, or inaction, which originates from low and impure intentions. Sometimes even not doing anything – because we have chosen conformism and indolence instead of truth – can create negative karma. Negative karma can also be created when one betrays one's path to the light. No further external punishment is required for such negative karma, because we are already paying the price of suffering in the state of forgetfulness.

Some seekers achieve a shallow level of awakening, and instead of continuing their evolution, they stop at this superficial point. Such inaction creates negative karma on its own, because life has blessed these seekers by opening the door to evolution and inviting them to take further steps, but they stopped listening to their inner guidance and backed away from the true path. There are many teachers who feel qualified to teach others in spite of having a very limited, if any, access to their true self – and they too create negative karma for themselves. In their cases, this negative karma is exacerbated by those who follow them, because a teacher always has to take on some of the karma of those he is helping for his help to be effective. If his realization and state are of insufficient strength, he will have insufficient light to be able to release this additional karma he has taken on, resulting in him accumulating the added karmic burdens of others.

Karma can be positive as well, of course. Positive karma is created by following the truth and serving the highest good of one's soul. Contrary to conventional belief, it is not created through self-sacrifice or from trying to save the world. The ego confuses contrived personal and social concepts of morality with true and natural goodness and compassion. In true goodness, our own base of well-being must also be preserved, because all is lost, including the possibility of helping others, if we lose the light and wellness of our own being.

Karmic Lessons

The term 'karmic lesson' is very important, and it has two connotations. The first one refers to what we are meant to experience and learn in this lifetime for our spiritual or human growth,



being based on the soul's blueprint. The second meaning has to do with learning whatever comes our way, even if such an experience appears to be very negative. The negativity of such a karmic lesson could be because it is traumatic and painful, or because it is the result of something we have done wrong. It is normal that when we have done something we are ashamed of, or which has serious consequences for us, we try to distance ourselves from the experience and repress the memory of it. However, it is important to learn and mature from our mistakes, and for them to become life lessons for us.

Life is our greatest teacher, so it is critical for us to retain the spirit of learning at all times. To let life be our guide through the mystery of our existence, we need to have open minds and hearts, being aware of everything, even the seemingly insignificant, that is happening to and around us. The experiences of some karmic lessons are essential for our maturation, but when we have managed to accelerate our evolution, we will find we are able to sidestep, or transcend, some of the painful lessons we might otherwise have required. On the other hand, some people stop learning and remain blind and deaf to the wisdom of life. When people are not open to learning their lessons, they will be confronted with the same ones over and over again until they are assimilated.

Is An Enlightened Being Free from Karma?

In different traditions of self-realization, the question is often asked as to whether enlightenment frees one from karma. There is a Zen koan where, when asked about this, a monk replied that Buddha is indeed free of karma. The monk was penalized by being reborn as a fox. Later on, he was freed from the fox's body when he heard the correct answer, which was, "Cause and effect are clear." What this means is that irrespective of our realization, we cannot escape the law of cause and effect, the law of karma. But this still does not fully answer the question.

Being free from karma means becoming emancipated from the relative dimension. In samadhi, one has fully embodied one's pure nature in the inner dimension and is free from cause and effect on that level. However, in its human dimension, the soul is still bound by the karmic laws and must suffer their consequences.

Having said this, when our awakening is incomplete, even our pure nature is still not free of karma, because the soul has not yet transcended. In fact, positive karma is required to complete the path. Without positive karma, we cannot go beyond the karmic laws and realize our unconditional freedom.

There is a concept of 'crazy wisdom' in Buddhism, whereby a master purposefully behaves in challenging and irrational ways that offend society or shock people to help them awaken. He may also behave this way to free seekers from being trapped by false ideas of morality or holiness, or he may behave in unacceptable ways to show that nothing can affect his inner purity and freedom. Does such a master create negative karma through such 'crazy wisdom' actions? He may, but only if he is acting from his ego and his intention is impure, or if someone is hurt by these actions. Of course, negative karma is not created just because people feel hurt. They might be hurt for reasons unconnected with the master's actions, or their hurt may just be in their imagination. And, sometimes, being hurt is simply unavoidable, so the person who seemingly caused this is not creating negative karma.



It is also always possible that after our awakening, we may create more negative karma which would then be a further impediment to our evolution. In fact, this is not only possible, but fairly commonplace. The human and the soul are interconnected. The soul can release the human from his negative karma, but only once the human surrenders and begins serving her higher purpose. But for this to be possible in the first place, the human must also have enough positive karma to attract the grace which awakens his soul.

We should not be afraid of karma, as it is just a natural law. It teaches us caution and responsibility. It is true that everyone needs to be careful not to create new negative karma for themselves through their actions or thoughts. Negative thinking on its own does create negative karma, because thoughts affect our inner and outer reality. Thoughts are also actions – actions experienced in our mental and emotional reality.

Awareness of the law of karma is an invitation to live in accordance with wisdom and higher intention. The very purpose of our existence is to embody our natural goodness, love, and compassion through actualizing the higher subjectivity of our soul. Karma is one of life's tools to help motivate us to get there.

Blessings,
Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology, please visit our website at www.anaditeaching.com/glossary