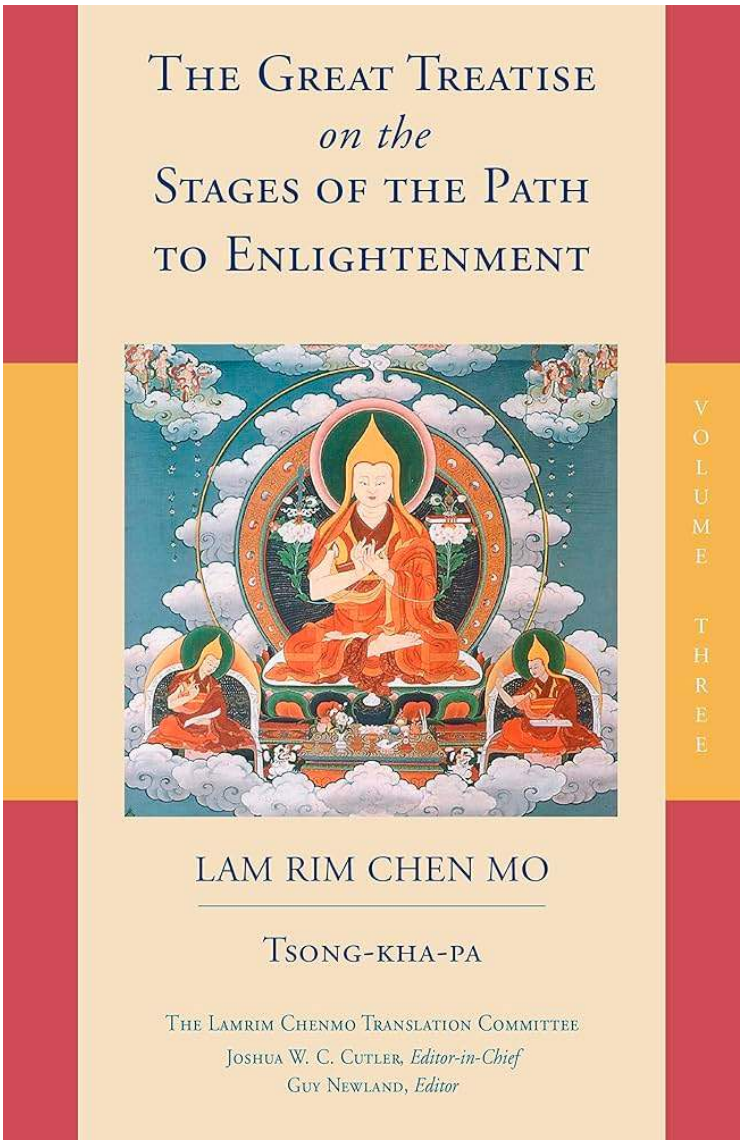


LamRim Path to Enlightenment Volume 1b

Chapter 13 The General Characteristics of Karma

b' Developing the faith of conviction that is the root of all well-being

(The second part of the a' in Chapter 11. This b' will see us through Chapters 13, 14, 15.)

The foundation of all virtue, happiness and bliss, both within the cycle of existence and beyond, lies in having trust in the cause-and-effect of karma and in the Three Jewels, grounded in a profound understanding of their perfect qualities. Trust in karma is born from a solid understanding of how it works, knowing the specific outcomes that result from various actions. As your understanding of these cause-and-effect relationships deepens, your trust in the workings of karma naturally strengthens. That trust serves as the primary source of all well-being.

Although the intricacies of how karma operates are profound and difficult to grasp entirely, it is imperative to develop a clear understanding of how karma works. Whether you aspire to attain higher rebirths within the cycle of samsara or you are on the path toward complete liberation, a comprehensive comprehension and appreciation of karma are essential. Why is this so crucial? Because if you fail to adhere to the principles of karma, all paths leading to a better rebirth or eventual liberation will be blocked. Karma is the key that unlocks the door to lasting happiness.

1' Contemplating karma and its results in general

(1' fills Chapter 13 and part if 14. 2' fills the rest of Chapter 14. 3' fills Chapter 15.)

a" The actual method of contemplating karma and its results in general

(a" is Chapter 13. b" is Chapter 14.)

1" The certainty of karma

All happiness is the maturation of virtuous karma. Every pleasant feeling—from a cool breeze passing through the hot hells up to the highest bliss of the arhat—all arises from previous virtuous action. There is not even the smallest enjoyable experience that ripens from non-virtue; there is no way that this can happen. Without previous virtue, happiness cannot arise.

In the same way, from ordinary individuals to ārya beings, all painful and unpleasant feelings are the results of non-virtuous karma that was previously performed. There is no way that any kind of unhappiness can ripen from virtuous action.

When you perform a virtuous or non-virtuous action, it is like planting a seed having a particular kind of potential to ripen into a particular type of result. What is definite is that a virtuous action can only produce a pleasant result and a non-virtuous action can only produce an unpleasant or suffering result.

From non-virtues come all sufferings,
And likewise all bad migrations,
From virtues, all happy migrations
And the pleasures of all lives.

That is, happiness and misery do not arise without a cause, nor do they arise from causes that are discordant or contradictory with the result. If this were not true, happiness and unhappiness would be random.

The various particular instances of misery or happiness arise from particular instances of virtuous or non-virtuous action. You should grasp this law of karma and its results clearly and with certainty.

The cause must be concordant with the result. Impermanent results cannot arise from a permanent cause — nor can a permanent result arise from an impermanent cause. In general, happiness arises from virtuous karma and suffering arises from non-virtuous karma.

All the buddhas have praised this **right view** as the basis of all white dharmas, meaning that all positive, happy and blissful experience arises from that right view.

We can distinguish two kinds of right view: 'conventional right view' and 'ultimate right view'. **Ultimate right view**—the correct view of the ultimate nature of things—is the realisation of emptiness (śūnyatā). **Conventional right view** is correct understanding of the cause and effect of karma and its results.

Another way to look at this is in terms of the **two truths**: **phenomenal and absolute truth**. The right view of the 'absolute truth' is the realisation of emptiness. The right view of 'phenomenal truth' is a proper understanding of karma and its results.

Conventional right view, the correct view of phenomenal truth, is just this understanding that positive karma will definitely produce happy results and negative karma will definitely produce suffering results. When you gain understanding and confidence in the certainty of this process of cause and effect, that is conventional right view.

Virtuous karma invariably brings happy results; non-virtuous karma brings only suffering. Each action brings its own definite, distinct result. Karma is always certain. Its results are never mixed up or inconsistent.

2" The magnification of karma

Karma increases greatly. Even a small virtue can bring a very great blissful result, while a small non-virtuous action can produce great suffering. Either way, the result can be greatly magnified in terms of size, amount, duration, or intensity from the original action that was the cause.

The Buddha gave a detailed explanation of karma and its results. He explained how a seemingly insignificant act—a small karma—increases and produces a very great result.

Performing even a small misdeed
Will bring great terrors and disaster
In future lives,

Like poison that has been ingested.

Performing even a small meritorious action
Will lead to great happiness in the next life,
And great purposes will be accomplished,
Just as grain ripens into bounty.

Even a small negative action can produce many unhappy rebirths and during those lifetimes you will meet many unbearable experiences. In the same way, a small virtuous action will bring great joy in the future and lead to accomplishing great purposes.

The details of this relationship between karma and its results is extremely profound and subtle—much more difficult to understand fully than emptiness. Until you are freed from all the subtle obstacles to knowledge, you cannot know all these details.

Even arhats are not completely free of these obstacles to knowledge. Although arhats have freed themselves from rebirth in samsara and from experiencing samsaric suffering, they still have obstacles to knowing certain things—including all the details of karma and its relationships. The details of karma are fully known only to the omniscience of a perfect Buddha.

The Buddha taught karma and its results by telling stories of chains of karmic causation over many lifetimes that had led to specific events of the time. Eg Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish. Eg, very poor woodcutter who gave all the money he had to the Buddha and rejoiced in all the merits they were creating was born many times as a child with a gold coin in his hand. This is the kind of story we find in these sutras, in which each event is explained by karmic potentials accumulated in previous lifetimes. There are stories of good events caused by virtuous actions and unhappy events caused by non-virtue.

Tsongkhapa identifies four facets of spiritual activity that are important for a religious practitioner: ethical conduct, ritual, livelihood and correct view of karma and its results. These four elements should be harmonious and in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha. Failure of any the first three gives rebirth as a nāga. Failure of the fourth gives a lower rebirth.

You need to gain a firm understanding that even the tiniest karma follows you like a shadow follows the body and it produces great happiness or great suffering.

Once you have confidence in this process, you should pursue virtue even in the smallest deeds that you do and avoid by all means negative actions. Do the very best you can to behave in this way.

This subject of karma is one of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. It is a cornerstone of all the paths that lead to higher rebirths and to enlightenment. These paths are all based on understanding and practicing karma and its results as established in various sutras and as taught here in the Lamrim Chenmo.

As we discuss this subject you may find that certain areas may seem clear and understandable—while others are not. You should begin by concentrating on those areas that make sense to you and let yourself be influenced by those teachings, so that your own behaviour comes into harmony with what the Buddha is suggesting.

It is important to not reject those areas that you don't understand or appear unbelievable. Think, "I will not flatly reject these ideas. Maybe eventually I will understand them." To reject them is dangerous. Leave the issue open and make it a basis of further investigation. You should base your behaviour and your practice on the teachings about karma that make sense to you now.

We have been born as humans, with the capacity to learn from the instructions of others, from our own experience, from our own research. By these means, we are able to discern these processes of cause and effect. Once we gain this discriminating understanding of how things work, we must make a great effort to act accordingly. Human effort can have tremendous power and can make a great difference in the path that our life takes in the future.

Just as their shadows accompany
Birds who dwell in the sky,
Good and evil actions
Follow those who commit them.

Just as travellers with insufficient provisions
Will meet hardship on the journey,

Beings who do not perform good karma
Will go to bad migrations.

Just as those with well-prepared provisions
Will be happy on their journey,
Beings who do good karma
Will go to happy migrations.

Do not discount even a tiny misdeed,
Believing it will do no harm.
By collecting water, drop by drop,
A large vessel is gradually filled.

Do not think that small unwholesome actions will do no harm or make no difference. Day by day, hour by hour, such small negative karmas accumulate, until you are filled with the potential for unpleasant results.

Also, do not think that small virtuous actions will not help you because they are too small. Just as dripping water accumulates until it fills a great vase, little by little virtuous karma will fill up a person who is well established and steadfast in his or her practice.

By performing virtuous or non-virtuous actions habitually,
It becomes the nature of a person,
So that in future lives, without intending it,
They continue to do them, as if in a dream.

You may possess all sorts of excellent qualities such as noble birth, physical beauty, power and wealth; all such good qualities come as a result of previous virtuous actions. But if you do not create good karma during this present life, you certainly will not obtain happiness in the next life.

Regardless of who you are now, your experience of happiness or suffering in future lives will depend on whether you do virtuous or non-virtuous actions during this life. This is something you should clearly understand.

The point of this discussion can be stated as follows: while you have the opportunity of this life you should be preparing yourself for the time of death and for what lies beyond. Imagine that you had to weigh your positive and negative karma at the time of death: will your positive actions be greater than the negative ones? If so, that would be a great accomplishment. But if you look back and see that your negative karma is much greater than the positive, you will feel great fear at the time of death. You will be facing a terrifying darkness and you will go into that darkness with deep sorrow.

Therefore, you should make every effort to produce virtue and to avoid all non-virtue. You should confess whatever negative actions you have already done and purify them by applying the antidotes.

3" If an action is not performed, its results will not be met

If you do not perform an action, you can never experience the result of that action. If you do not perform an action that is the cause of a pleasant or unpleasant experience, then you cannot have that experience. The corollary of this is that you cannot experience the results of karma created by someone else.

A question arises: If it is true that you cannot meet the results of karma that you did not perform yourself, how do you explain the case in which the Buddha's enlightenment created great happiness for countless other beings? Commentary says "During is many lives as a bodhisattva accumulated considerable merit. Many sentient beings have experienced good results from the Buddha's vast accumulation of merits." I find this spurious.

Tsongkhapa says that those who experience good results by virtue of the actions of a buddha or bodhisattva need to have performed those positive deeds themselves. There must be an appropriate relationship between their own virtuous karma and the results they experience. Perhaps by following the Buddha's teaching and path will give that merit.

Without creating the virtuous actions that can act as the cause for a happy result, you will not be able to meet that experience. No matter how much a bodhisattva may pray and dedicate his or her merits, such a being will not be able to place anyone in that happy state. "It is the combination of the bodhisattva's powerful prayer, together

with the meritorious actions of the individual being benefited and the dedication of merits by that individual toward the achievement of what the bodhisattva has prayed for, that creates the relationship and the cause for such a happy result."

GDB. I'm inclined to think the no one can arrange merit or good karma by proxy. Each person themself must do the work - virtuous actions, good karma. You can get merit by celebrating the achievements of others. I think it ends there.

Commentary also has.

Just as heroic Mañjuśrī knew how,
Just as Samantabhadra also knew,
I dedicate all this virtue so that
I may learn to follow all their ways.

When you dedicate your merit in this way, you make a connection with the unlimited activities of these two great bodhisattvas, which they have dedicated to the welfare of all sentient beings. The karmic relationships are subtle and difficult to comprehend, but making this connection can bring about very great results. If you don't do anything at all from your own side (virtuous actions positive karma) and if you don't make any connection to these bodhisattvas, you will not attain the benefit of their actions. As Tsongkhapa puts it 'a person must at least create some portion of the merits of a buddha or bodhisattva in order to partake in the benefits of their unlimited merits.'

The general point here is that if you do not perform any action that can produce a particular result, you will never experience that result.

When the time comes for the maturation of karmic causes—when it is time to experience the result of previous actions—there is no way to escape those consequences.

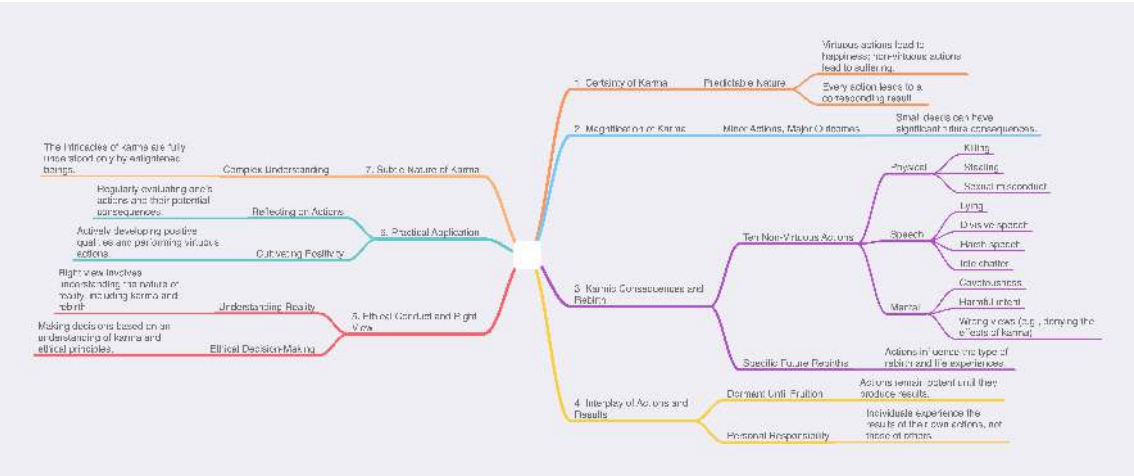
4" Actions that are done do not perish

Once you create a karma, its potential will never be lost until it ripens and yields fruit. The only thing that can prevent it from ripening is destroying the karmic seed by means of an antidote. Otherwise, even if it takes many, many millions of eons, the result of that karma will eventually occur. It is inevitable that those who perform virtuous actions will experience attractive results and those who perform non-virtuous actions will experience unattractive results.

The Buddha teaches that once someone performs a karma it will never be lost and its results must be experienced by the person who created the karma. If you do not create a karma, you can never experience its results.

Once an action is done, there is no circumstance where the results will not be met.
When another has done an action, you cannot experience the result.

Even in one hundred eons,
Karma will never be lost.
When the time comes and they meet the conditions,
Beings surely will experience the results.



Summary Chapter 13.

Chapter 13 is a detailed exploration of the Buddhist teachings on karma. It is structured around key themes such as the certainty and magnification of karma, the consequences of actions and the intricate workings of cause and effect.

1. **Certainty of Karma**: This principle asserts that every action (karma) inevitably leads to a corresponding result. For example, acts of kindness and generosity lead to future happiness, while harmful actions result in suffering. This concept is akin to the law of cause and effect, emphasising the predictable nature of virtuous and non-virtuous actions and their consequences.
2. **Magnification of Karma**: The text discusses how small actions can lead to significant, sometimes unexpected, consequences. For instance, a minor act of deception might lead to a future filled with distrust and betrayal. This magnification principle underscores the importance of being mindful of every action, thought and word, because their effects can amplify over time.
3. **Karmic Consequences and Rebirth**: The ten non-virtuous actions are:

- Killing
- Stealing
- Sexual misconduct
- Lying
- Divisive speech
- Harsh speech
- Idle chatter
- Covetousness
- Harmful intent
- Wrong views (such as denying the results of karma)

Each of these actions leads to specific negative results in this life and future rebirths.

4. **Interplay of Actions and Results**: The text explains that actions performed in one's life will not disappear until they bear their respective results. The effect is said to remain dormant until it comes to fruition with the right conditions. The text also emphasises personal responsibility in the karmic process, asserting that one only experiences the results of their own actions, not those of others.
5. **Ethical Conduct and Right View**: This section emphasises that understanding and practicing ethical conduct according to karmic principles is crucial for spiritual progress. It's not just about avoiding negative actions, but actively engaging in positive deeds. The 'Right View' involves understanding the nature of reality, including the principles of karma and rebirth, which form the basis for ethical decision-making. This understanding is vital for progressing on the path to enlightenment.
6. **Practical Application**: The document offers guidance on how to apply these principles in daily life. It suggests constantly reflecting on one's actions and their potential consequences and actively cultivating positive qualities like compassion, patience and generosity. It is essential to create a positive cycle of karma that not only benefits oneself but also contributes to the wellbeing of others.
7. **Subtle Nature of Karma**: Finally, the text acknowledges the complexity of understanding karma. It's described as a subtle and intricate law that operates beyond ordinary perception, fully comprehensible only to a Buddha. This acknowledgment serves as a reminder of the profound and often mysterious nature of these teachings.