

Training in Wisdom 7: Karma and the 12Links

Karma, meaning ‘action’ refers to cause and effect. Actions leave seeds in the mindstream which can sprout whenever conducive conditions arise. This feedback from a previous action can arise practically instantaneously, or lifetimes after the original action.

Manifestations of body, speech and mind leave traces in the mindstream. These traces are called by the Persian Sufis “kashf”, the ‘lines on the mind’. In the Mahayana they are referred to as “vasana”, ‘perfuming’ of the mindstream. These karmic seeds can be from virtuous or non virtuous actions. The ‘habitual tendencies’ of repeated karmic actions emerge as events when conducive conditions arise, and make further repetition of the action probable. It is, however possible to break the vicious cycle of negative habituations by not reacting and not repeating the negative action. Likewise, positive actions can be enhanced by repetition.

It is said that only Buddhas can fathom the laws of karma and cause and effect completely. Among the powers attained by Shakyamuni Buddha under the Bodhi tree were the ability to scan all his past lives and understand the karmic causes behind each life experience. He was also able to discern the karmic paths of other sentient beings.

Prepared for Nalanda Institute by Bob Harris Oct, 2016
The Buddha summarized his understanding of karmic law in the teaching of the 12 links of ‘dependent arising’

“pratitya samutpada”. These summarize the vicious circle of action and reaction in this samsaric world.

The first two links in the chain of causation represent the forces of the subconscious, or, if you like, the sum total of the karma of past lives:

1. “Avidya”, ‘ignorance’, not seeing reality.
2. “Samskaras”, ‘impulses’, ‘karmic formations’
The same word refers to the 4th skandha and the 51 habitual tendencies, virtuous, non-virtuous and neutral. Avidya and samskaras then generate the chain of events that make up our daily experience:
3. Subject-object consciousness, “vijnana”
4. Name and form, the process of five skandhas
5. Six sense gates, the sense organs including mind
6. “Sparsha”, sense contact with an object
7. Feeling, “vedana” positive, negative or neutral reaction to a sense contact.
8. “Trishna”, thirst, craving. This is where the process of generating new karmic seeds can be stopped. By staying centered and resisting the pull of a liked object, or the push of a disliked object, thus preventing the rise of:
9. “Upadana”, ‘grasping’
10. “Bhava”, ‘becoming’; karmic seed planted.
11. Birth, or the arising of a phenomenon
12. Old age and death, or the ceasing of a phenomenon