Understanding Karma

Karma (*kamma*, in Pali) is one of the Indian words that has infiltrated into the English language. The translation of the word is traditionally “action”, specifically related to the intention of the person acting. In one of the sutras, someone points to a blind bhikkhu practicing walking meditation and asks “If he steps on an ant, does that generate unwholesome karma?” The Buddha replied that, since there was no aggressive intention regarding the ant, the bhikkhu accumulated no unwholesome karma.

The Buddha modified the previous cultural understanding of karma, as he frequently did, it would seem. The prior understanding was related to the expectations of whichever clan one was born into. If the person followed the cultural roles assigned to that clan, beneficial karma resulted, and this would determine whether that person’s rebirth would be beneficial. There was a specific requirement for Brahmins, members of the priestly clan: In order to accumulate beneficial karma, the priest (always male), performed certain rites and rituals perfectly, that was beneficial *for the supplicant as well as the priest*!

The new understanding of karma promoted by the Buddha involved mindfully cultivating the principles of harmlessness, kindness, compassion, generosity and patience. Regarding the Four Noble Truths, what constituted nobility were these ethical principles, and someone who had mastered those capabilities and experienced awakening was called a Brahmin, regardless of whichever clan he or she was born into.

As straightforward as the translation is regarding karma, the concept itself is quite complex. It is one of the four imponderables, more specifically, the way karma is created and the impact of karma. Regarding the impact of karma, there is another term, *vipaka*, which is the fruition of karmic action.

Karma can be divided into four categories: wholesome, unwholesome, a mixture of wholesome and unwholesome, and indeterminate (a category reserved for those who are awakened). These four categories can manifest in terms of physical action, mental action and verbal action. There are different levels of karmic consequence: minor karma (intentionally stepping on an ant), major karma (intentionally killing or otherwise seriously harming one’s parents or an awakened being), and habitual karma (either wholesome, unwholesome or indeterminate). There is also the designation of proximal karma (the effects are immediate) and distal karma (the effects may occur decades later, or even in another lifetime).

I want to introduce more contemporary considerations of karma. Much of modern Buddhist commentary is informed by current research in psychology and neuroscience. This issue of rebirth is not considered from this perspective. The following are some categories of research and how they relate to karma:

* LONG TERM POTENTIATION: It is becoming more commonly understood that different mental processes emerge from patterned connections between neurons in dispersed areas of the brain. The more frequently these neural patterns are stimulated, the stronger the connections between them become, and the more easily the patterns can be activated. The bonding between the neural pathways are reinforced through two modalities: the emotional potency involved (such as fear or desire), and how frequently associated neural patterns are stimulated (this is habituation, for example, the way a person ties her or his shoes). *A person’s karma is changed when the organization of the neural patterns is changed*—this is neuroplasticity.
* SOCIOCULTURAL CONDITIONING: This considers two levels of culture—familial and societal. Each family system has its own cultural norms which generally follow the general tone of the larger societal norms. As a psychotherapist, I have heard of many different ways that a family indoctrinates their children, based on the parents’ childhood experience and the “hybrid” combining of each parent’s particular experience. The culture of the family is influenced by ethnic and other factors of society—prejudice, education, financial status, etc. All of these conditioning factors are implicit, that is, the specific karmic rules are seldom described explicitly, and the rules are activated by neural pathways largely outside of a person’s conscious awareness.
* ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONING: There is a research discipline focused on what is called epigenetics, which investigates how environmental factors affect the actions of DNA, which specifies the generation of cells in the body. The number of possible connections between the two spirals that constitute DNA, and these connections control what the characteristics of the new cellular function will be in the replacement cell. Research has shown that environmental factors can activate or deactivate these links between the spirals, so that the next generation of cells in that organism function differently. Most of these epigenetic changes are stimulated by factors such as exposure to certain chemicals or other environmental conditions. There are suggestions in current research that certain behavioral routines (such as meditation practice) have epigenetic influence. Research suggests that some epigenetic changes are capable of being passed on to progeny, that they are inheritable. This is another way to understand how evolution operates. *This could be considered as multigenerational karma*!

The complexity of karma comes from the complexity of factors involved in human cognition and behavior. There are biological factors, such as neural activity, combined with metabolic factors, such as nutrition, fatigue, etc. There are environmental factors, such as the complexity of negotiating relationship dynamics with many personalities, and the complexities of relative social power dynamics. All of these conditioning factors involve emotionally charged memories as well as habituated ways of perceiving and responding to interpersonal cues.

How can karma be modified? The classical suggestions include understanding what is called *dependent origination* (I prefer *contingent provisional emergence-*google that term for more information). This concept describes 12 links that recur multiple times a second to create a relentlessly recurring series of blended momentary self-state organizations. Here are the links: Ignorance—karmic formations—consciousness—name-and-form—six sense bases—contact—feeling—craving—clinging—becoming—death [of that moment of self-state organization]. According to the doctrine, when someone is clearly aware of the emergence of a feeling, without craving and clinging, that person’s karmic formation process is altered beneficially, provided they act on the ethical principles put forward by Buddhism, stated above.

In terms of current neuroscientific research, the ability to be aware of the emergence into awareness of a particular self-state organization requires mindful, non-reactive investigation of that process, then the activation of neural pathways that disengage attention from that emerging phenomenon before it becomes predominant in awareness. That disengagement acknowledges a feeling tone as just a phenomenal experience without channeling the energy of attention towards “solidifying” the perception into “myself”.

Literally, what is happening is the neural patterns of long-term potentiation associated with stressful thoughts and actions are drained of energy, and lose the potency and habituation associated with that particular self-state organization. At the same time, the neural pathways associated with mindful, non-attached investigation are empowered and become potent and habituated. This process transforms what is called *state mindfulness* into *trait mindfulness* through long-term potentiation, and this is how karma is changed beneficially (for more information, google “from state to trait mindfulness”).

This process of modifying karmic formations is key to the process of awakening. There are some considerations developed currently that the epigenetic potential of socially widespread applications of the ethics described by
Buddhism, combined with dedicated cultivation of mindfulness meditation training practices, could provide an evolutionary aspect to the human condition. We can, as a species, become more mindful and kind in relationship with the natural world and each other, creating the next stage of human development, *homo beneficus*!