

Session 9 - May

Chapter 3: Faith and Practice

4. Changing One's Karma

Nichiren Buddhism is a teaching that enables people to transform their lives at the deepest level, break through the limitations of karma, or destiny, and open a way forward. It is a teaching for changing one's karma for the better and securing a truly happy state of life today that will endure long into the future. In this section, we will examine the concept of changing one's karma, as well as the value of regarding our karma as our mission in this life.

1) Changing One's Karma

Life involves all kinds of problems and suffering, some of which are clearly the results of actions and choices we have made in this lifetime. But we also face problems for which we cannot identify the cause. At such times we may think, "I haven't done anything wrong. Why should I have to suffer like this?"

From the perspective of Buddhism, we can regard this latter kind of suffering as a result in this present life of negative actions we have taken in past existences. This is explained as the principle of karma.

The term "karma" originates from a Sanskrit word meaning "action." Our actions in past lifetimes that have the power to influence whether we are happy or unhappy in this life constitute our "karma from past lifetimes," or destiny. Though this karma may be either good or bad, most often it refers to bad karma—the accumulation of negative causes from past lives resulting in suffering in the present.

Buddhism expounds "the three existences of life" and "cause and effect spanning the three existences." That is, it views life as not limited to the present existence, but as a continuum extending from past lives to the present, and on to future lives. Actions made in past existences form causes, which appear as effects, or results, in the present existence; and actions taken in the present create causes that will bring about effects in future existences.

If one has created bad causes in a past life, then one will experience the results of those causes in this life as suffering; whereas if one has formed good causes in past lives, these will bring about pleasant effects in this life, such as good fortune, peace, and happiness. This is the general description of causality found in Buddhism, which underlies the concept of karma.

According to this view, however, even if we should become aware of the causes of our present suffering, we could do little to resolve it in this lifetime. As long as the

causes from past lifetimes remain, we will experience suffering. Moreover, these causes will be cleared up only after they produce effects. In that case, all we can do is wait for one bad cause and then another to produce its effect until all bad causes are exhausted, while taking care not to produce any more bad causes. But this would take innumerable lifetimes. As such, this perspective on karma inspires little hope for improving our lives, and worse, it may lead us to simply resign ourselves to our fate.

In contrast to this idea, Nichiren Daishonin shows us how to change our karma, or destiny, in this lifetime. In his “Letter from Sado,” the Daishonin states that the great persecutions he has been facing cannot be attributed to the general explanation of cause and effect found in Buddhism, but rather, to the fact that in past existences he has slandered the Lotus Sutra and its practitioners. He writes:

My sufferings, however, are not ascribable to this causal law. In the past I despised the votaries of the Lotus Sutra. I also ridiculed the sutra itself, sometimes with exaggerated praise and other times with contempt. (WND-1, 305)

In the above passage, the Daishonin suggests that slandering or disparaging the Lotus Sutra—that is, committing “slander of the correct teaching”—is the most fundamental negative cause a person can make. The Lotus Sutra embodies the ultimate Buddhist principles that all people can attain Buddhahood, that all people should be respected, and that one must strive to achieve happiness both for oneself and for others. For that reason, slandering the Lotus Sutra means disparaging or denying the true potential and dignity of human beings and represents the ultimate form of evil, giving rise to all kinds of bad causes.

The Daishonin tells us that we can achieve a truly happy state of life in this world if we stop committing the ultimate evil of disbelieving and slandering the correct teaching and instead carry out the ultimate good of believing, protecting, and spreading it. That is, by replacing the most evil cause with the greatest good cause, the corresponding result will also be transformed into good. Core to this transformation is chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

The Daishonin quotes the Universal Worthy Sutra,¹ considered the epilogue to the Lotus Sutra, where it states, “The host of sins, like frost or dew, can be wiped out by the sun of wisdom” (LSOC, 390), saying:

¹ The full title is the Sutra on How to Practice Meditation on Bodhisattva Universal Worthy.

The “host of sins” are karmic impediments . . . and these are like frost or dew. Thus, although they exist, they can be wiped out by the sun of wisdom. The “sun of wisdom” is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (OTT, 205)

By believing in the Gohonzon and striving to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for our own and others’ happiness, we bring the sun of Buddhahood to rise within our lives, causing the negative karma from our many past lifetimes to vanish like frost or dew in the sunlight.

2) Lessening One’s Karmic Retribution

Though we are striving in our Buddhist practice, we will never be completely free of life’s hardships. Obstacles and hindrances will arise as well in the course of our struggles for kosen-rufu. Nichiren Daishonin teaches that encountering such hardships and being able thereby to change our karma is actually a benefit of Buddhist practice called “lessening one’s karmic retribution.”

The concept of “lessening one’s karmic retribution” is explained as follows. Heavy karma accruing from serious offenses in previous lifetimes will bring about major suffering, not only in the present life, but in future lifetimes as well. The beneficial power of our Buddhist practice, however—of believing in and striving to spread the correct teaching—enables us to receive the effects of such offenses in this single lifetime, and in a much diminished form. Not only that, we can also extinguish all of our negative karma from the unperceivable past.

Concerning this principle of lessening one’s karmic retribution, the Daishonin states, “The sufferings of hell will vanish instantly” (WND-1, 199). The moment our evil karma is eliminated, we become free from the worst kind of suffering in this and future existences.

Hardships become important opportunities to rid ourselves of past negative karma and to forge our lives. In this regard, the Daishonin writes:

Iron, when heated in the flames and pounded, becomes a fine sword. Worthies and sages are tested by abuse. My present exile is not because of any secular crime. It is solely so that I may expiate in this lifetime my past grave offenses and be freed in the next from the three evil paths [the realms of hell, hungry spirits, and animals]. (WND-1, 303)

3) Voluntarily Assuming the Appropriate Karma

Those who persevere in faith even in the face of hardships, and through doing so transform their karma, will experience a great change in the meaning they derive from

living.

In this regard, the Lotus Sutra explains the principle of “voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma [to fulfill one’s vow].” Living beings are born in particular times and places because of two different kinds of causes—that is, they are born either according to their wishes and vows or as a result of their karma.

In general, Buddhism explains that bodhisattvas are born into this world out of a wish to fulfill their vow, while ordinary people are born into their present circumstances as a result of their past karma.

On the other hand, the Lotus Sutra teaches that bodhisattvas who have accumulated great good fortune through their Buddhist practice in past lives voluntarily relinquish the rewards due them for their pure deeds and choose instead to be born into this impure world that is filled with evil. They do so because they feel compassion for living beings and wish to save them from suffering. As a result, these bodhisattvas, just like those ordinary people who are born into this evil world due to their bad karma, also experience suffering.

Taking this view, we can find new meaning in adversity. As people who overcome problems through faith, we can regard living in this evil world and enduring suffering not as simply a result of our bad karma, but as an opportunity to fulfill our vow as bodhisattvas to lead people to happiness. While sharing people’s suffering as our own, we can serve as models for others of how to overcome such suffering.

Regarding those who base their way of living on this principle of “voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma [to fulfill one’s vow],” SGI President Ikeda has observed:

We all have our own karma or destiny. But when we look it square in the face and grasp its true significance, then any hardship can help us lead richer and more profound lives. And our actions in battling our destiny set an example for and inspire countless others.

In other words, when we change our karma into mission, we transform our destiny from playing a negative role to a positive one. Anyone who changes their karma into their mission is a person who has “voluntarily assumed the appropriate karma.” Therefore, those who keep advancing, while regarding everything as part of their mission, proceed toward the goal of transforming their destiny.²

[To be continued]

² Translated from Japanese. Daisaku Ikeda, *Gosho no Sekai* (The World of Nichiren Daishonin’s Writings), vol. 2 (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbun-sha, 2004), pp. 324–25.