

Changing Karma Into Mission

No one can avoid difficulties or problems. Buddhism encourages us to build happiness in the midst of reality, to grow, improve and become stronger while facing life's challenges. Nichiren Buddhism enables us to change every aspect of our lives for the better, permanently. The process called "changing karma" entails securing unwavering happiness by revolutionizing our lives at the very core. And seen from the Buddhist perspective of life and death, this happiness persists eternally, countless lifetimes into the future. Here we examine the principle of changing karma and the Buddhist practice for changing karma into mission.

What Is Karma?

Some of our problems and sufferings are caused by actions and decisions we have made in this life. But for some we can find no apparent cause. These may make us think, *I've done nothing wrong, so why is this happening to me?*

Buddhism teaches the principle of karma—that many events and conditions we experience in this lifetime result from actions we have made in previous lives. *Karma* is a Sanskrit word that means "action." It explains the workings of cause and effect that span the boundaries of life and death. Our actions of thought, speech and behavior are like seeds that become implanted in our lives. These causes can remain dormant as "latent effects" in the current and future lifetimes. At certain times under certain conditions, however, these reveal themselves as "manifest effects"—results, or karmic rewards, we experience in a tangible way. Karma, then, is the accumulation of actions from previous existences that remain dormant within us until they appear as effects in this lifetime. This karma can

be either good or bad, though people tend to view “karma” as bad results stemming from bad actions in the past.

Buddhism teaches that life is not just a matter of the present, but a continuum of past, present and future lives—the “three existences” of life. Our actions at any moment become part of the continuum of cause and effect that spans these three existences. Bad causes in past lives or the present, such as disparaging or hurting others, stealing or lying and so on, express themselves in present or future lives as bad effects, bringing us suffering and problems. This is the principle of cause and effect that Buddhism and most Eastern philosophies generally teach. Nichiren Daishonin calls this the “general law of cause and effect.” And while this principle is important to understand, being aware of it alone is not enough to change our lives.

Adopting this view would require that, in order to rid ourselves of bad karma, we negate every bad cause we have ever made by making a good cause in its place, one at a time, over countless lifetimes. Of course we would have to refrain from making any more bad causes as well. There would be no way to transform our sufferings arising from karma directly or quickly in this lifetime. Bound by this belief, many Buddhist sutras taught prior to the Lotus Sutra hold that changing one’s karma requires countless eons of austere practices. This heavy view of karma ultimately inspires no hope.

Fortunately, Nichiren does not emphasize this general view of karma or cause and effect. Instead he focuses on the principle and practice of changing karma.

In “Letter from Sado,” he makes a revolutionary pronouncement in stating, “My sufferings, however, are not ascribable to this causal law” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 305). Here, he expresses that the great persecutions he is facing cannot be explained by the general view of causality.

Rather, he continues, these sufferings arise from his slander of the Lotus Sutra in the present and past existences. By “Lotus Sutra” he does not simply mean a Buddhist scripture, but the deepest Law or principle the sutra embodies. This constitutes the correct teaching that all people can reveal their Buddhahood, the principle of respect for the value and dignity of the human being and the standard of striving for one’s own happiness as well as the happiness of others. To slander the Lotus Sutra means to fail to recognize or to belittle these values intrinsic to life itself; it means to deny that one’s life and the lives of all others are precious embodiments of the Mystic Law, which is the source of these ideals. This adverse relationship to the Mystic Law constitutes a deep-seated negative cause that gives rise to various forms of bad karma.

To change karma arising from rejecting or slandering this fundamental Law, we need to make the most fundamental good cause, which is to protect and spread that Law for the sake of people’s happiness. This means to believe in the correct teaching of the Mystic Law, to practice it correctly, and to uphold, protect and teach it to many people. In this way, we can immediately change the direction of our lives, from one bound for suffering to one of increasing power and joy deriving from the law of life. This is the process of changing karma in Nichiren Buddhism. The source of this transformation is the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. When we do so, “then the host of sins, like frost or dew, can be wiped out by the sun of wisdom“ (*The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, p. 390). Referring to this passage from the Universal Worthy Sutra, Nichiren compares our past negative karma to frost or dew that has built up in one’s life. When we believe in the Gohonzon and apply ourselves to chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo both for ourselves and for others, the world of Buddhahood emerges within our lives like the sun, dispelling our karmic impediments just as the warm morning sunlight evaporates frost or dew.¹

Lessening Karmic Retribution

In the course of practicing Buddhism and working for *kosen-rufu*, we will inevitably face obstacles, negative influences and functions that attempt to block our way or interfere with our efforts.

Nichiren Daishonin taught that to encounter such opposition is in fact a benefit. That is because by meeting and winning over difficulties, we naturally carry out the process of “lessening our karmic retribution.” The characters for the Japanese phrase *tenju kyoju*, often translated as “lessening one’s karmic retribution,” can literally be read “transforming the heavy and receiving it lightly.” Left alone, the bad causes we have accumulated over many lifetimes reveal themselves as miserable results in this and future lifetimes. But through the benefit of devoting ourselves and leading others to the Mystic Law, the heavy consequences of our karma can quickly be lightened. That is, we can effectively rid ourselves of all our negative karma in this lifetime by experiencing its results in much lightened form as obstacles and troubles we challenge for the sake of *kosen-rufu*. For this reason, Nichiren Daishonin says that through the benefit of lessening karmic retribution, “The sufferings of hell will vanish instantly” (“Lessening One’s Karmic Retribution,” WND-1, 199). Difficulties, then, are important opportunities for ridding ourselves of bad karma and developing and strengthening ourselves.

Nichiren also says: “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” (“Letter from Sado,” WND-1, 303).

Voluntarily Assuming the Appropriate Karma

By persevering in faith despite hardships and thereby changing our karma, we find deeper meaning in living. In its “Teacher of the Law”

chapter, the Lotus Sutra introduces the idea of “voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma.”² It explains that bodhisattvas voluntarily give up the good karmic rewards due them as a result of their pure actions in past lives. Out of compassion, they choose instead to be born in an evil age so that they can teach people the principles of the Lotus Sutra and save them from suffering.

Such bodhisattvas experience suffering just as those who do so because of bad karma they formed in the past. Viewing ourselves as having made this choice—of voluntarily meeting and overcoming difficulties through faith out of compassion for others—gives us a new perspective on problems and suffering. We can see facing problems as something we do to fulfill our vow as a bodhisattva to save suffering people.

Only by dealing with hardships in life can we come to understand and empathize with people’s suffering. With every problem we overcome through Buddhist faith and practice, we create a model for winning in life, a genuine experience through which we can encourage many others.

SGI President Ikeda expresses this process as “changing karma into mission” and explains: “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 serve to help us lead richer and more profound lives. Our actions in challenging our destiny become examples and inspirations for 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. Those who change their karma into their mission have ‘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” (August 2003 *Living Buddhism*, p. 50).

*Adapted from an article in the October 2010 Daihyakurenge,
the Soka Gakkai’s monthly study journal*

Notes

1. For example, in “Letter to Niike,” Nichiren writes: “Our worldly misdeeds and evil karma may have piled up as high as Mount Sumeru, but when we take faith in this sutra, they will vanish like frost or dew under the sun of the Lotus Sutra” (WND-1, 1026).
2. “Teacher of the Law,” the 10th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, states, “Medicine King, you should understand that these people voluntarily relinquish the reward due them for their pure deeds and, in the time after I have passed into extinction, because they pity living beings, they are born in this evil world so they may broadly expound this sutra” (LSOC, 200).