

Purification of Karma in Zen Practice

by Kokyo Henkel

Though in Buddha's teaching there is no permanent, singular, independent, separate self, there is the conventional appearance of a causal series of impermanent body and mind experiences we can call a "person." These present body and mind experiences arise dependent on the previous moments of body and mind. Though "my" body and mind is partially dependent on "your" body and mind, we each have a unique causal series we call "me" and "you." Without this patterned series of cause and effect that plays out over time, we could not account for personal memories, habit patterns, or karmic causality. Everything we intentionally do with this body, speech, or thought is called karma. It's easy to see how these intentional actions have an effect on the world and on other people, but it may be harder to understand how karma always has an effect on the "person" who did the action.

In the "Causal Discourse" in the *Numerical Discourses*, the Buddha said, "Any action originating from greed, hate, or delusion will have an effect wherever that individual arises, and there one will experience the effect, either in this life, in the next life, or in subsequent lives." Since the Buddha also taught that there is no permanent, independent separate self, we can understand "individual" in this case to refer to the causal series we call a "person," a particular series that continues from one lifetime to the next, along with the effects of actions. In later Mahayana discourses the Buddha called this ever-changing causal series of body and mind experiences the "storehouse consciousness" (*alaya-vijnana*), or resultant consciousness, which is sometimes described as being like a flowing river. This so-called "storehouse" of karmic effects is taught as a way to account for the effects returning to the person who performed the action. Like "person," the word "river" is also simply a convenient name for a specific causal series, in this case a series of water. A person performing an action is similar to a river eroding some soil from its banks. The soil continues to follow the flow, or causal series of water, even though there is no fixed entity or "self" of a river. The soil may eventually be deposited downstream in that ever-changing river, building up a layer of silt and blocking the very "river" that eroded the soil long ago.

In the "Short Analysis of Karma Discourse" in the *Middle Length Discourses*, the Buddha said, "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, born from their actions, related to their actions, and actions will decide their future." This is true for both harmful actions and beneficial actions. The result of wholesome beneficial karma for a particular causal series of body and mind experiences is called "merit" (*punya*), which could be understood as increased open-heartedness in the "person" who did the action. In the Mahayana teachings the complete culmination of this emotional openness, which comes from generosity and other wholesome deeds, is taught to be an essential condition for a person (causal series of body and mind) to realize complete awakening – along with the other essential condition, the complete culmination of wisdom or nonconceptual understanding of emptiness.

In the *Connected Discourses*, in a section called "the Book of Causation," the Buddha said, "If you think that the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences the result of that action, then you assert that there is someone who exists permanently, and that suffering is created by oneself. This is the view of eternalism. If you think that the one who acts is one person and the

one who experiences the result of that action is another, totally separate person, then you assert that suffering is created by another. This is the view of annihilationism.” This is the belief or feeling that yesterday’s “me” was a completely different and separate person from today’s “me,” with no relation to me now. Most people don’t think this way, but people who hear the Buddha’s teaching about “no self” might start to think this way. This is a misunderstanding of “no self,” the belief that there’s no dependent relationship between me sitting here now and yesterday’s me. When an ancient Zen teacher was asked if an awakened person falls into cause and effect or not, he said “no” and thus he fell into the body of a wild fox. Actually an awakened person does not obscure cause and effect, does not deny interdependent arising. The Buddha continued, “without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dharma as the middle.” The Buddha teaches the middle way free from extreme views. The middle way is interdependent arising, the present person arising dependent on the past person. Without falling into a false view of a permanent separate “self,” we can conventionally agree that this present body and mind is “responsible” for previous intentional actions of a past body and mind in the same causal series.

Since the Buddha taught that karmic effects cannot be purified by somehow eliminating them, then what is so-called “karmic purification,” and how can we be free from the painful results of “our” previous actions? First we must be willing to admit that we intentionally did something harmful to another, based on the false belief in separation between self and other. This acknowledgement is confession or avowal. Then, based on this confession, we can open to feeling sincere regret for that past action. This is repentance (*deshana*). Finally, based on this repentance, we can resolve to refrain from such actions in the future. If regret for past harm is sincere, then resolve for future non-harm naturally follows. If we don’t feel resolve to avoid some harmful action in the future, then we have not really regretted that action in the past. All this can be done without holding the false view of an independent separate self, but it does require understanding the conventional “person” as a causal series. Thus confession and repentance for the past, along with resolve for the future, is a necessary part of the purification of karma. If these steps are skipped over, then we will probably continue to do the same type of harmful actions over and over and purification is not possible. Dogen Zenji says in his essay *Karma in the Three Periods* (three periods refers to karmic effects being experienced either in this life, in the next life, or in subsequent lives of this causal series of body and mind), “As the Buddha says, ‘Once wholesome or unwholesome karma is done, the effects will not disappear even after a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand eons. One receives the karmic effect when the conditions for that come together.’ However, unwholesome actions can have lighter results by repenting of them. Wholesome actions can have greater results by rejoicing in them.”

In our Zen tradition we recite a Repentance Verse from the *Flower Ornament Sutra* to begin daily Morning Service, to begin the monthly full moon Precepts Renewal Ceremony, and in the ordination ceremony before the precepts are received: “All my ancient twisted karma / from beginningless greed, hate, and delusion / born through body, speech, and mind / I now fully avow.” “Avow” means to acknowledge, admit, or confess an action but, strictly speaking, the Sino-Japanese term used here, *sange*, means to repent or to feel regret for an action that has been avowed. Reciting such a verse, and meaning it, is called “formal repentance.”

Once we are no longer hiding from our past karma and mistaken views, willing to admit that we have acted based on dualistic thought and perception where self and other seem to be separate, and we feel regret for such thought and action, then we can look more deeply into the nature of karma. This is how complete purification of karma can happen. As the “Repentance Sutra,” the final teaching of the *Threefold Lotus Sutra*, says, “All things are neither permanent nor annihilated. If one repents like this, when contemplating one’s own mind there is no mind that can be found. Things do not abide in themselves, but are naturally liberated, verifying the truth of cessation of suffering. This is called ‘great repentance, sublime repentance, repentance without faults, the end of dualistic consciousness.’... The whole ocean of obscurations from past karma arises from illusory imagination. If one wants to repent for these actions, sit upright and contemplate the true nature of things. All faults are like frost and dew which evaporate in the dawn of wisdom’s sun. Thus, wholeheartedly repent of the dualistic experience of the six senses (where subject and object seem to be separate).” This is called “formless repentance.” Similarly, Keizan Zenji says in his commentary on Ancestor Jayata in the *Transmission of Light*, “If the root of ignorance is cut, and one realizes the original nature of mind, the branches and leaves of karma and its effects no longer seem to truly exist as they used to.”

In this way, the complete purification of past harmful actions is based on understanding emptiness or nonduality. Actions and their results appear to follow a specific pattern, but in reality the whole causal series is just a manifestation of buddha-nature, like a reflection of cause-and-effect appearing on the boundless clear mirror of empty unchanging awareness. If the *conventional self* is the causal series of body and mind experiences we call “person,” and the false illusion of an *independent separate self* is imagining there is some permanent owner or experiencer of this causal series, the *true Self* of buddha-nature is like the boundless mirror of awareness upon which the reflection of the causal series of “person” appears. Thus all karma and its effects are seen as naturally liberated, their true nature being nothing other than empty awareness.

After confessing and repenting we can, with an open heart of devotion, invoke the reality of empty unchanging awareness in the form of buddhas and awakened ancestral teachers, and ask this buddha-awareness to reveal itself to us, and completely free us from believing that painful karmic effects are really what they appear to be. Dogen Zenji says in his essay *Sounds of Valley Streams, Forms of Mountains*, “Although the effects of our past harmful karma have greatly accumulated, being the cause and condition of obscurations in practicing the Way, may all buddhas and ancestors who have realized the Buddha Way be compassionate to us and liberate us from karmic effects, allowing us to practice the Way without hindrance... Repenting in this way, one never fails to receive profound help from all buddhas and ancestors. By revealing and disclosing our thoughts and actions to the buddhas, the root of faults is dissolved by the power of this repentance.”