

Consequences in Buddhism



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– Why Things Happen to Us –

A Buddhist Perspective on Cause and Effect

– Edward Horner –



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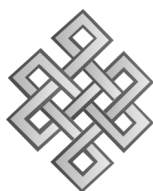
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Consequences in Buddhism

Why Things Happen to Us

A Buddhist Perspective on Cause and Effect

There is rarely just one specific thing that causes someone to have something happen to them. We live in a world that is complex, integrated, interdependent and constantly in a state of flux. We miss most of that and generally focus on our own immediate needs and what's happening in our immediate world. We too often forget that there are many things happening all around us that can cause things to occur to us – often things we can't see or, for that matter, things we aren't even aware of.

Some years ago, I failed to renew the little sticker on my license plate by the due date. I was hoping just to put it off until my next pay cheque in a few days, just because I didn't have enough money. Well, I got caught and was issued a ticket. My fault, I get it. So, about a month later, I received a reminder in the mail about the fine, which I failed to read fully. Included in the reminder (it turned out) was a little bit about paying by a certain date otherwise my license could be suspended. Well, of course I didn't pay – like I said, I didn't read it fully. To be clear, I had renewed the sticker by this point, but I had not paid the fine. So about two month after that, I open my mail and was quite surprised to see my license has been suspended! My shock, was quickly followed by laughter with the instant recognition of the shifting world

of dependent arising. The cause was eventually followed by the effect.

It was this event, this singular brush with cause and effect, that got me thinking about why things happen to us, from the perspective of a practicing Buddhist.

Natural Phenomenon

The wind, waves, gravity, cosmic rays, speed of light, geology, cosmology, etc. Whether or not we “believe” in gravity, you will fall if you jump off the garage roof. If you stand on the tidal flat and wait, you will get covered in water. When you build on a fault line you will experience seismic events. These things are pretty self-evident, I think. We live in a world that we have perfectly adapted to and when things in that world happen, we are affected.

In 2004 there was a terrible tsunami, caused by an undersea earthquake, near Indonesia. In Indonesia alone, the number of confirmed dead numbered nearly 131,000 with something like 37,000 missing and presumed dead. Around the Indian Ocean, the number of dead totalled some 300,000. This was a natural disaster with few modern precedents. The impact wasn't felt just in Indonesia, but affected Sri Lanka, South India, and Thailand. Even distant South Africa one death attributed directly to the wave. The property damage went into the billions. You can read more about that event at BCOM.

The point of all this is that almost immediately after this terrible natural disaster, one could read articles all over the internet that, somehow, this was a result of “bad karma,” that somehow, these people “deserved” what happened to them. Of course that’s utter nonsense. These people deserved nothing of the sort. What caused this were the natural laws of the universe - geology, in the case of our planet.

We know now (and knew full well then) that under the Indian Ocean is major, active fault line between two tectonic plates of the earth’s crust. When they shifted, it’s believe the upper plate was dislodged along it’s edge for a distance of some 1,200 km, releasing a force equivalent to 23,000 Hiroshima bombs. Geologist knew it was there and even went so far as to predict that, ‘some-day’ something like this would happen. “Some-day,” however is meaningless to the vast majority of us, so no one bothered to listen or take action. Houses, hotels, industry, businesses and all sorts of development occurred right along the coastlines of many countries in the region. When the wave came, it took it all away or destroyed it beyond recognition.

This wasn’t karma or their “comeuppance,” but rather a series of bad judgment calls by tens of thousands of individuals who built right on the coast. It was exacerbated by the fact that those countries impacted had nothing in the way of advanced warning systems in place to warn the people to evacuate to higher ground ... indeed, there may have been no “higher ground” to evacuate to. The emergency response systems were not prepared for anything like this scale of dis-

aster. It was a series of bad choices, poor preparedness, lack of advanced warning, poor development planning on the part of local governments, etc. that made the damage worse than it otherwise might have been. To be fair, a lot of people didn't know there was a fault line waiting to shift out under the ocean, and they just got caught up in the disaster, but it wasn't because of karma.

A similar scale earthquake occurred off the coast of Japan in 2011. Due to better disaster preparedness, tsunami evacuation drills, earthquake resistant building standards, better response teams and a more highly developed infrastructure, the casualties were held to some 15,984 in total. Still that's a lot of people who were killed due to a natural disaster, but far less than might have occurred if they had not been so well prepared. The Japanese knew the risks they faced and took advanced action accordingly.

Of course these two natural disasters can't really be compared and that's not my intention. The first occurred in the "developing" region of the Indian ocean while the second took place in Japan, a well developed, economic powerhouse. This just goes to show that disasters unduly affect the poor.

Genes and Chromosomes

There are random mutations dropped into our gene pool to help the species experiment with faster, better, smarter versions of ourselves. Sometimes the experiments don't work and that branch of the species might not last long. If my par-

ents and their parents were prone to a particular disease or condition, then it's likely I too will be prone to such conditions.

Have you ever looked into the mirror and had a sudden revelation that you look a lot like you mother or father? When I look into the mirror, I see my father in myself. The same nose, eyes and chin. I see my uncle's receding hair line and share my mother's propensity for high blood pressure.

These are all things we can't do too much about. Clearly, we can get our blood pressure under control, take precautions against any heart conditions we've inherited or get regular check up for advanced warning of inherited cancer risks. Still, in the end, there will be some things we simply can't guard against at this point in human history. (DNA sequencing is moving us closer every year to being able to suss out inherited disease, but we are still a long way from doubling our life span.)

These are things that have come to us, not because of bad karma, poor planning, or questionable lifestyle choices. We get these whether we take precautions or not, whether we like them or not.

Of course I also inherited my fathers predilection towards a well-muscled body, strength and rugged good looks! I'm nothing if not delusional.

Karma

This is an ethical component of why some things happen to us. If we are skillful and practice our living with skill, helping others and limiting the harm we do to ourselves and the environment, good things tend happen to us. If we are unskillful and go though our lives harming others, hindering good deeds and being careless with the environment, unfortunate things tend to happen to us. Karma is within our control to alter. Others might simply say, “What goes around comes around.”

As a Buddhist, I know karma is affected not only by my actions, but also my words and even thoughts. For example, I might have the idea of stealing something, but decide not to do it. Probably little to no harm done to my karma. On the other hand if I think about stealing something and then do it, then I’m pretty sure that I generate a little bad karma. If I then return the object I stole, apologize and attempt to make amends, then I likely have reversed the bad karma. This is the premise for a hilarious 2005-2009 TV sit-com entitled *My Name is Earl*.

Long story short, Earl Hickey (played by Jason Lee) is a troubled individual who has had a difficult life, made more than a few bad choices, made a few enemies and got into plenty trouble along the way. He wins \$100,000 in a scratch-and-win lottery, but loses the ticket. He decides that all his bad karma has caused him to lose the ticket, so he takes on the task of apologizing and making amends to all

the people he's hurt along the way, which proves no easy task. Most of the episodes begin with a voice over of Earl;

"You know the kind of guy who does nothing but bad things and then wonders why his life sucks? Well, that was me. Every time something good happened to me, something bad was always waiting around the corner: karma. That's when I realized that I had to change, so I made a list of everything bad I've ever done and one by one I'm gonna make up for all my mistakes. I'm just trying to be a better person."

You can find a few of the episodes on YouTube.

Dharma

One's religious or spiritual practice affects not only the practitioner, but others as well. Everything we do or see will be filtered through one's religious or spiritual views. In Buddhism we call this the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha.

If you are a Christian, you view the world in a particular way and your actions and words will reflect that view. If you are Muslim, your words and actions will reflect that particular point of view. Regardless of what your religion, spiritual practice, or set of values you choose follow, it will inform your, compassion, charity and view of the world ... IF we stop to take a moment to consider.

In Buddhism, we follow the Eightfold Path, the prescription given by The Buddha to help humans seek relief from suffering. The path is generally divided into eight attitudes and

actions, which are, themselves, categorized under: Wisdom, Ethics and Mental Development

Wisdom

1. *Right View*
2. *Right Thinking*

Ethics

3. *Right Action*
4. *Right Livelihood*
5. *Right Speech*

Mental Development

6. *Right Concentration (meditation)*
7. *Right Mindfulness*
8. *Right Effort*

The eight items in the path all start with “right.” This isn’t to suggest that there’s a right or wrong, but only that if you are to proceed along the Eightfold Path, having a world view, or way of thinking that will help you, will help. You can have a fine and fulfilling life without the Eightfold Path, but improving your karma and developing your ethical and mental aspect can help you achieve a higher state might be difficult.

Mind

Our mind leads everything. Our mind creates “reality.” Our world isn’t really “out there,” but what’s happening in our mind. If we continue with delusional thinking things will happen to us for no reason that we can divine. When our thinking becomes clear and acute then things happen for a reason. When we don’t understand the nature of a tidal flat, then we get wet. When we know the nature of a tectonic fault line, then we can avoid building our house astride one.

Our mind builds our world with or without suffering. When we see our unhealthy attachment to people or things, we can work to limit that suffering by recognizing that everything is impermanent and that everything will, eventually, fall away. When the mind recognizes this and accepts the validity of the preposition, then the mind will, with little effort, ease our suffering.

This cannot happen without effort. The mind must be re-trained to see the world as it truly operates. The mind must learn to look beyond the surface stories that have been told and built about the world around us.

I’m reminded of one morning, not long ago, when I was at Riverdale Farm. I had just been to the coffee shop at Sumach and Winchester and had wandered over to the swine enclosure at the city farm. I was watching the piglets as they gambolled in their own little world, when a toddler waddles up, parents several steps behind. The child was almost floored by the sight of the piglets. The child couldn’t even

talk yet, but just stopped at the fence and stared at the piglets while attempting to mimic the sounds as the little pigs were making. What a delight!

There was no pretence at having “seen it all.” No cell phone to talk into or text to send while watching. Just a little child, amazed and delighted to see piglets. Nothing else at the moment was in her universe. Forgotten were food, water, chaffing diapers, parents, siblings – even where she was – other than in front of little pigs. There were no judgments. No acting. No attraction or aversion. No sense of fear or safety. Just true and utter amazement.

She didn’t try to get the pigs to move, or oink or do anything other than just mill together, lost in their own moment. This was about as, “in the moment” as I’ve ever witnessed. Seeing her “Buddha nature” brought tears to my eyes.

Here was a pure mind, looking at the world without judgment, without even knowing there was anything to judge. There were no stories to add, for there were no stories to be told. This pure mind just allowed the world to unfold.

Then her parents arrived with their calls to judgment; “Don’t get too close! Don’t they smell? Why don’t they go in the shade? Keep your hands off the fence. Take a picture honey, etc. “ Once distracted by the parents, the child pointed, turned to them for guidance and the moment was gone – for both the child and me. Hopefully the pigs still had their moment.

Delusional Mind

Lets pretend that we're vaguely aware of what our minds are doing. They're talking to us, making judgments, assessing risk, planning, thinking of the past, preparing for the future and generally running amok. It's a miracle we get out of bed, but we somehow do. If we're aware of our minds working (if not it's workings) then we at least have a chance to see where it "sticks."

By "sticks" I mean that some thoughts slip by our general level of mental awareness, almost every day, because we haven't bothered to examine them in years – if at all. Here's an example that came to me the other day. "Streetcars are good." This is a basic premise I've held for dozens of years. I won't burden you with why I think this, suffice it to say that I believe it to be so. You need not agree with me.

I haven't examined this premise for dozens of years, but I examined it the other day during a bicycle lane discussion. I found it to be false! Given new circumstances, a different urban fabric, new transportation tastes and technology, I have honestly found streetcars to be barriers to transportation system progress. I can see a good place for them, sure, but using them now, in the same way we have used them since the early 1900s is remarkably short-sighted!

The "stickiness," of the streetcar premise just kept passing under my awareness radar. It was a no-see-um (gnat) that just passed through the mosquito netting with impunity to bite me in the ass. It is a perfect example of delusional

thinking. Failure to assess pre-conceived notions without regard to changing circumstances is, kind of, insane. Delusion is a nice word for it.

This sticky or delusional thinking crops up every day in every way. I see it on the street, I see it at work, I see it in relationships, I see it in schools, churches, gymnasiums, literally everywhere I go. It is as pervasive as cell phones and people playing Pokemon Go.

Plainly, the difficulty here is this; our world is defined, not by what is, but by what we think it is. Our realm is defined by our thinking – no matter how clear or muddled. We live in the isolation of our thinking. That's a little scary isn't it?

Random Stuff

Occasionally something happens that just plain and simply makes no sense what-so-ever. Why is it that Puerto Rico isn't allowed to declare bankruptcy? It's because of the 1984 Bankruptcy Amendments and Federal Judgeships Act, when, mysteriously, the right for the territory of Puerto Rico to access Chapter 9 bankruptcy was suddenly revoked (leaving Puerto Rico in a precarious situation, given its level of debt). No one knows why this right was revoked - not even the guy who forwarded the bill, Senator Strom Thurmond. It makes no sense that it was revoked, but it was. Seems it was just tossed into a larger omni-bill that had a lot of unrelated things included.

YouTube is full of people just walking along the street or chatting on the phone at the corner, when a car, bus or truck comes out of nowhere and misses them by centimetres. The poor scared person had not done anything wrong. They may have been looking ahead, to where they were walking - perhaps waiting for the lights to change so they could safely make their way across the street, when suddenly a vehicle appears from off-camera, crashes through a bus shelter or over a construction barricade to miss the poor pedestrian by a hair. Completely random. Just search YouTube for “close call for pedestrian,” to see random close calls.

When things happen to us or others, we can't always just point a finger and say, “Ah ha. See, that, right there, is the specific reason for what just happened.” It's usually a combination of things – it's almost always a combination of things.

When I've been camping or hiking and something's gone bad, it was never just one thing that exploded. It's always a series of things. For example, a number of years ago a friend and I were hiking on the Healy Pass trail, near Egypt Lake, Alberta. We hiked about 6 hours that day and it was unusually hot and humid for August. When we arrived at our campsite in the late afternoon, we were both sweating heavily and the lake looked very inviting - cold, but inviting. We dropped our packs, decided to quickly erect the tent and go for a swim.

After about 5 minutes of wading about in the shallow water near the shore, we felt a gust of wind and watched, helplessly, as our tent lifted off and blew into the lake. Thankfully, it landed right side up and floated for a few minutes while my friend swam out with the intention of retrieving it. Sadly, by the time he got there, the tent had begun to fill with water and was sinking. While my friend tried to pull it back it was simply too heavy with all the water in it. He swam back to shore, freezing and tired.

We decided to take about one hundred feet of cord from our packs and swim out with one end to tie it on the tent and pull it back from ashore. I swam out this time and affixed the cord to the tent and swam back to shore to help pull it slowly back in.

As I was swimming back in, I saw something about 200 feet behind my friend, near where we left the packs. I yelled out "Bear!" My friend turns just in time to see the bear rip open my back pack like it was made of paper. My friend yelled and jumped around, but the black bear took little notice and after about a minute, he casually ambled off with most of our food! Well, I made it back to shore with no problem, cold, tired, but fine other than that. We did manage to pull in the tent, disassemble it in the shallow water and eventually dry it out, just as night began to fall. With only about a days worth of food remaining, we had to wrap up our trip a few days early and return to the Sunshine parking lot, where we parked the van, about 9 miles distant.

It wasn't one single thing that happened that caused us to shorten our trip, but a few things. First, we stupidly, didn't take the time to secure the tent to the ground. We had all the pegs and cord, but we just opted to just set up the free-standing dome tent and leave it for a cooling swim – poor judgement. Secondly, we didn't put the food away properly. It should have been tied up a tree, far from the ground and away from curious animals – more poor judgement. In fact, that's why we had the cord in the first place. Third, we didn't have bear spray with us, we left it in the van, which wouldn't have happened if we had of taken the time to tick off the checklist that we had previously prepared – again, poor judgement.

When things happen, it's rarely one thing going catastrophically wrong, but usually a series of small things - along with errors in judgement.

Meditation Can Help

Here's how meditation has helped me. I'm used to listening to the gross thoughts that keep running around in my head. By "gross" I don't mean disgusting, I mean big or coarse. "Streetcars good," type of thoughts. These coarse thoughts tend towards generalizations and of course cannot be inclusive of all possibilities. As such, they are right or wrong. Through meditation, I've learned that there are more subtle thoughts running around in my mind, or, more correctly I've learned to listen to them. These thoughts give greater clarity to, or modify and correct the coarser thoughts, and provide nuance - right is not always right, but under these conditions

... , etc. These thoughts are hard to hear without practice. Meditation and mindfulness training allow us to hear our subdued thoughts.

In Theravada Buddhism two types of meditation are often practiced; Vipassana and Samatha.

Vipassana or “insight” meditation provides techniques to “purify” the mind and ready it for deep-seeing of the nature of ourselves so we can unravel the causes of our suffering and general disillusionment of our lives. It’s mind training that helps to take away the stories we’ve added to our observations and allow us to see and know, clearly, what is unfolding before us. It helps us cut through conventional perception to perceive mind and matter as they really are: impermanent, unsatisfactory, and impersonal. With training, we learn to detach ourselves from our ideas and opinions so desire and delusion are gradually diluted.

Vipassana itself is a compound Pali word. “Passana” is to see or perceive. “Vi” may have several meanings, including “through.” So, vipassana is to “see through.” “Vi” can also be thought of as the English equivalent of the prefix “dis” - as in discernment that suggests being able to see or perceive individual components separately. Vipassana-insight literally cuts through the curtain of delusion in the mind. The idea of “seeing separately” the difference between the “truth” our delusions is relevant.

Vipassana and Samatha meditations are two sides of the same coin. Each enhances the practice of the other.

For a weird instructional video on vipassana meditation try the Self Help Robot on YouTube. The voice is a little unclear and the robot thing is a little curious, but all in all, it seems good.

So Where Does This Discussion Leave Us?

Simply, we need to stop blaming the world for things that happen to us. We need to wake up and see the way the world operates. Our failure to understand that consequences arise from previous actions is contrary to good sense. It's also contrary to Buddhist teachings. We *must* recognize that all things are impermanent and everything changes whether we want it to or not. When we develop an unhealthy attachment to people, things and ideas, we can be sure they will disappoint us and cause mental suffering. We can rarely point to one particular thing and say, "That is the cause of my suffering." It's almost always a series of things or circumstances and occasionally some random event that gives us grief. Meditation can help sharpen the mind and relieve us of our delusional thinking.

~ Ed Horner

Other Titles by Edward Horner

- Wisdom in Buddhism
- Death and Dying in Buddhism
- Pain and Suffering in Buddhism
- The Complete Family Camping Guide
- Monk of A River
- Life of the Buddha
- The Story of Milarepa
- Freewheeling; Nine Tales of Boys and Their Bikes
- My Buddhist Journal
- Certainty in Buddhism
- Day Hikes of Ontario Vol. 1
- Day Hikes of Ontario Vol. 2

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About the Author

Horner has been a practicing Buddhist, in the Theravada tradition, since 2003 and enjoys talking and writing about his experiences and ideas. He has been hiking, skiing and paddling throughout Ontario and Alberta for over 50 years. He's an avid photographer, cyclist and keen outdoor enthusiast. He founded Friends of Dieppe Park and is a past member of the Harbourfront Parks and Open Space Project, in Toronto.



