

Question 22:

Who or what keeps track of how much merit or "good" karma a person has accumulated? It all seems simplistic. If I do good, I get rewarded with a "favorable" rebirth. If I do bad, I get punished with an "unfavorable" rebirth. If you are going to make the claim that there is no "self," then how can "I" (which you claim is an illusion) be held responsible for my actions? If there is no judge or God or higher being to hold beings accountable for their actions and send them to one of the six realms, how specifically does the process work? I find it irresponsible that you claim that individuals who have done "bad" things in their lives are destined to be born in hell or hungry ghost world or whatever. What possible good does that accomplish? Let's say you are a depressed teenager who decides to take her own life. Now, according to your philosophy that girl is destined for a "bad" rebirth. But, how can this girl be responsible for her actions if there is no actor performing the action? Who is accountable to whom and for what? *From Michael Moshenrose*

Answer:

The accumulation of merit and demerit is automatic, analogous the accumulation of healthy and unhealthy factors in our bodies that result from what we eat. If we eat junk food, then unhealthy factors such as excessive cholesterol and fat build up in our bodies, and if we eat healthy food, then healthy factors such as vitamins and antioxidants build up in our bodies. There is no being or that must keep track of, and punish us with, a fat body from eating junk food, or a slim body from healthy food, just as there is no judge or other being who rewards us with a favorable birth or an unfavorable birth from our accumulation of merits and demerits.

Karma is not so simplistic. We are born with the countless good and bad karmas from many past lives, and we generate karma every day by our "good" and "bad" actions, and each karma causes a result at some unknown time in the future – in the present life, next life, or some distant future life. A murder done in a life in the remote distant past may have results over several lives, in the present life, or in some future life, and the results vary depending on the person's other karmas. As stated in Anguttara Nikaya 3.99 (Lonaphala Sutta), a trifling evil deed leads to rebirth in hell by a person who has not developed his mind, contemplation, virtues, and discernment; who is small hearted; but for such a deed done by a person who has developed his mind, contemplation, virtues, and discernment and who is large-hearted, the deed is experienced in the here-and-now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment. The Sutta gives the analogy of dropping a salt crystal in a glass of water, making it impure to drink, contrasted with dropping a salt crystal in a river, which does not affect the purity of the river. In the Buddhist story of Angulimāla, a mass murderer who turned his life around and became a good monk only had to suffer abuses of others in the same lifespan, and did not have any adverse rebirth. In essence, many good deeds can "drown out" or reduce the effects of some bad deeds. Similarly, exposure to some very toxic chemical may manifest immediate acute symptoms or may cause disease symptoms many years later, perhaps as a result of accumulation of different toxins, or may have only a very minor effect on health if the person has a healthy lifestyle. We all have some pleasant and some unpleasant experiences in our lives, as a result of our good and bad karmas.

According to Buddhism, everyone has a self - including mind and body - in the conventional sense. However, because the self does not stay the same, there are changes from moment to moment and life to life, the self is always changing, not a fixed entity, therefore, in the ultimate

sense, is an illusion, not real. But that (changing) entity, the self in the conventional sense, includes its actions (karmas) which cause results, which the self will automatically experience. Similarly, a river is a discrete entity when viewed from land, but when perceived from within the river itself, or from the riverbed, it is a flow of ever-new particles of water, thus always changing, not fixed. And in its flow it accumulates, and drops off, sediments; similar to the self accumulating, and experiencing results of, karma.

Upon death of the body, the “self” which, in Buddhism, is considered a set of energies (including accumulated karmas, mental, intellectual and spiritual development, tendencies, traits and other things), transmits to take a rebirth for the next life, propelled by the force and quality of those karmas to one of the six realms. There is no mention in Buddhism of a separate being to judge and send the “self” to one of the realms.

Existence in each of the realms is temporary – there is no eternal hell or eternal life as a hungry ghost. The length of time and severity of suffering therein is based on the degree of negative karma being resolved by that unfortunate rebirth. The degree of negative karma depends on the quantity and quality of the bad acts, i.e., the intention and circumstances. Knowing this is useful to deter people from doing bad acts, but does not lead to hopelessness from the concept of an eternal hell or of going to hell based on a few bad deeds. It is also useful in that it encourages people to continually engage in wholesome deeds, and does not lead to spiritual laziness from the concept of an eternal heaven for people who don’t put in great efforts to purify their minds.

Regarding a depressed teenager who takes her own life, her intention at the time of suicide and her other karmas from present and past lives determine the degree of any resulting suffering in a future life. There is no mathematical formula to determine what kind of life she will be reborn into. The suicidal feelings, unfortunate experiences and/or depression that led to the suicide are the result of previous bad karmas. But they can be mitigated or undone, and suicide prevented, by dharmic practices such as mindfulness, meditation, loving-kindness (including toward oneself), compassion, and engaging in meritorious actions such as helping others.