

## What Karma Really Means

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According to the Buddha, what makes any act skilful or unskillful is the motive which underlies it. Karma literally means ‘willed act’ and the Buddha taught that there is a ‘law of karma’, a natural law, not unlike our law of gravity, according to which acts based in kindly intentions always have beneficial consequences whereas those whose motives are selfish always have painful consequences. It all comes down to intention. Why?

Consider these different scenarios –

Jim grabs a sandwich from a sandwich bar for his lunch. The smallest note he has is a fifty and he receives two twenties and a five in his change. He puts them in his billfold, leaves the coins as a tip, and goes back to work. One of the twenties is fake, but Jim’s a little nearsighted and it just passes him by. On the way home that evening he stops for some groceries, the shopkeeper accepts the fake twenty, and Jim knows no more about it.

Now re-wind the reel and play a different scenario from the point where Jim gets his change. As he takes the notes from the person at the counter, he feels that there’s something a little odd about the bottom twenty. The texture of the paper isn’t quite right, but he’s in a rush to get back to work so he stuffs the notes into his billfold and heads back to the office.

That afternoon, a friend in the office passes by. ‘Hey Jim,’ he says ‘check your wallet. Someone in the neighborhood’s been passing off fake twenties.’

Jim has a dim recollection of feeling that something wasn’t quite right with his change. ‘No.’ He thinks, ‘Forget that. Too much hassle.’ And so in a state of willful ignorance he just lets things lie. On the way home he spends the twenty on groceries. But he didn’t do that knowingly, well, not altogether knowingly.

Re-wind again. His friend warns him about the fake notes and Jim recollects that sense that there was something wrong with his change. He leafs through his billfold and comes to the twenty. Yes, it’s a fake. After thinking about it for a while, he decides to pass it on as soon as he can. He needs some groceries, so on the way home he selects a shop where he knows there will be a new immigrant behind the till. He makes his purchases, hands over the twenty, and collects his change.

Now re-wind again to the point where Jim leafs through his billfold and spots the fake bill. He sighs. ‘Oh, well – win a few, lose a few.’ On the way home from

work he calls in at the local precinct and hands the fake bill to the officer behind the desk. Then he heads off to buy some groceries.

What kind of person does Jim become as a result of the way in which he handles the fake twenty in each of these episodes?

In the first episode, he unknowingly spends the fake bill on groceries. The act of handing over the fake twenty on this occasion is karmically neutral. Neither Jim nor his own immediate world is changed much by it.

In the second episode, Jim again hands the note to a person in a grocery store. Although he doesn't know that he's done so, his ignorance now is willful, because he deliberately ignored his friend's warning, and to that extent his action is karmically somewhat negative. Like many of us, he prefers not to face up to some ethical difficulties. As a result, the world he inhabits is vague at the edges. He is less clear than he could be, slightly unaware of himself and his environment, and things tend to go wrong for him again and again. He's just not looking where he's going. But there's more to it than that. The suffering people inflict upon one another comes about, not just through the malevolent acts of single individuals, but also through the willful ignorance of those who would otherwise do good.

In the third episode, the act of handing over the fake twenty in payment for groceries, the self-same physical act but with a different motive, is karmically much more negative. By willingly deceiving the shopkeeper Jim strengthens his own tendency to selfishness and deceitfulness. He becomes more likely to act deceitfully in the future as the habit of doing so is made stronger. The niggling sense he has of being somewhat isolated and cut-off from others is reinforced and his world becomes that little bit bleaker and more apparently hostile as his encounters with others are colored by his self-preoccupation.

In the fourth episode Jim hands over the twenty again, this time to a police officer, and, financially at least, he loses out for a time. But karmically his action is much more positive. Acting honestly and ethically, Jim becomes a bit less selfish. His world opens out a little more, it becomes lighter and brighter, and his relationships with others go on more easily as people sense that he is the kind of man they can trust.

In Buddhist terms, handing a fake banknote to someone else is neither good nor bad in itself. What made the chief difference in each of these episodes was the motive underlying the act.

Karmic results happen in the same way that apples fall off trees under the influence of gravity – they are part of the natural order. Being human, we are neither intrinsically good nor bad. But we do have choice. At every moment we can choose to act skillfully or unskillfully – creatively or reactively.