

Chapter 10 – Karma

When Garchen Rinpoche was young, his father and his teacher Lama Chime Dorje taught him about the law of karma, cause and effect. They taught him about this subject many times, whenever there was a good opportunity to do so. Sometimes he felt that he had some understanding of it from his own experiences – such as when he got angry and his father put him outside in the freezing cold weather without warm clothes on, and he felt like he was in the cold hell world. But usually the teachings didn't really give him a deep understanding of karma.

His teachers also taught him about the six worlds of samsara – the human world, the animal world, the heaven worlds, the hell worlds, the hungry ghost world, and the world of the asuras, the jealous spirits. But Garchen Rinpoche and his classmates in the monastery were so young then that they found the lectures about the different kinds of suffering in the hell worlds and in other worlds to be extremely boring. They didn't feel like listening or paying attention to those subjects. The teachers would go on and on with the lecture, and the students would just become increasingly bored.

Later, Garchen Rinpoche understood the real reason why the teachers emphasized the hell world and the five other worlds so much. They really were teaching about the six poisons of the mind. When they were teaching about the hell-worlds, they were really talking about anger and hatred.



When they were teaching about the hungry ghost world, with hungry ghosts' huge bellies and tiny thin necks, they were really talking about stinginess, greediness, not sharing, keeping everything to oneself.

Their big bellies show that even if they have everything, they still wouldn't be satisfied - they still want more and more.

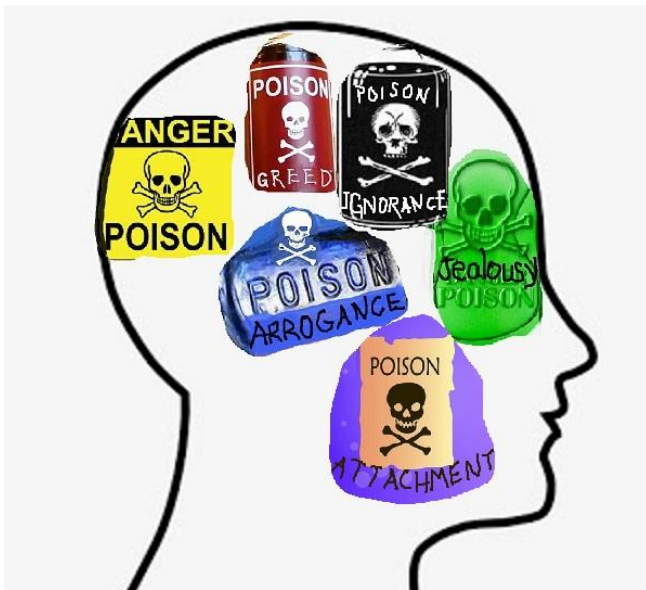
And they are always suffering terrible hunger and thirst in the hungry ghost world.

When the lamas were teaching about the animal world, they were really talking about ignorance. When they were teaching about the human world, they were really talking about attachments, having too many likes and dislikes, wanting what we like and wanting to get rid of what we don't like.

When they were teaching about the heaven-worlds, where the gods live, they were really teaching about pride and ego. The gods in the heaven-worlds enjoy all the delights of heaven but they still have arrogance.



When the lamas were teaching about the world of the jealous spirits, who are always quarreling, fighting and making war, the lamas were really talking about jealousy.



The six poisons of the mind are extremely important to think about, because when we are mindful and aware of when they arise in our minds, then we can control them, and not let them overtake our mind and lead us to do things we later regret.

We all have at least a little bit of the six poisons. Sometimes we get angry, we feel jealous, we get a little too greedy, we are too attached to our favorite things, or we become arrogant. And sometimes we are ignorant of what is really important.

We don't go to the lower worlds just because of that. But if a person's anger or

hatred becomes a major part of their life then they might be born in a hell-world, or if they have a habit of being extremely stingy and greedy then they might be born in a hungry ghost world, or if they don't want to learn what is good for them then they might be born as an animal.

Garchen Rinpoche remembered how his father used to scold him every time he traveled away from the monastery. Rinpoche would pack many things, like clothes, cushions, and sitting rugs. His father would say,

“If you bring all those things, the poor animals will have to carry them for you. It's very heavy. It's a lot of suffering for those animals! You are making negative karma for yourself. You don't need so many things!”



The animal his father was talking about was a type of mule, a “dei-u” in Tibetan, a mix between a donkey and a horse, bigger than a donkey but smaller than a horse.

They were easy to control, just following along closely behind the horses, and could travel easily for long distances.

His father advised him, “If the animals must carry things, then let them carry Dharma items from the monastery. That would be good for them. It’s a way for them to gain some merits.”

So, not only humans but also animals can gain merit, which means doing good karmas, good deeds which are the cause of good results in the future.

By this scolding and advice, Rinpoche’s father was teaching him about karma. But it wasn’t until Rinpoche had to work hard labor at the prison - carrying dirt, sand and rocks, and lifting heavy rocks with his bare hands - that he truly realized how valuable the teachings were from his father long ago.

Near the prison was a mountain on which thousands and thousands of prisoners were working. If you stood at a distance looking at the people on the mountain, it looked as if the whole mountain was actually being moved by a colony of “slave ants” in slow motion. The prisoners all had to carry rocks, sand and soil from the mountain to build roads.



The first year in prison, Rinpoche had to work in the brick factory, making bricks by hand, the old-fashioned way.

There are many steps in making bricks. First, soil must be dug and carried to a certain area, then the soil is mixed into a clay batter (like cake batter), and then the clay batter is pressed into block shaped molds to shape them into bricks.



The bricks are dried in the sun, then they are stacked up and moved into ovens called “kilns” where the fire hardens the bricks, and finally the hot bricks are removed from the kiln to cool.

Garchen Rinpoche didn't have to work with the kilns. Those who fired bricks in the kilns were mostly Chinese prisoners, who were more skilled and had more expertise in firing the bricks and removing them from the kiln. And they also got better food rations for their work than the other prisoners.

Rinpoche noticed that only the Chinese prisoners were lucky to work in the automobile factory.



One time, Garchen Rinpoche had a chance to go inside the area of the kilns. It was so unbearably hot and the air was full of fire sparks, dust and smoke. There were embers, pieces of burning coals, everywhere. The prisoners walked around wearing wooden sandals. Their whole bodies were covered with sweat, and were completely black with soot from the fires. They had to take out the super-burning-hot bricks, put them on the carts, and then pull them out of the carts.

Their sandals were half burned because they constantly had to walk back and forth on hot coals. Rinpoche thought it was exactly like the hot hell world. The workers were so used to being in this extreme heat that when they came out of the kiln area, even if the weather was very hot, they would feel cold anyway!

Rinpoche's job in the brick factory was to make the clay batter, mold it into bricks, and load up the bricks after they dried in the sun. Making the clay batter was very difficult and tiring for the hands and arms, because it was wet and very heavy, and had to be made into an even consistency without lumps. And he had to do it for long periods of time, working six days per week. The batter had rocks and pebbles in it which first had to be removed. Then the clay had to be kneaded – mixed around by hand - with water and sand to make it smooth. Then the clay had to be pressed into a brick mold and dusted with a little bit of sand. Each prisoner had to make 300 to 400 bricks per day.

Rinpoche worked the whole day under the scorching hot sun, counting the long hours and thinking that he was paying his karmic debt – paying off his bad karmas – brick by brick. He

didn't think he was very skilled at brick-making, as he said the bricks he made didn't come out so well.

In the second and third years that Rinpoche spent in prison, he made bricks with the help of a machine. With the machine, he had to make 25,000 bricks per day! And making bricks using the machine was not any easier. It was even more painful for the hands and arms because they had to work much harder to mix an even more smooth clay batter for the machine – it had to be the perfect consistency with no lumps at all, like tsampa (barley flour).

There were different types of labor at the prison to which the inmates could be assigned. There were jobs such as welding metal, constructing roads and buildings, making machines and equipment, making clothes, making noodles, and farming. The Tibetan prisoners mostly did labor that didn't require any skills, like digging and carrying soil or stones, plowing fields to grow vegetables and grains, collecting the poop from the pits under the latrines (toilets without water), spreading the poop over the fields, watering the vegetable gardens, planting potatoes, cabbage and apple trees, and taking care of pigs and cows.

But were the pigs and cows being raised to provide milk, butter and meat for the prisoners? No! The prisoners received only a meager food ration of the cheapest food, and very little of it, from the government. The Chinese officials loved pork, so in every prison, they made the prisoners raise pigs for meat and raise cows for milk and butter, but only for the Chinese officials to eat.

Whatever the job that was assigned, each inmate's experience in prison was personal to him based on his own karma. Garchen Rinpoche, due to the blessings of the Three Jewels – the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – was fortunate that he never was beaten or treated with any brutal violence. He never was tortured or whipped during the "struggle sessions," when the Chinese officials asked questions of the prisoner and beat or tortured him if they didn't like the answer he gave, if he didn't admit to some crime he was being accused of, or if he gave an answer that didn't agree with Communism. Yet, Rinpoche had to watch severe mistreatment and cruelty to many of his prison mates. Pain went through Garchen Rinpoche's whole body during those moments when he had to watch, that made him feel as if he himself was actually going through unbearable cruelty.

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you name the six worlds of samsara? (the hell worlds, hungry ghost world, animal world, human world, heaven world, world of the jealous spirits)
2. Why might someone be born in their next life in a hell world? (if they are full of anger or hatred)

3. Why did Garchen Rinpoche's father tell him not to pack so many things when he traveled? (it would be heavy for the mules to carry, making them suffer)
4. Why did Rinpoche's father tell him to have the mules carry religious items? (so they could gain merit, good karma)
5. What did Rinpoche feel was the most tiring and painful part of making bricks? (mixing the heavy clay batter)
6. What emotion did Rinpoche have in his heart toward the prisoners who were in pain while they were being treated cruelly? (compassion, sympathy)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Karma:

As we learn from Rinpoche's father telling Rinpoche not to make the mules carry so much, if we cause suffering to others, what kind of karma do we create for ourselves? Negative karma.

And if we do something that is supporting the Dharma, like the mules carrying the Dharma items, what kind of karma do we create? Good karma.

We create good karma - which is also called gaining merits - whenever we behave according to the Dharma, with good qualities such as kindness, compassion, being helpful, and so forth.

We never know what will happen in the future, but if we behave now with good qualities, then we build up our good karma.

What happens as a result of our good karmas? We experience good fortune.

What are some examples of good fortune?

Being healthy, successful, having what we need, having a safe environment, having a nice family, having good friends.

Our situation now – our health, lifestyle, all the nice things we have – is the result of our behavior in the past – in this life and many countless past lives.

Also, the misfortunes - the bad luck, loss, problems, disappointments - we have in this life are the result of our negative behavior in any of our countless past lives.

We all have our own good and bad karmas that we have collected over our past lives, so sooner or later we have to experience the good and bad results of them.

Garchen Rinpoche was experiencing the results of both good and bad karmas being in prison.

What were some results of his good karmas? What was he fortunate not to have experienced in prison?

He didn't suffer torture or beatings. Also, he was able to meet many wonderful lamas.

When people have very bad experiences - for example being very ill, poor, or unsuccessful - as a result of their bad karmas, does it mean that they are a bad person? No.

We can't control when we get the results of particular good or bad karma.

Innocent good-hearted people might seem to be unlucky, experiencing the results of their worst karmas from their past lives.

And selfish, hateful people might seem to be lucky, because they are experiencing the results of their good karmas from the past.

So, can we judge how good or bad someone is by how lucky they are right now? No.

We can't avoid the results of our past karmas. But can we make them less painful?

Yes, we can! We can affect the way we feel while we are experiencing something unpleasant or painful.

If we practice Dharma, we won't feel so much suffering because we know we have a lot of good karma, and we have a calmer mind, so we don't have as much fear as ordinary people have.

On the other hand, someone who is selfish, greedy or hateful isn't fully happy even when he has lots of good luck because he can't really enjoy it when his mind is not peaceful.

What about the little things we do to help, the small kind acts we do, or the prayers we say - do they really make a difference when we have so much karma from past lives?

Yes! Every good thing you do, every bit of merit, adds to your good karma. It is never wasted!

Many ordinary people, non-Buddhists, think that if you do something good and you don't get paid for it, or you don't get something you want in return, then it's a waste of time, it's not worth it.

For example, they may think that if they do something kind for someone, then that person should do something kind for them in return.

But as Buddhists, we know that when we do something with kindness, then no matter what, we have made merit, we added to our good karma.

It will definitely give a good result. We don't have any expectation of when or how the result will come.

But it will come, and no one can take it away from us.

What does it mean when we dedicate our merit to all sentient beings?

It means we are sharing our good karmas with others.

Does that mean we give it all away and then we don't have much left for ourselves?

No! When we dedicate our merit for all sentient beings, then we are sharing it with others, which itself is a merit, so then we create even more good karma for ourselves than if we didn't dedicate it!