

Karma Is Individual

One of the Buddha's major accomplishments was to establish a non-tribal religion. His teachings were for everyone—regardless of tribe, caste, or nationality—who wanted to put an end to suffering. Since his time, those teachings have managed to spread throughout the world, transcending boundaries and divisions, because they treat people as responsible *individuals*, rather than lumping them into groups. They recommend that we evaluate ourselves by our own current actions, rather than by the actions of other members of the group into which we're currently reborn.

We may be interconnected, but it's not through what we *are*—or through the categories that other people would use to define us. It's through what we, as individuals, choose to *do* to one another. In the Buddha's terms, we're "karma-related," related through karma, for good or for ill.

That's how we find ourselves born into particular groups of people. It's not the case that first you're born into a group and then, after joining that group, you assume the karma of its earlier members. The causal pattern actually goes the other way: First, through your own individual intentions, you develop a karmic profile. Then you're born with people who have similar profiles in their individual backgrounds.

So, if a particular group—a family, a nation—suffers hardships, it's not because the long departed members of that group created bad karma. It's because the individuals currently in the group have similar bad karma in their own past. Even then, though, their karma is individual—as shown by the fact that hardships suffered by a group are rarely distributed evenly. Some people suffer greatly; others are barely grazed.

And remember: People are not always reborn into the same family, ethnic group, nation, gender, or even species. Sometimes you go from a class of oppressors to a class of the oppressed, and sometimes back. The Buddha's image is of a stick thrown up into the air: Sometimes it lands on its base, sometimes on its tip, sometimes smack on its middle. We're slippery characters, changing roles all the time.

Which is why the proper response when groups of people suffer is not to callously tell yourself that they deserve it. After all, the Buddha taught a path for the end to all suffering, "deserved" or not. As he said, when you see people suffering, don't look down on them. Remind yourself that, in the long course of rebirth, you've been there, too. When you see people enjoying the pleasures of wealth, don't resent them. You've been there as well. You've seen how wealth can come and go.

The ultimate purpose of this reflection is to spark a desire to get out of the karmic network altogether. The interim reaction, though, should be empathy: We've all been in this together for far too long. It's time that we helped one another, rather than taking advantage of people when they're down.

The Buddha's image of each person's karma is seeds sown in a field: Some seeds are sprouting right now; others are waiting to sprout. When you see the sufferings of others, you're seeing only their seeds that are currently sprouting. The good seeds waiting to sprout, you can't see. At the same time, you don't know what bad seeds are lying in wait in your own field.

Still, the most important seeds in your field are the ones you're planting right now, because they can determine whether you'll suffer from your old seeds or not.

So you look for the good old seeds in other people's fields that may be ready to sprout, and try to get them to plant good new seeds so that they won't have to suffer from any bad seeds already sprouting. After all, that's how you'd like them to treat you when *your* bad seeds start to mature. Acting in this way, you create good karma for yourself, and a more humane world all around.

— *Thanissaro Bhikkhu*