

Karma: Fate or Freedom?

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID LOY

Many Buddhist teachings seem quite modern in their emphasis on such things as impermanence and interdependence (evolution, ecology), insubstantiality (physics), and the deceptions of language (philosophy). Yet the same cannot be said for karma, which points to an inexorable moral law built into the cosmos. This doesn't mean that the doctrine of karma should be dismissed or ignored, but it does encourage us to interrogate those teachings and to ask, what does karma mean for us today?

There are at least two problems with the ways that karma has often been understood. Although the earliest teachings are quite clear that laypeople can become enlightened, the main spiritual role of lay Buddhists, particularly in non-Western societies, has been to support the monastic sangha. In this way non-monastics gain "merit," and by accumulating merit they can hope to attain a more favorable rebirth. This approach commodifies karma into a form of "spiritual materialism."

Karma has also been used to rationalize sexism, racism, caste, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and almost everything else. If there is an inevitable cause-and-effect relationship between one's actions and one's fate,

social justice is already built into the moral fabric of the universe. So why bother to struggle against injustice?

For these reasons, karma is one of the most important issues for modern Buddhism. Is it a fatalistic doctrine or an empowering one? That is the focus of the conversation that follows.

Karma and rebirth were already widely accepted in pre-Buddhist India, but Brahmanical teachings understood karma mechanistically: performing a Vedic sacrifice correctly would sooner or later lead to the desired consequences. The Buddha transformed this ritualistic approach into a moral principle by focusing on *cetana*, meaning "volitions" or "motivations." As the *Dhammapada* emphasizes, "If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows just as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox.... If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs."

As Rita Gross points out, the term "karma" literally refers to one's actions. To focus on the eventual consequences of our actions puts the cart (effect) before the horse (cause) and misses the revolutionary significance of the Buddha's approach. Karma can be understood as the key to spiritual development, revealing how one's life situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of one's actions here and now. Yet karma is not something the self *has*; rather, it is what the sense of self *is*, because one's sense of self

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is transformed by one's conscious choices. By choosing to change what motivates me, I change the kind of person I am.

From this perspective, we experience karmic consequences not just for what we have done but also for what we have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. In other words, we are “punished” not *for* our “sins” but *by* them. And, as Spinoza put it, happiness is not the reward for virtue; happiness is virtue itself. To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. And when we respond differently to the challenges and opportunities the world presents to us, the world responds differently to us.

This understanding of karma does not necessarily involve rebirth after we physically die, and there is an agnostic “I don’t know” thread in the conversation that follows. The emphasis is on “moment-to-moment” rebirth, as our motivations and actions change right now. Yet that does not mean excluding other, perhaps more mysterious possibilities regarding the consequences of our actions. In either case, karma is not a fatalistic doctrine. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a more empowering teaching. We are not enjoined to accept passively the problematic circumstances of our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to improve our situations by addressing them with generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

B **BUDDHADHARMA:** Let's start with a basic definition of karma. What would you say if someone were to come up to you and ask, what is karma? What would your elevator speech be?

RITA GROSS: I taught university students this material for about thirty years, and I explained that the word "karma" comes from a Sanskrit verb root that means an action, or to do something. The idea is that our present situation is due to things that have happened in the past, and that what we do with the present situation has a great effect on what the future will be. I often gave the example that if you spend a whole semester not doing your homework and not doing the reading, then you'll flunk the course—and that's called karma. On the other hand, if you pay attention and mind your p's and q's, you'll get a better grade than if you didn't—and that's also called karma.

I've always tried to keep it very simple and straightforward. There's nothing about past and future lives in my elevator speech, and nothing mystical or esoteric. I think karma is better explained as something that we all experience all the time. It isn't a particularly Eastern idea; it's just that we're not used to the word karma.

LARRY WARD: I'd define karma in the classic sense, as activity of our body, speech, and thoughts that leaves traces of habits in our mind and brains.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: I would start by emphasizing what it does *not* mean. Everyone assumes that karma means fate because that's more or less how it's been translated into English. And so, like Rita, I emphasize that it really means cause and effect—that what you do has a consequence. Fate seems to suggest that somebody is up there in the cosmos keeping track of everything. Karma, as used in the earliest Buddhist teachings, largely has to do with your own psychological process. What's pointed to is not why earthquakes happen or why a meteor strikes, but rather that if you act with hatred, you're going to be hated or disliked.

RITA GROSS: I agree it's very important that people understand karma isn't fate, which is the popular knee-jerk definition.

LARRY WARD: The other tendency is to interpret karma as retribution, with emphasis on the effect but little on the cause.

RITA GROSS: Yes, that comes up a lot, too—that it's punishment. But that's not it at all, of course.

BUDDHADHARMA: Let's talk about the nature of these causes and why they lead to specific consequences. For example, would



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you say that in some sense there's a moral quality to the positive or negative causes that lead to future conditions?

RITA GROSS: After many years thinking about this, I really believe it's better to talk about effect than cause. The present is an effect, and we can't always ascertain exactly why the present is as it is. But how we *deal* with the present becomes the cause of future effect. So that to me is one of the most important clarifications about what karma is and isn't. You know, if somebody has been mean to us, we don't necessarily know why, but how we deal with that difficult situation will have a lot to do with how we feel in the future and how our relationships with other people will work in the future. That's why Thich Nhat Hanh says we shouldn't ever take out our frustrations by punching pillows, because all we're doing is imprinting in our mind that it's okay to react or hit when we are angry.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: I'd say a moral component is perhaps a subset of karma. There are lots of ways to understand cause and effect in nature, but the Buddha was particularly interested in our psychological life, and his great insight was that some of the emotions we have, some of our responses, and some of the actions we undertake are healthy and some of them are unhealthy, or wholesome and unwholesome. Healthy or wholesome was described simply as that which works toward the alleviation or cessation of suffering. Unhealthy or unwholesome thoughts or actions are what lead us toward more suffering and away from wisdom. It's all very practical.

The Buddha is simply saying that your quality of mind is going to be affected by the kind of thoughts, emotions, and actions you put into your mindstream. That's the distinction between healthy or unhealthy; it's not so much moral in terms of what you should or shouldn't do, but rather it's like the law of nature: you can throw a rock up in the air and stand underneath it if you want, but there will be a consequence. In the same way, you can punch somebody if you want, but the consequence will be that it brings harm to you and others.

LARRY WARD: It's helpful to understand our actions and the seeds that may be the source of them—what is referred to in the Yogachara tradition as “perfuming”—and how we can condition ourselves psychologically. Our karma can also show up as memories that can impact our intellect and our character. It influences both what we prejudge and how we prejudge, whether in a wholesome or an unwholesome manner. I suppose we could also respond in a neutral manner.

BUDDHADHARMA: So how does karma really work? We said there are wholesome or unwholesome acts that by some mechanism

Every action nourishes seeds that grow from a depth consciousness up into our mental states and into our traits and behaviors. —Larry Ward

cause us to suffer or not suffer in the future. What is the specific mechanism, according to Buddhism, by which these causes are carried forward to have their effects in the future? How does that happen?

ANDREW OLENDZKI: In classical Buddhist psychology, karma is explained in terms of the relationship between what we might call mental states and mental traits. The state of what is manifest in the mind, the emotion of anger or hatred or love, has an effect on your behavior, whether through body, speech, or mind—and that lays down a disposition, a character trait. A behavior has been learned, has been reinforced, and so downstream when you are called upon to respond to a situation, if you have watered those seeds with a lot of anger, you're going to be inclined to be an angry person who has angry responses, and the whole thing will just cascade. But if you're able to cultivate states of mind that are kind, you're laying down dispositions—habits, as it were—that are kind, and those will more likely be triggered.

BUDDHADHARMA: Does the Mahayana tradition have a more specific analysis of how the seeds are created and manifested in the future?

LARRY WARD: Yes, the Yogacara tradition talks about our “storehouse consciousness,” or depth consciousness, where these seeds or habit energies reside based on our previous actions. Every action nourishes seeds that grow from a depth consciousness up into our mental states and into our traits and behaviors. I find the metaphors from Yogacara very helpful. Thich Nhat Hanh draws upon these images in his teachings as well. My tendency is to stay focused on this experientially and in the present tense, so I want to affirm what's been said already about the immediate psychological impact as well as the subsequent psychological impact of our actions, be they wholesome or unwholesome.

RITA GROSS: I think the word “habit” is really important here. When we do something over and over, it becomes habitual and therefore much easier to repeat. So the seeds we choose to water—Trungpa Rinpoche used to use this analogy, too—makes a lot of difference. Here's where the role of practice is so important. Without the ability to see what's going on and catch ourselves, which is an experience we develop through



meditation practice, we tend to be very reactive to our environment. When that happens, we only reinforce the habits we're already familiar with and aren't able to turn our habits in a more positive direction.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: I agree. What meditation is doing is training us to be aware of what's going on. We can get through the day pretty well without being aware of what's happening; all of our habits are automatic responses. We don't *have* to pay attention, but when we do, we have the chance to alter our habits, which is what makes the practice transformational.

RITA GROSS: And that's what makes it possible to let some seeds wither and others flourish.

BUDDHADHARMA: So if karma isn't fate, it raises the question of free will. Is the ability to have awareness of one's habits in effect where the possibility of choice or freedom comes in? Does it allow us to not be controlled completely by our karma?

RITA GROSS: Yes. In fact, Buddhist practice makes no sense at all if there isn't that little gap where we can go one way or the other. There's always a gap—even if it's a very small one—where we have some ability to go left or right, one way or

the other, to think, *how can I work with this present moment in a way that will bring about the most positive effect in the future?*

LARRY WARD: I agree, and I really appreciate the comment about karma and freedom. I see meditation practice as an opportunity, for me anyway, to discover my freedom over and over again.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: We don't have any say, in this moment, over what hand we're dealt; that's conditioned by past action. Although in every mind-moment we're receiving karma from the past, we *do* have some influence over how skillfully we play that hand, and that's where awareness increases our skill level.

BUDDHADHARMA: Going back to the question of mechanism, or how karma works, we've talked about habit and seeds in a way that's relatively easy to understand within the context of a single lifetime. If I cultivate these habits in my mind now, I'm going to influence who I am, how I act, and how much I suffer in the future. But Buddhism posits more than that; it posits that those seeds carry forward from lifetime to lifetime. What can you say about how that mechanism works?

APPROACHES TO KARMA

Thinley Norbu Rinpoche explains the Vajrayana view of karma and how it differs from other Buddhist schools.

There are many ways to understand the meaning of karma from different points of view within Buddhism. To synthesize some of these in a simple way, according to the point of view of the vehicle of cause, karma is the activity of cause and result. Within this vehicle, there are various explanations for the basis of karma. The Vaisesika point of view teaches that karma originates in subjective consciousness; the Sutranta point of view teaches that karma originates in ordinary continuous mind; the Yogacara point of view teaches that karma originates in the basis of all phenomena; and the Madhyamika point of view teaches that karma originates in interdependent circumstances. In the context of practice, all points of view within the vehicle of cause teach that there is a basis for enlightenment, a path that leads to enlightenment, and a result of enlightenment.

According to the Vajrayana point of view of the vehicle of result, it is unnecessary to divide cause from result or to consider that any activity follows from or leads to another activity. From the beginningless beginning, there is only the divisionless, pure nature of the mandala of stainless buddhas, and there are not even the names of cause and result. By recognizing this, all activity becomes the spontaneous display of dharmakaya. With that point of view, we must abide in this recognition always, without the influence of the habit of ordinary

mind's delusion, until we have complete confidence. But as long as we have dualistic mind, we divide cause from result and root circumstances from contributing circumstances. Through constantly making these divisions, we do not release samsara's divided phenomena into nondualistic wisdom appearance. Instead, by grasping at appearances, we create duality, conceptions, passions, habits, and karma.

Only buddhas do not have karma. All beings with dualistic mind are continually creating karma. There are many different methods according to different beings' capacities for purifying the karma of dualistic mind. Hinayana practitioners, through aversion to the suffering of samara, try to abandon the causes of karma, which are ego and the passions that arise from ego, in order to attain the enlightenment of self-peace. Mahayana practitioners try to realize that there is no possessor of a self and no possessor of phenomena, so therefore all phenomena become illusory with the freedom of nonattachment, which automatically opens immeasurable compassion towards beings who do not recognize this, in order to attain enlightenment for the benefit of countless beings. Vajrayana practitioners, through the pure perception of deity appearance, try to transform all karmic phenomena through nondualistic wisdom mind in order to attain enlightenment in the immeasurable, pure mandala of all buddhas.

From *White Sail* by Thinley Norbu, published by Shambhala Publications

LARRY WARD: The only thing I'm really clear about (kind of) is this lifetime. But in terms of the habit energies, one way to describe them is as the momentum of our conscious and unconscious tendencies, be they wholesome or unwholesome. This momentum may continue into our next life and into future lives. Whatever form or fashion they may take, these tendencies—that momentum toward behavior, character, memory, and perception—continue.

RITA GROSS: I would also say the fundamental phrase for me is "I don't know." But I do think it's important to separate karma from rebirth to a certain extent. The deeds that I do in this life will not die with me or my body. They will continue into the future, whether or not there is personal rebirth. Someone will reap the effects of the things I've done or haven't done in this life, and that to me is motivation enough to do the best I can with the situation I have right now.

LARRY WARD: My approach to the rebirth question is to come back to the present, to the states and traits that Andy presented earlier. The question for me, from a meditative practice point of view, is if a state of hatred or irritation or anger comes up, is that state going to be reborn—not next year, but in the

next moment? One way to understand rebirth is as an existential present moment, in terms of the continuation of wholesome momentum or unwholesome momentum. So rebirth can be understood in the present tense as well as in the long term.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: Well said, Larry. I think these days a lot of us are rethinking this very question, given the challenges of explaining rebirth in a literal sense. Many of us are thinking of it more moment to moment—every single mind-moment is a rebirth, a new beginning, and the question that comes up in the literature is, are you the same person now that you were ten years ago? Or ten minutes ago? And how is who you are now going to affect who you are going to become ten minutes or ten years from now? That's very valuable to think about, and it's very helpful to practice with so that you bring the best possible quality of mind to every moment. In this way you do your best to work with whatever you've inherited from the past and also maximize your benefit to the future.

BUDDHADHARMA: If we were to have what in the Vajrayana tradition we would call a moment of ordinary nonconceptual mind—a gap, as it were—could that simple transition from a sense of a pure openness to a reappearance of our normal

PLANTING KARMIC SEEDS

Thich Nhat Hanh explains how our actions, experiences, and perceptions become stored as karmic seeds in the alaya consciousness.

According to the teachings of Manifestation Only (*Vijnaptimatra*) Buddhism, our mind has eight aspects, or, we can say, eight “consciousnesses.” The first five are based in the physical senses. The sixth, mind consciousness (*manovijnana*), arises when our mind contacts an object of perception. The seventh, *manas*, is the part of consciousness that gives rise to and is the support of mind consciousness. The eighth, store consciousness (*alayavijnana*), is the ground, or base, of the other seven consciousnesses.

The primary function of store consciousness is to store and preserve the “seeds” (*bijas*) of our experiences. The seeds buried in our store consciousness represent everything we have ever done, experienced, or perceived. The seeds planted by these actions, experiences, and perceptions are the “subject” of consciousness. Maintaining all the seeds—keeping them alive so that they are available to manifest—is the most basic function of store consciousness.

Seeds give phenomena the ability to perpetuate themselves. If you plant a seed in springtime, by autumn a plant will mature and bear flowers. From those flowers, new seeds will fall to the earth, where they will be stored until they sprout and produce new flowers. Our mind is a field in which every kind of seed is sown—seeds of compassion, joy, and hope, seeds of sorrow, fear, and difficulties. Every day our thoughts, words, and deeds plant new seeds in the field of our consciousness, and what these seeds generate becomes the substance of our life.

There are both wholesome and unwholesome seeds in our mind-field, sown by ourselves and our parents, schooling, ancestors, and society. If you plant wheat, wheat will grow. If you act in a wholesome way, you will be happy. If you act in an unwholesome way, you will water seeds of craving, anger, and violence in yourself and in others.

The practice of mindfulness helps us identify all the seeds in our consciousness and with that knowledge we can choose to water only the ones that are the most beneficial. As we cultivate the seeds of joy and transform seeds of suffering in ourselves, understanding, love, and compassion will flower.

Adapted from *Transformation at the Base*, published by Parallax Press

discursiveness itself be considered an example of how karma arises again and again?

RITA GROSS: It could, although I don’t think the question we should concern ourselves with is whether we’ve totally uprooted karma but rather whether can we see that negative habitual patterns are not as strong as they used to be and that positive patterns are growing. Anyone who has practiced seriously for some time has had the experience of habit energy not being as thick and strong as it once was. Otherwise, we wouldn’t keep practicing. Of course, the point in the long run is not just building up a lot of positive habits; positive karma still leads to rebirth.

The end of karma altogether really only happens to an awakened person.

—Andrew Olendzki

BUDDHADHARMA: Yes, that is actually where I was going to take us next in this discussion, because we have discussed karma primarily in the context of being positive and negative, but at the same time there is another, deeper level of karma—you could say the karma of fundamental ignorance, which causes us to posit dualistic existence altogether. And in that context, the issue is not so much whether we create more positive than negative karma but whether we can get to the point where we’re not creating karma at all. What about that more basic karma of ignorance, which causes us to perceive reality as we do?

LARRY WARD: I think all practitioners have experienced moments where we were in a state of neither negative nor positive karma, but rather in a state of suchness (to use the Yogacara term) of direct experience of what is present. The hope for the arhat is that out of this awakened space within comes compassionate and wise action, which is a quality of wisdom and action that transcends the positive and negative dualisms of the relative world.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: It’s addressing a very subtle transformation of mind. The end of karma altogether really only happens to an awakened person. There’s some way in which we’re always grasping after something with our mind, even if it’s grasping after something healthy when we’re already healthy. Then there’s a fundamental nongrasping, when the mind is no longer seizing on anything, not imputing causes and effects and setting those into motion. The idea that the Buddha produced no karma upon his awakening has always struck me as paradoxical, because there’s probably no single person in



global history who's had more of an effect on everything else that came after. So we're obviously talking about this in a way that we're not familiar with; it's very subtle.

BUDDHADHARMA: Can it be said that, according to Buddhism, enlightenment is the state of producing no karma?

RITA GROSS: That's one classic definition of it.

BUDDHADHARMA: So I suppose the other question, which we've hinted at, is why is it that not producing any karma is the greatest positive karma of all, from a relative point of view?

RITA GROSS: In the most simple classical terms, it's because karma is what fuels the rebirth process, and you want to halt samsaric rebirth. Positive karma only produces a better samsaric rebirth, and we want to halt altogether whatever state perpetuates samsara.

LARRY WARD: One way of describing enlightenment—meaning no karma—is as a particular presence of body-mind that is not perpetuating the samsaric experience. To encounter that mind, in oneself or in someone else, or even through the stream of history, is potentially transformational. I like to say enlightenment leaves nothing in its wake, in the sense of positive or

negative karma; it's deeper than that. Here we're getting into the difference between ultimate and relative truths.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: Yes. Remember that samsara means “flowing on.” It comes from the root meaning “to flow like a river,” whether you're flowing on from one lifetime to another or flowing on from one mind-moment to another. The awakened mind of the Buddha just stops flowing; it's put to rest and becomes at peace.

BUDDHADHARMA: What about the relationship between karma and *shunyata*, or emptiness? In the lingo of Beat Zen, what does karma matter if it's all empty? What is the view of karma in the context of emptiness, and how do we look at it and give it weight—or not?

LARRY WARD: First of all, it depends on how one defines emptiness. Emptiness has been defined by some as purity of mind, meaning the mind is empty of defilements. Others have talked about emptiness as the realization of no self, or not self. The definition that's most intriguing to me in this context, from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, has to do with the interpenetration of all reality. If emptiness is one way of describing how reality

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interpenetrates with all other things, then for me, my action—wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral—will have effects way beyond my capacity to perceive them. The effects beyond my lifetime, as well as in my lifetime, are inescapable.

RITA GROSS: Emptiness doesn't mean things aren't there. So if things are "empty," from a very simple point of view, that doesn't mean karma doesn't happen, but from another point of view, the only way to undo or alter karma is to truly understand emptiness and to not reify or substantialize everything we encounter all the time, but to let things be in a much less fixated way.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: In the early teachings, emptiness is usually discussed in the sense of non-self. And a lot of that language is there simply to emphasize that it's not *you* doing *your* karma, it's not *you* inheriting *your* karma; the whole concept of "you" and "yours" is really called into question. You know, things happen, things occur, and the less you see yourself as the one doing them, the closer you are to seeing things as they are.

RITA GROSS: And the less karma affects one.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: Yes. There is no agent producing the karma. And there is no victim or recipient of the karma. The whole karmic stream is impersonal; the more you can recognize that, the more natural it is to abandon or not construct those things that cause harm, and instead cultivate altruism and compassion, kindness, honesty, generosity, and so on.

RITA GROSS: And the less one will resent the present, and whoever made the present the way it is, and just work with it.

BUDDHADHARMA: Touching on what Rita was saying earlier, to what extent is karma our misperception of a solid and truly existent reality? And what is the antidote to that? Is it wisdom?

RITA GROSS: Practice and study.

LARRY WARD: From which we hope wisdom and compassion come.

ANDREW OLENDZKI: Looking at karma from the psychological standpoint, we have to act every moment. You know *sankhara*, which is related to the word karma, is one of the five aggregates, and it simply means every moment that we're cognizing an object or perceiving it, we have to respond to it. So we must act every single moment either by body, speech, or mind. Karma is intrinsic to the human condition, and we need to understand the implications of cause and effect and

the quality of mind that goes into how we act. That's what's going to clean things up as we purify the mind and, through our interactions, help improve conditions for everyone.

LARRY WARD: Right, and another aspect of the antidote to karma creation and manifestation is to meditate on—and discover and name and wrestle with—our own psychological conditioning at the deep levels of our mind that results in the subject-object dualism in which karma itself can subtly become another object of clinging. So I think we must combine study and practice with the aspiration for wisdom and compassion.

BUDDHADHARMA: All three of you have described karma in down-to-earth understandable terms. For many people the concept of karma seems philosophical and abstract, and so the question is, what should we actually do with these teachings or these principles in our lives? There is a saying, Tibetan I believe, that we should protect our karma more carefully than we protect our eyes, that it's the most precious thing we have. So what as Buddhists can we say about how we should evaluate karma in the choices we make and in how we choose to live our lives?

ANDREW OLENDZKI: Well, karma is our refuge. We are going to inherit the consequences of what we do with our minds here and now, and if we want to be as safe as possible, as happy as possible, as well off as possible, then we have to put as much care into the present moment as possible. There will always be something coming out of past karma that throws us a curve, and we'll find ourselves in very challenging circumstances, but the best way to be safe in the future—the Buddha talked about this—is to take care, to act ethically, to act honestly, and to practice diligently. In doing so, you're giving yourself and everyone around you a gift of harmlessness.

LARRY WARD: Some of my recent research is an attempt to parallel Buddhist practice with recent neurological findings on how our neurons fire when we think and take action. I find that a biological grounding in how our brains and minds work can be very helpful for practitioners. The phrase "when neurons fire together they wire together" is one way to understand the neurological basis of habit, which ties into what we've already said about some aspects of the nature of karma. We now know that our actions of body, speech, and mind leave traces neurologically, not just in our mind but also in our brain.

RITA GROSS: I find it's important to think about karma beyond the level of self-interest. In the larger scheme of things, there's a level of choicelessness about doing what needs to be done for the greater good that's more important than anything else. That level of choicelessness is the basis from which I approach whatever arises in the present. I really don't think about calculating karma in a self-interested way.



ANDREW OLENDZKI: Contemporary Buddhism is facing the global challenge of dealing with the past karma of our species. We need to figure out how best to undo some of the difficulties we've caused collectively and to lay out some pathways, some new ways of approaching things. I think this is where the Mahayana emphasis on altruism and the collective good and helping others is very important. Our selfishness has gotten us into trouble; it's rooted in some primitive instincts that we need to outgrow if we're going to survive collectively. Whatever the subtle philosophical and theological issues in Buddhism may be, I think most of your readers are thinking very practically about karma—you know, what actions cause more trouble and what actions can help create a better future, a better reality.

LARRY WARD: One important phrase for me in the Buddhist tradition is "I-making," or "identity-making." What does it mean to look at identity-making in terms of the suffering it might create in oneself or others? It's important to look at I-making in terms of group identity, national identities, corporate identities, and what we're willing to deny, hide from, or aggressively defend in order to protect these identities we've concocted. We

need to see how we invent ourselves, and then how we reify those inventions in ways that can cause suffering, leading to war or poverty or ignorance on the societal level.

RITA GROSS: Yes. People think that identity is a given, but there are ways that we can mold our identity if we want to. It's fairly easy to see the way that collective identities cause harm.

The default position for us psychologically as human beings is subject-object duality. Most people take it for granted. Most people have no idea what we're talking about when we say that self and other are co-arisen. There's no understanding of what that phrase means. It's really important to educate people that others are not out there independently and objectively, and that we have some agency over our own identities. Subject-object duality will always come up unless we are aware and vigilant and careful. We have to keep asking the question, why do you think that about yourself or about others?

BUDDHADHARMA: And presumably as long as there is that subject-object identity, there will always be karma. Isn't that where it comes from?

RITA GROSS: Yes. And as a result, there will always be suffering. **BD**