

## Learning bad

If we review our lives with some care and honesty, we would realize that whatever bad we did, we never really did any of them willingly or full-heartedly, or that we would in due course regret any such bad. We might even admit to having done a bad willingly and full-heartedly, but we had done so under the delusion that it was fun, just, right or good. Still, after the fact, when we mature in wisdom and love, we simply would never do it again.

The reason for this is really simple and natural: it is not in our true nature to do bad. Or, for those of us who have gone through really painful sufferings from the bad that others have done (such as during wars, religious persecution, social strife or personal tragedies), we hope that such circumstances would not arise again, or that bad would not follow them. In other words, we are all capable of being good.

Why then do we act bad, or what are the conditions that push us into bad? The simple answer is that it is in the way we think. If we are used to thinking bad, we will speak bad and act bad. Why do we do so? This is because before or during the bad moments, we do not really know they are bad. We are really ignorant of the fact that what we have done are bad, or we might feel justified doing such acts, meaning that we are deluded into believing that our bad deeds were actually good.

We could then say that ignorance is the root of our badness. Does this mean that we are not responsible for our acts, not accountable for our karma? Now, karma means “intention,” which can be bad or good. Bad intentions sow bad seeds of thinking, speaking and doing, while good intentions sow good seeds. Intention means we are deliberate, that is, we plan the act, carry it out, and feel satisfied, even delight in its fruits.

The fact remains that while we are planning the act (verbally or bodily), we are not always, or not really, aware that they are bad. If we know this well enough, we would be able to stop ourselves from committing that bad act. A good (or bad) example is a person whose job is slaughtering animals. He might or might not start off knowing that it is bad to kill. But he needs to earn a living, and in time, due to habit and routine, becomes numb to this fact.

In other words, a bad habit, especially of harming others, taking the not-given, sexually exploiting others, lying, or letting the mind become clouded up or addictive, are bad acts, even when we are unaware that they are bad. For that reason, we still suffer the painful consequences of such actions. It's like putting our hand into the fire (and holding it there), whether we do this consciously or not, we still get burnt.

In the case of a hot fire, we would instinctively pull our hands away. But this is more difficult with our mind-moved acts, unless we are aware and accept that bad acts have bad and bitter consequences. Or, we could forget this truth because our minds have been clouded by a teacher we respect or fear, a wrong crowd we follow, or some wrong idea that has overwhelmed us. We have been deluded.

There is another powerful way in which we can be deluded into doing bad. We want something so badly that we are simply goaded into acting in such ways that we would get the objects of our desire. We are driven by forces beyond our control, as it were. This is craving, one of the three unwholesome roots of action. When we have craving, powerful desires for things we wish to possess or enjoy, we are also driven to hate what or whom that prevents us from possessing or enjoying the desired objects.

Hate, then, is the second unwholesome root of action. Yet when we are under the power of either craving or hate, we are simply driven to be dishonest, seductive, manipulative, violent, destructive. We are not even aware of such subtle, yet powerful, dark forces lurking inside us. This is delusion, the darkest and trickiest of the three unwholesome roots.

It is clear from what we have seen thus far that all these drives and badness are really internal events that are expressed outwardly and affect others. The three roots are within our own minds and hearts. They are like a trimetallic lightning conductor standing tall out of our heads, and reaching out ever higher the

badder<sup>1</sup> we are. So the lightings that range in life's storms easily strike these conductors and hit us painfully, and we keep suffering multiple hits, as long as it is not yet our time to die (and be reborn).

Since the bad roots are within us, or even if we believe so, we are empowered to remove them, or at least, control them. We do this not so much by "fighting" them as by seeing our capacity for good, and the good in others, no matter what their faults. The bad in us simply means that we have yet to see good, and the good in us means that we are capable of self-liberation. This is the rationale for a truly healthy religion or healing system – that we are capable of self-healing. Even the best doctors may treat the sick, but if we do not work or want to heal, the sickness somehow remains, as it is, rooted in us.

Love, or better, lovingkindness, as such, is the firm ground on which good stands, never fearing bad. Instead of cursing the dark, we wait until our eyes see well enough despite the lack of light. Or, we would light a candle or turn on the light.

Good and bad are in the mind, many would agree. In an important sense, we define what are good or bad in our daily mundane lives. On a deeper level, however, as we mature with longsuffering, we would realize that good brings real happiness and suffering gives meaning to that happiness, making it ever more precious. Great people are those who understand human sufferings, and teach others to detect and avoid them.

Words like "evil" and "sin" are pathologically unhelpful, especially as fixed and narrow ideas. They are what are said to be *iatrogenic*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, what is meant to heal, actually brings on more suffering. Where religions or systems using such terms are strong, there is a correspondingly high incidence and real risks of psychological and social problems, even crimes and destruction, rooted in such unhealthy conceptions.

Full healing begins with a wholesome language of the heart to reflect our issues and challenges for what they really are, like describing an illness that we have. It is more helpful to describe our symptoms clearly rather blaming it as a "curse," or "black magic," or the "wages of sin" or even "bad karma."<sup>3</sup> Only in accepting our pains, or those of others, for what they are, with wisdom and compassion, are we helpful and healing to them.

Our actions speak for themselves, though not everyone, not even we ourselves, always hear their cries. Sometimes, if we are unmindful, our actions (no matter how "kind") can harm others more deeply than if we have not helped them at all. Then, we too create bad karma for ourselves, for our actions have been rooted in one of the three unwholesome roots. This brings us back to what has been said earlier: we are not always aware that we are doing something bad.

But if we listen deeply and humbly enough, there is gentle voice in us, reminding us to step back and allow compassion to take its course. We only need look into our own lives where our goodness and kindness have brought great healing and happiness to us as well as others. Buddhism works because good is possible.<sup>4</sup>

R303 Simple Joys 118  
Piya Tan ©2013

---

<sup>1</sup> On how such simple words are meaningful and healing, see SD 17.6 (8.1.2):

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.6-Khandha-4-Sankhara-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Meaning "resulting from the activity of physicians; said of any adverse condition in a patient resulting from treatment by a physician or surgeon"; see *Iatrogenesis*: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iatrogenesis>.

<sup>3</sup> Not everything, incl sickness, is always due to karma; there are many other conditions that can cause sickness, such as internal causes (eg diet) or external causes (eg trauma. the weather): see **Sivaka Sutta**, SD 5.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/5.6-Sivaka-S-s36.21-piya.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8 (1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40a.8-Emotional-independence.-piya.pdf>