

## Field Seven - Karma Work: Taking Care of Your Precious Life

Ultimately, if you want to experience Realization *and* have it transform your life, you need to commit yourself to Learning the Self. This means becoming intimately familiar with *your* self - *your* mind and *your* body. A lifetime path of practice becomes deeply personal, asking you to face your Karma, take responsibility for it, and use it to find your gateway into awakening. This isn't just about transforming yourself into a Buddha through your Zen practice, it's about awakening to how your very body - your unique, imperfect, human manifestation - *is* Buddha.

<b>To Learn the Buddha Way Is To Learn the Self.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>What “Self” Are You Learning?.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Your “Phenomenal” Self.....	4
2. Your Subjective Experience as Self.....	5
3. The Illusory Self: Your Belief in Your Inherent Self-Nature.....	6
4. True Self, or Your True Nature.....	7
<b>The Two Aspects of Learning the Self: Karma Work and Realizing Your True Nature.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Karma Work: Taking Care of This Precious Life.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Taking Responsibility for Your Karma.....	11
Taking your Karmic Inventory.....	13
Untangling your Karmic Knots.....	15
Identifying Underlying Causes in the Here and Now.....	17
Insight Versus Habit Change.....	19
<b>This Very Body is Buddha: Karma Work and Realization are Not Two.....</b>	<b>20</b>

### To Learn the Buddha Way Is To Learn the Self

Before I get into a discussion of Karma Work, I want to clarify how it relates to the aspect of our Zen practice called “studying the self.” One of Zen master Dogen’s most famous teachings is from his essay “Genjokoan,” or “Actualization of Reality:”

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things. To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of others drop off.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Okumura, Shohaku. *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen’s Shobogenzo*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010.

Why doesn't Dogen's description of Zen practice *begin* with "forgetting the self?" Chances are good that's something you'd like to do in your practice, sooner than later. To some extent, your practice in the other Fields of Zen allow you to do just that. Zazen and Mindfulness allow you to enjoy moments where you feel less separate from others, free from painful self-consciousness and worry. Through Precept practice and Opening the Heart you can learn to transcend your self-concern, at least at times. Dharma Study and Realization may help you to appreciate the Emptiness of self. Unless you're in great pain and want to figure out what's causing it, shouldn't you be working on *forgetting* the self?

The thing is, the self is the key to everything in practice. Why? It's the only tool you have for practice. It's the only interface you have to explore the Dharma. It's simultaneously your obstacle and your gateway to liberation. It is a trap, a mystery, and Buddha - awakened being - itself.

We tend to discount the self as - at the very least - an imperfect vessel for our Zen practice. It's as if we're taking a journey across an ocean by ship. We're so wrapped up in anticipating our arrival somewhere to pay much attention to the ship. If anything, we may bemoan the ship's slow speed or the discomfort we experience on it. Then - hopefully sooner than later - we realize that the point isn't about arriving anywhere. The whole point is the journey: Learning to sail and care for the ship, and learning to navigate the ocean and enjoy it.

The self is not only your means for practicing, it's indistinguishable from what you're seeking. Hakuin Zenji wrote:

All beings by nature are Buddha,  
As ice by nature is water.  
Apart from water there is no ice;  
Apart from beings, no Buddha.

And:

Truly, is anything missing now?  
Nirvana is right here, before our eyes,  
This very place is the Lotus Land,  
This very body, the Buddha.<sup>2</sup>

It's not that your body allows you to achieve a state of Buddhahood, it *is* Buddha. What does this mean? The investigation of this question is the essence of Zen practice.

The Dogen passage cited earlier, "to study the Buddha Way is to study the self," was translated by Shohaku Okumura. In his book on *Realizing Genjokoan*, Okumura gives a further explanation

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<sup>2</sup> Lahn, Bussho. *Singing and Dancing Are the Voice of the Law: A Commentary on Hakuin's "Song of Zazen"* (p. 23). Monkfish Book Publishing. Kindle Edition.

of the Japanese word he translates as “study.” He says the Japanese word is *narau*, which is related to the word *neraru*. *Neraru* means “to get accustomed to,” or “to become intimate or familiar with.”<sup>3</sup> Okumura further elucidates the term by explaining how the Chinese character for *narau* is composed of the symbol for the wings of a bird, combined with the symbol for “self.” He suggests that *narau* implies the kind of study or learning a baby bird needs to do in order to fly – watching its parents, taking the risk of trying flight itself, and then practicing over and over in order to do it successfully.

Inspired by Okumura’s description of the Chinese character *narau*, I am choosing to call this aspect Zen “Learning the Self.” “Study” - although I’ll still sometimes use the term - can imply an entirely intellectual process in which the observer is detached from the subject. Sometimes such a sense of objectivity is helpful when examining the self, but ultimately you’re seeking insight about self that is directly applicable to your life, and then you’re seeking to manifest that insight in your behavior of body, speech, and mind. As the baby bird learns to fly, you seek to fulfill your Bodhicitta and take full advantage of this human life. You become intimate with your Life through Zazen and Mindfulness. You learn about yourself by trying to follow the Precepts and Open Your Heart. Every aspect of your life can teach you something about yourself.

The study of self Dogen is referring to in the Genjokoan is not intellectual study. It’s not sitting around thinking about yourself or your life. It’s not about philosophizing, or reading, or even meditating in order to achieve some kind of transcendent insight about yourself.

If it goes deep, Learning the Self it ends up being intensely personal. You won’t get far if you try to skip over the personal in order to contemplate abstract generalities like the question, “What is the view of self?” You’re being asked to look within and explore *your* view of *your* self, because that’s the only reality you have direct access to! If you explore, for example, “the fear of annihilation,” you shouldn’t be contemplating philosophy but exploring your own very real, visceral fear of death or non-existence.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Learning the Self is not about analyzing your neuroses and trying to figure out where they came from. Instead, it involves turning toward your direct experience as a living being - moment by moment, day after day, year after year - until you really know yourself.

## What “Self” Are You Learning?

But what exactly are you studying when you learn the “self”? Zen is based on the Buddha’s original teachings about not-self, or anatta, so you’re starting your study with the premise that no

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<sup>3</sup> Okumura, Shohaku. *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen’s Shobogenzo*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> It helps to have the support of teachers, Sangha, and perhaps even a therapist as you embark into uncharted territory with self learning.

matter how hard or long you look, you're not going to find anything enduring, inherent, or graspable you can call "self." Isn't it strange to focus your study on something you can't locate or define? Also, according to the Buddha's original teachings,<sup>5</sup> you cause yourself no end of dissatisfaction and suffering when you identify anything as "self" – so wouldn't focusing on self in your Buddhist practice only exacerbate your dissatisfaction and suffering? Wouldn't it make you even more obsessed with self?

These are all valid questions that, ironically, need to be part of your study of self! It might make more sense to put Dogen's statement this way: To study Buddhism is to study all things self-related. Once you start examining this matter, you'll realize that many aspects of the human experience can fit in the category of "self-related," and when it comes to Zen study, all of them are relevant. Here are four aspects of self that are important to keep in mind in your practice.

### **1. Your "Phenomenal" Self**

There's no denying you exist as an individual. You have a body that's physically separate from other bodies, with its own sensations and needs. You have a mind that - for the most part - seems separate from other minds. People can't read your thoughts, and you can't read theirs. You ended up with a personality and tendencies that may be a source of joy and pride for you, or not. Over time, you accrue relationships, responsibilities, and possessions that don't belong to anyone else, at least not in the same way. You occupy a unique position in the world, and have an experience unlike anyone else's. This is your "phenomenal self"<sup>6</sup> - that is, your personal and distinct manifestation in the world.

Contrary to popular belief, the Buddha never said "there is no self." That would have been a philosophical proposition that couldn't be proven (in that you can't prove a negative). What the Buddha *did* say was that identifying anything as self - or as belonging to self, the process of "I-making" and "my-making" - was a cause for Dukkha. Dukkha is dis-ease or dissatisfaction, sometimes translated as suffering, and you experience it when what you identify as "I, me, or mine" inevitably, eventually, proves to be impermanent and beyond your control. This situation brings up existential fears of death, annihilation, loss, etc.

There is nothing inherently wrong with, or unreal about, the phenomenal self. What matters is how you relate to it and take care of it. Ideally, you learn to function effectively as your phenomenal self without trying to grasp any particular aspect of it, expecting to be able to completely control it or make it last forever.

A Buddhist teaching meant to help you relate to your phenomenal self is called the "Five Skandhas," or Five Aggregates. The Five Skandhas are form (your body), sensations (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and the sensing of thoughts), perceptions (your identification and

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<sup>5</sup> See the teaching of *Anatta* and *Dukkha* in the chapter on Dharma Study.

<sup>6</sup> Phenomenal meaning "a phenomenal, or perceptible, manifestation," not amazing.

processing of what you sense), volitional mental formations (all mental activity beyond basic sensation and perception), and consciousness (awareness of your existence through time and space). A human being is said to be composed of these Five Aggregates, but there is no fixed thing within them that can be identified as the self (such as a soul). Neither can a human being be found apart from the Five Aggregates. Amazingly, you can become perfectly comfortable with this situation (see *Your Belief in Your Inherent Self-Nature* below).

## **2. Your Subjective Experience as Self**

Another aspect of the Self is your moment-by-moment awareness. Most of us think of ourselves as having a unique window on the world, with the thoughts inside our heads trying to make sense of what we see around us. Over time, we come to realize that our subjective experience of things doesn't always align with the experience of others, or with reality itself. Unless we're terribly arrogant, we recognize the constraints of our limited perspective when it comes to navigating the world, although it doesn't stop us from thinking and analyzing, commenting and planning.

Buddhism invites you not just to value your subjective experience, but to turn your attention to it like it's the key to everything. However, when it comes to practice, the subject matter of your awareness should primarily be what's happening in your own mind and body. You might call this kind of self study "phenomenological." Phenomenology is "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view"<sup>7</sup> – that is, it takes your subjective experience as a valid method of inquiry for genuine insight into the nature of your own consciousness.

Rather than dismissing your direct experience as a "merely subjective" view on external reality, Buddhism points out that your subjective experience is your only real means of insight into your nature as a human being. Learning the Self can't reveal to you whether there's life on other planets, but it gives you transformative insight into how your own mind and body work – and therefore how you can gain more freedom of choice when it comes to navigating your own life. How better to learn what it means to be a human being than to study your own experience as a human being? How better to learn what it means to be you – an individual with your own particular body, mind, genetic makeup, and history – than by studying *you*?

In Zen, learning to pay close attention to what's happening in your mind and body is called "turning the light inward." This is what Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have done when he finally achieved the awakening he'd been seeking: In deep concentration, he looked within at his own, direct experience. He saw the causal connections between things, and therefore found the way to freedom. This wasn't because he developed great spiritual superpowers and was able to gain insight into something beyond the limitations of his subjective experience, it's because *what really matters to your peace and freedom lies within*.

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<sup>7</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

### 3. The Illusory Self: Your Belief in Your Inherent Self-Nature

An extremely important aspect of self from the Buddhist perspective is your conviction that somewhere within you resides an inherently-existing, independent, enduring self-nature. Even if you accept that the Five Aggregates aren't *you*, and none of the stuff of your life is exactly *you*, you still have a strong sense that there is someone *home* inside your head. Your self-essence has to be *somewhere*, right?

Some elusive kernel of me-ness seems to have persisted throughout your life, present within you when you were a child, a teenager, a young adult, a middle-aged adult, and an elder.

- This “I” was, is, and will be the protagonist of your life journey
- This “I” was, is, and will be the do-er
- This “I” was, is, and will be the experiencer of pleasure, pain, happiness or misery
- This “I” was, is, and will be the thinker, feeler, speaker, decision-maker, performer
- This “I” understands, or doesn't understand
- This “I” achieves, or fails to achieve
- This “I” is happy, or unhappy
- This “I” is loved, or unloved
- This “I” is alive, or it is dead

Apparently, human beings evolved an inner narrator, probably to make sense of their behavior to others and to themselves. Modern psychological research has demonstrated numerous instances where people make decisions influenced by something they were completely unaware of, but then they subsequently offer what sound like perfectly reasonable alternative explanations for their actions - and they seem to be entirely convinced they are telling the truth.<sup>8</sup> In other research, people's actions were initiated *before* their consciousness of them, but they believe “they” decided to act first.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, your behavior and experience involves a good amount of conscious choice, but there is clearly a whole lot more going on in your mind and body than some internal “Executive I” can track and manage.

Through practice, you look for, question, and ultimately see through your sense of having an inherently-existing, independent, enduring self-nature. You do this because such a view causes lots of problems and is ultimately unnecessary. In fact, you're much better off without it, and you don't need it in order to take care of your life. However, as long as you *do* remain convinced of your inherent self-nature, that view drives the “I-making” and “my-making” that leads to Dukkha. You also have to worry about how things are going to turn out for the protagonist of your life, and about what happens to that “I” when you inevitably die.

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, Robert. *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

#### **4. True Self, or Your True Nature**

Finally, in Zen we talk about your True Self, or Buddha-Nature. If ending Dukkha isn't enough to motivate you to let go of your belief in an inherently-existing self-nature, anticipating the rewards of knowing your True Nature will hopefully inspire your Bodhicitta!

It's tricky talking about our True Nature because it's not something we can find or define. It's not a thing we possess, nor something changed by our birth, death, behavior, or Realization (or lack thereof). It's not a kernel of goodness within each of us waiting to be cultivated into Buddhahood. If you can imagine It, it doesn't apply. One way it's described in Zen is "your True Nature is no nature," meaning that it has no fixed attributes or characteristics.

Nonetheless, our True Nature is very real. The process of Realization is infinite because Reality-with-a-Capital-R is infinite, but in Zen, "seeing one's True Nature"<sup>10</sup> is considered the pivotal insight of your life. Before understanding your True Nature, your view of yourself and the world is limited, dominated by your sense of yourself as the protagonist in a story centered on you - and this is true whether you like the story of your life or not. You assume that your perceptions of things are more or less true, and navigate using a mental map of the world.

When you see your True Nature, you realize in what sense every idea you've ever had about yourself or the world is like the thoughts you have in a dream - true or appropriate within the context of the dream, but taking place within the context of a universe much bigger and more inclusive than you ever imagined. All along you have been right where you belonged. Even your struggles are dignified by meaning - not a meaning that depends on some limited narrative, but one that arises from the completeness of your Own-Being.

Your True Nature isn't different from mine in any way, because it isn't dependent on the form of our manifestation. Given this, you may wonder why we bother to talk about this True Nature as being "yours," or say it's your "True Self." We do this because our experience of our True Nature is the intersection between the universal and the individual. Although your True Self is boundaryless and therefore all things are your Self, you also remain you. You are a radiant part of the whole - Interdependent but also independent, like a leaf on a tree.

#### **The Two Aspects of Learning the Self: Karma Work and Realizing Your True Nature**

Now that you have some sense of what Zen is talking about when it refers to "self," what's involved with Learning the Self? This part of our practice has two essential aspects. Karma Work

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<sup>10</sup> The term used for this in some Zen lineages is "kensho," but I avoid its use because of our seemingly inevitable tendency to fixate on it and associate it with a dramatic experience we should strive for.

is taking care of your Phenomenal Self - becoming intimately familiar with your own body and mind and learning to live in accord with the Dharma. Realization of your True Nature involves seeking out, questioning, and seeing through your belief in an inherent self-nature, thereby awakening to your True Nature.

These two aspects - Karma Work and Realization - are intimately related and support each other, and both are indispensable. If you neglect taking care of your everyday life and trying to change your behavior for the better (Karma Work), Samadhi and Realization will either elude you because your life is a mess, or any experience you have of the nondual aspect of Reality will remain shallow and disconnected from your embodied existence. On the other hand, if you neglect cultivating a deeper sense of, and intimacy with, your True Nature (Realization), your work to become a better person can get bogged down or discouraging – because, frankly, it never ends. Realization reminds you of the sense in which your life is already complete and precious just as it is.

Sometimes people think (or hope) Zen or Buddhism is all about Realization. I don't know whether you've ever had any of the following thoughts, but many of us have:

“Maybe, no matter the state of my life, no matter how much unresolved stuff I have from the past or how much conflict is happening in my life now, I can just meditate, access deep peace, and make it all go away.”

“Maybe, through insight or practice, I'll reach some mind state or attitude where nothing bothers me anymore.”

“Maybe, if I meditate hard enough, I'll end up with a permanent sense that everything is precious, luminous, and empty, and I'll no longer be inspired to do anything selfish. Surely awakening will rid me of my delusions and bad habits – so there's no need to struggle to change them in the meantime! After all, the process of wrestling with Karma is so messy and slow... I'd rather just meditate and think about profound teachings.”

Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on how you look at it - such hopes to avoid Karma Work by focusing primarily on spiritual Realization are false, for at least three reasons.

First, applying spiritual teachings or practices in order to alleviate your immediate discomfort, but not taking the practice any further, is called spiritual bypassing. Spiritual bypassing is like taking a pain reliever and ignoring the underlying condition that's causing the pain to begin with. Fortunately, there are plenty of tools in Buddhism for addressing your underlying conditions, and those tools are part of the Karma Work aspect of your practice.

Second, even if you gain some insight into the absolute dimension of Life, do you then *always* have that larger perspective? Do you constantly experience equanimity or joy? No. It's true that

over time you may end up with deeper and deeper faith in the Reality of the Independent Dimension. You may perceive Suchness more and more often, or feel fairly grounded in your Buddha-Nature. But for ordinary mortals (that is, all the people I've ever met), Samadhi<sup>11</sup> is not some permanent attainment. You can't rely on some particular mind-state or attitude to inspire and guide all of your actions. Instead, you have to establish new habits and ways of operating in the world that will carry you even when you don't "feel" enlightened – that is, Karma Work.

Finally, even if you attain some insight or experience, enlightenment isn't a place you go to, or a badge you wear because of something you understood in the past. Enlightenment arises in how you meet each moment. Unless you put it into practice – manifesting it in your everyday life – enlightenment doesn't even exist. It can be very difficult to bridge the gap between what you've Realized and the nitty-gritty of daily life, and doing this is Karma Work.

I've heard people say Karma Work is about the "relative world," while Realization is about the "absolute." There's some truth in this statement, in the sense that relationships between beings and things are part of the relative aspect of Reality. From the absolute perspective, there are no separate beings and things that can be said to interact, and discriminations such as good and bad, right and wrong, don't apply. Still, it's problematic to speak in a way that implies you can do some work in a "relative world," which exists separately from some sublime, if confusing, "realm" of the absolute. Relative and absolute are two aspects of the exact same Reality.

Your work on Karma should be informed by, and reflect, absolute truth; this is what results in compassion, selflessness, and equanimity, because you're empty of any inherent, separate self-nature, and all phenomena arise and pass within one, seamless, luminous Reality. And your awakening to absolute truth should never be disembodied and removed from the relative Reality of life. If your spiritual insight feels disconnected from the mundane experience of everyday life, your work isn't done. You have to learn to manifest your insight about the absolute, or the insight is incomplete.

On the positive side, working on your Karma supports your Realization, and working on Realization supports your Karma Work. Karma Work leads to greater self-acceptance, stability, moral behavior, generosity, trust, and openness. Because of the work you do on your Karma – as incremental and messy as it can seem sometimes – you can become better able to sit still, face things, calm your mind, and open to insight. Realization, in turn, can lead to pivotal insights which realign your whole being and make it easier to see through and resolve your Karmic issues. Also, when you awaken to your True Nature, you recognize how you are not fundamentally defiled by your Karma. This can make Karma Work feel like less of a duty, a penance, or an endless self-improvement project, and more like the joyous activity of a Bodhisattva.

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<sup>11</sup> A state of nondual awareness that allows you to perceive what is most true. See chapter on Realization.

## **Karma Work: Taking Care of This Precious Life**

Traditional Buddhist teachings about Karma can be useful for your practice, even if you only take them as potent metaphors. Many Buddhists in the world believe in literal rebirth - that you are reborn in the world in some form, human or otherwise, after your death - but this belief isn't necessary for practice. The imagery and cosmology of Karma and rebirth can function for us as illuminating myths, or stories which effectively convey important truths, even if they aren't factual.

According to the Buddhist view, then, Karma is a universal law of cause-and-effect when it comes to your willful behavior. Certain choices you make lead to negative results, such as choosing to break moral Precepts or spending your life pursuing pleasure while neglecting spiritual practice. You may experience negative results in this life, such as alienation from other people or facing existential fears on your deathbed, or the negative results may be felt in your next life, when they shape the circumstances of your rebirth. There are elaborate teachings on the different "realms" of existence you might find yourself reborn into, including a hell realm populated by beings who have nurtured hatred or acted violently in their previous lives. On the other hand, of course, certain choices lead to positive results, such as moral behavior and generosity. These choices might cause you to be reborn as a human being in fortunate circumstances, or perhaps in the heaven realm.

The important thing to remember about the Buddhist cosmology of Karma and rebirth is that it is *descriptive*, not *proscriptive*. Any Buddhist teachings about Karma are a kind of general observation about how things tend to work out. They don't imply the existence of a supernatural power - deified or otherwise - that metes out rewards or punishments according to a universal rule book. Instead, the laws of Karma operate impersonally. This is reflected in the Buddhist cosmological imagery, where, after death, beings appear before the deity of the death and the underworld, Yama. Yama holds up a mirror to each person, and this is enough to determine which realm they will be reborn into.

According to original Buddhism and the other religious traditions of the Buddha's time that shared the belief in rebirth,<sup>12</sup> spiritual practitioners could either aim to ensure a fortunate rebirth or to avoid rebirth altogether. Avoiding rebirth was viewed as the highest goal, and indeed the Buddha is said to have proclaimed, "This is my last birth," upon his enlightenment. If it seems strange that you might seek not to be reborn, consider that rebirth is not like everlasting life. With each birth, you forget everything. You once again experience all the joys and sufferings of

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<sup>12</sup> This view of the main point of practice evolved over time. Few Mahayana Buddhists, including Zen practitioners, would frame practice this way.

life, are once again separated from your loved ones, and once again lose everything you care about - as if it's for the first time.

In any case, in the Karma and rebirth scenarios, whether you're seeking a good rebirth or aiming to avoid it, your present life is viewed as a precious opportunity. Given your human form and your encounter with the Dharma, you have the chance not just to enjoy your good fortune but to to "purify" or "clean up" your Karma. The term "Karma" technically refers to your willful actions, but it's also understood to include the effects of those actions. You are living with the effects of your past actions, which then condition your behavior - in essence, becoming causes. Your life is an unfolding of Karmic causes and conditions, and from the traditional point of view, the chain of causation you're a part of extends back untold lifetimes. To avoid rebirth - or even just to keep your chain of causation moving in a positive direction - you need to identify your negative Karma and stop perpetuating it, plus generate positive or liberating Karma by forming or strengthening good behaviors.

How is this imagery of Karma and rebirth useful to you in your practice? Regardless of whether anyone is literally reborn after death, and regardless of how such rebirth might work or manifest, you can observe a kind of "rebirth" within your own life. A classic example is how a certain "self" might get "reborn" when you find yourself around people with whom you have a difficult relationship. One minute you're doing just fine, operating as a reasonable and kind person. Then you step into proximity with your fraught relationship and you feel resentful, reactive, and defensive. Memories and feelings come flooding back based on past experiences. Because you haven't yet dealt with the Karma underlying your troubled relationship, a self is reborn into a less-than-ideal realm.

The concept of Karma is a helpful way of framing the relationship between your choices and the states of your body, mind, and life. Central to the teaching is the idea that *you always have a choice you can make to move your life in a positive direction*. No matter what circumstances you find yourself in, your choices matter. You "clean up" as much of your negative Karma as you can in this lifetime, minimizing harm and trying to leave the world a better place than you found it. Clearly, doing this affects the future in a positive way, whether you are technically reborn after death or not. It's very easy to see the law of Karma operating when someone does the opposite - carelessly generating negative Karma and causing harm. When they die, they leave behind strife, trauma, and toxic residue on almost everything they touched.

### **Taking Responsibility for Your Karma**

This first step in Karma Work is cultivating a willingness to take responsibility for your Karma as manifested in your Phenomenal Self. Another way to speak about this situation is to use the possessive "my Karma" to refer to the way past causes and conditions manifest as your particular

body, mind, heart, tendencies, conditioning, habits, etc. I find it helpful to think of all of this as your “Karmic package” – the whole ball of matter and energy and momentum that comprises your “self” in a conventional, practical sense. Some of your Karmic package you can readily recognize as being the result of your past actions, but a lot of it ends up feeling like an inheritance you didn’t ask for. You may like some of your Karma (e.g. strength, health, intelligence, determination), but there’s probably a fair amount of it you’d rather not have (e.g. physical or mental disabilities, a tendency toward anger, depression, or anxiety, or a distrust of other people).

When you’re doing Karma Work, it’s best to let go of trying to sort out which aspects of your Phenomenal Self “you” are responsible for shaping, and which you should blame on genetics, culture, conditioning, past experiences, luck, or the behavior of others. Traditionally, the term “Karma” applied only to the effects of *your* willful behavior, but notably traditional teachings also tended to attribute every aspect of your life - even things like being born with a handicap or suffering injustice - to *your* actions in a past life. I find it’s most helpful if you acknowledge there are infinitely many causes which have resulted in your Phenomenal Self and simply focus on what it is *you* have any influence over: Your choices.<sup>13</sup>

Karma Work means to take responsibility for the Karma you’ve got and get to work on transforming it as best you can. Working out where that Karma came from – who is to blame for it – is of extremely limited usefulness. Occasionally, you might end up with an insight like, “Oh, I’m like this because my mom did such-and-such,” or “The abuse I suffered has caused me to be anxious.” This is useful only insofar as it allows you to understand, accept, and work with your Karma. If such insights leave you stuck in self-recrimination or resentment of others, they are worse than useless.

It’s not even helpful to get stuck in self-blame, although you may indulge in this because you erroneously think it’s a way to take responsibility for your Karma. In my Zen lineage we regularly recite a “Karma verse” which goes like this:

All harmful Karma ever committed by me since of old,  
On account of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance,  
Born of my body, mouth, and thought,  
Now I atone for it all.

After taking responsibility in this way, the teaching tells us to “sit up straight in the presence of the Buddha.” There is no room for shame, self-loathing, a sense of inadequacy, or comparison to others. In Buddhism, greed, anger, and ignorance are called the “three poisons,” or the basic

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<sup>13</sup> The Buddha himself is said to have recommended against dwelling on the “precise working out of the results of kamma [karma].” See “Acintita Sutta: Unconjecturable” (AN 4.77), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.077.than.html>

cause of all your selfish and harmful behaviors. In the Karma verse you admit that you sometimes perpetuate the three poisons through your actions of body, speech, and mind, but you also say the three poisons are “beginningless.”

Even if you can identify negative aspects of your Karma that you bear some responsibility for – like anger issues, addiction, or the need to control or judge other people – can you explain how that negative Karma began? Some kids are born with a tendency to react with anger, while others are introverted and shy. Who knows why? Some people can participate in certain activities and partake in certain substances without an issue, while others have a strong tendency toward addiction. Who knows why? Maybe you have a compulsion to control or mistrust others, but chances are good that this aspect of yourself is a reaction to negative childhood experiences. If it is, why did the people who hurt you end up the way they were? Probably their own negative childhood experiences! And so, you trace the cycle of suffering back and back and... eventually it's impossible to find a place to lay the ultimate blame.

However, you are not a victim of your Karma. That is one of the central messages of Buddhism. Change is possible. Greater freedom is possible. It is possible to live a wiser, more compassionate, and skillful life. It's not easy, but everything you do matters. Every choice you make in this moment conditions the future. It is very difficult to change habits of body, speech, and mind that have been built up over a lifetime, but you might think of each choice you make as a drop in a bucket. Eventually, inevitably, the bucket will fill.

### **Taking your Karmic Inventory**

The next step in Karma Work is becoming intimately familiar with your Karma. In particular, you look for your Karmic issues - those ways in which you are compelled toward harmful behaviors of body, speech, and mind, and those ways in which your capacity for beneficial behaviors are constrained. How do you identify your Karmic issues?

You know you're not perfect. You may feel like you're fairly familiar with your faults and shortcomings. However, few of us are in the habit of examining these things as closely as Zen practice invites us to. Of course, you may already have done a fair amount of “work on yourself,” whether through introspection, psychotherapy, or a 12-step program, but many of us tend to react to evidence of our issues with denial, blaming, defensiveness, or self-recrimination. In practice, you need to learn how to examine your Karmic issues with objectivity, setting aside your self-concern as much as you can.

Instead of getting all wrapped up in a narrative about who you think you are, who you should be, or who you want to be, it's best to relate to your Karmic issues almost as if they belonged to someone else. Instead of thinking, “I'm a terrible person because my mind is so full of

judgements about other people,” you think (as much as possible), “Interesting! Look at all those judgements about other people. What’s that about?” This kind of objectivity can be difficult, but you might find it liberating to be invited to view things this way. As long as you're still wringing your hands about your Karma – miserable that you ended up this way or wallowing in self-blame – you won’t get much Karma work done! It’s very helpful to find your own Karma fascinating, and even to develop a sense of humor about your shortcomings.

Karma work begins with what Alcoholics Anonymous calls “a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” If you’re not currently facing a life-or-death matter like addiction, such an inventory may seem like a negative, burdensome, and unnecessary project. However, such an inventory is an essential part of Buddhist practice. This work is part of what Zen master Dogen called “studying the self.” Although your negative Karmic patterns may feel more like annoyances than emergencies, any negative Karma you remain unaware of, or refuse to work on, controls you to some extent. You continue to perpetuate it and affect others with it. Your experience of life is constrained by it – compromising your peace of mind, your intimacy with others, and your ability to settle deeply in meditation and engage in awakening work.

A mature Buddhist practitioner is intimate with their Karma, good and bad. You might say they have done a thorough cleaning of their Karmic closet. They’ve discovered the skeletons that were hidden in there, and done their best to bring them out into the light of day and give them a proper burial. If skeletons remain, you are well aware of them and how they affect your actions of body, speech, and mind. Ideally, you also learn how to compensate for your Karmic issues – not excusing or enabling them, but minimizing the harm they cause for self and others.

As you take your Karmic inventory, some things may immediately jump out at you. Obviously harmful behaviors like addictions, stealing, lying, cheating, or abusing others are definitely Karmic issues that need to be part of your practice. Depression and anxiety are Karmic issues (although they may also have a physical component).

Other Karmic issues are more subtle. When you pay careful attention to your life, where does dukkha – dissatisfaction or suffering – arise? Where do you find yourself behaving in ways you know are unhelpful? In what ways do you fall short of your own aspirations? Where are your relationships marked by conflict? In your relationships, where do you find yourself manifesting defensiveness, avoidance, resentment, or an effort to control? (In some senses, other people bring out the worst in us, which in the case of Karma work is a good thing!)

In what ways are you inhibited from speaking or acting in a way that feels authentic? What negative thought patterns do you tend to get caught in, such as catastrophizing, nurturing resentments, or building the case for a nihilistic worldview? What are your greatest fears? What fears are beneath those fears? What issues keep showing up for you in life, in one form or another? What needs or beliefs drive your harmful behaviors? What are you attached to and

why? Why aren't you completely and utterly satisfied with yourself and your life? What gets in the way of your intimacy with others, and with all of life?

The list of possible lines of Karmic inquiry are infinite. You learn to pay careful attention whenever you break Precepts, feel dukkha, cause suffering for others, feel negative emotions, act contrary to your aspirations, or feel like you're being inauthentic. At a more subtle level, you learn to notice when any tightness or reactivity arises in your body or mind.

You turn your attention to your Karmic issues not because you're embarking on an endless self-improvement project, but because noticing any tightness in the flow of your life is an opportunity to achieve greater freedom, wisdom, compassion, and skillfulness. You don't have to tackle all your Karmic issues at once. You don't have to add judgement and self-recrimination when you recognize one of the skeletons in your closet. You don't have to fixate on an ideal about who you should be, and constantly compare yourself with it. If, as I discussed earlier, you can be somewhat objective about your Karma, you can roll your sleeves up and engage in your Karma work as a way of taking care of this precious human life. You're not asked to flagellate yourself for being flawed, you're encouraged to realize your full potential.

### **Untangling your Karmic Knots**

The first step in working on a particular Karmic issue is to cultivate curiosity about it. This means arousing your questioning mind and looking closely. As much as possible, adopt an attitude of humility, setting aside your assumption that you already understand this part of your Karma. Imagine you're a psychologist observing yourself; ask respectful and compassionate questions to understand your Karma more intimately.

When this Karmic issue arises, what is usually going on in your life? What triggers your behavior of body, speech, or mind? What are you thinking and feeling? What happens in your body? Is there any tightness? Maybe a headache, dizziness, nausea? How long does your reaction last? What do you really want in the situation where the issue arises? If you could get exactly what you wanted in that moment, what would it be? As you experience this Karma, do mental or physical memories come up from the past? Do you get stuck in a stressful loop of negative thinking? If so, what is the content of that thinking? What tends to alleviate your Karmic symptoms?

As you're closely observing your own experience, it's important – at least temporarily – to set aside your agenda to change. The temptation to leap straight to fixing things will cause you to jump to relatively shallow and premature conclusions which aren't helpful. An agenda also skews your attention and may cause you to negatively judge what you observe. The part of your

self being observed may respond by being uncooperative, such that your thoughts and feelings go underground and your effort to understand is foiled.

What you discover as you deeply examine your own Karma may not be easy to face. You may need to open up old wounds before they can be healed. Your idea of yourself may be profoundly challenged. You may need to recognize and admit that much of your internal dialogue is childish, self-centered, arrogant, or completely irrational. All of this is okay. It may help to remind yourself that anything unpleasant you uncover in your Karmic inquiry was lurking there long before you uncovered it, quietly wreaking havoc with, or compromising, your life.

As you investigate, it's important to remember how incredibly complicated Karma is. An issue you want to address is never going to have one simple cause. Instead of discovering a one-to-one cause and effect relationship, you're likely to discover what my teachers called a "Karmic knot." One negative behavior entered your repertoire because of another issue you have, which connects back to another cause, and so on. The causes and effects twist back on themselves and reinforce each other. Finding any resolution can seem quite unlikely!

However, Karma work is not like straightforward problem solving. It requires patient, gentle persistence. It's like untangling a large, dense knot in a skein of yarn. If you yank too hard on any piece, you're liable to make the knot worse. Just looking at the knot, you're unlikely to be able to follow the thread far enough to make a difference. If you want quick results, you'll probably give up in frustration. If you keep gently massaging the knot, though – allowing your fingers to get intimate with it, loosening things a little when there's an opportunity, gradually you may untangle one section of yarn, and then another. Each piece of Karma you untangle brings relief and greater freedom.

Another analogy helps to convey the kind of effort you make in Karma work.<sup>14</sup> Imagine greater understanding and freedom is on the other side of a locked door. It's an incredibly thick door you can't break through. If you want to get through the door, it won't help if you just walk away from it and forget it. What you need to do is maintain contact with the door, perhaps leaning against it or placing the palm of your hand on it. You use some pressure, so if or when the door gives a little, you'll notice and take advantage of it. Such effort requires patience, determination, and persistence. When you first begin deliberate Karma work, it may seem like a hopeless or foolish endeavor, but over time your faith that change is possible will grow. In my experience, you may have to keep your hand on that door to insight for many years, but eventually something will budge and make the whole effort worth it.

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<sup>14</sup> This analogy I credit to one of my teachers, Kyogen Carlson.

## Identifying Underlying Causes in the Here and Now

For the next stage of Karma work, I want to introduce yet another analogy. The Karmic issues you observe on the surface – your obvious thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences – are often like symptoms of an underlying illness. You can treat your symptoms, but ultimately the most healing and transformative thing is to address the underlying illness.

If you want to find the underlying causes for your Karmic issues, you need to keep delving deeper and deeper. Simple answers may help you a little, but they are unlikely to truly unravel your Karmic knots or result in lasting change. If you arrive at an answer or insight, you then ask, what's underneath, or behind, that?

Note: The underlying causes you are looking for are in the here and now, not in the past! The Karmic malady lives within your own body and mind. The issues may have causes rooted in the past, or in the actions of other people, but that isn't what you are trying to figure out in Karma work.

Second note: When you are “looking” for underlying causes, you are not using your intellect. You're not excluding your mind, of course, and part of your process may involve words or narratives. However, some of the answers you find may manifest in images, physical sensations, dreams, or spontaneously arising emotions. In addition, you are not actively “figuring things out.” Instead, you are shining the light of awareness on your Karma and looking. You examine and question what is happening within you as if you were a scientist. “Interesting! Look at that thought? What's that about? Why do I care so much about that? What am I afraid of?” The answers may not appear to you right away, and they may not be the answers to questions you were asking, but if you keep up this process, eventually insights happen. When they occur, they feel fresh, spontaneous, and often somewhat surprising. Your meditation practice helps immensely when it comes to cultivating the ability to just sit still, shine the light of awareness on a topic, and wait for answers to arise.

I'll use an example to illustrate the process of taking your Karmic investigation deeper to find underlying causes. Let's say you tend to judge other people negatively. Let's say this happens often enough, and the judgmental thoughts are so preoccupying, that you really want to understand this tendency and hopefully find a way to change. You start watching your judgmentalism carefully – noticing it arise, what goes through your mind, how you feel at the time, and then noticing when it passes. Looking carefully and patiently, one day you recognize that when you're judging someone's behavior, you're thinking, “Well, I don't let myself do that!” Surprisingly, you realize you feel a little bit of envy for the other person. Why can they get away with acting like that, when you work so hard to be the right kind of person? It's not fair!

Just this amount of insight into your Karma may help. Maybe you realize that your judgmentalism isn't so much about the behavior of other people, it's about your own standards

for yourself. This may lead you to give yourself a break sometimes, which subsequently makes you a little more tolerant of others.

But there are many layers of Karma beneath such a preliminary insight. For example, why do you feel compelled to hold yourself to such high standards? What do you think would happen if you failed to meet the standards you have chosen for yourself? Let's say you hold that question for a while, and at some point recognize that some part of you fears you are inherently unworthy of acceptance and love. Starting in your childhood you tried to figure out what kinds of behavior would earn you the belonging and esteem you needed. You gradually created a long list of standards for yourself that feel less like voluntary aspirations than a set of fixed rules, and the punishment for breaking those rules is devastating rejection, humiliation, and alienation from the people you love and depend on.

Again, this insight may help resolve some of your Karma. Maybe you recognize that your fear of rejection was formed when you were a child, when you literally depended on the acceptance of others for survival. As an adult, you need positive human relationships but don't need to worry quite so much about maintaining the approval of others. Realizing this may relieve some of your Karmic stress.

However, Karma work doesn't even stop there! It's possible to keep tracing the Karmic connections deeper and deeper. The further down you get, the more basic, primal, and sometimes irrational the Karma. Warning: To keep up your Karmic investigation at this level is not something your culture generally understands or endorses. It's not that it's dangerous, it's just that most of us would not assume it was worth looking deeper unless a tradition like Buddhism told us it was.

In the example about judgementalism and standards, let's say you keep up the inquiry (keeping your hand on the door to insight). In a meditation retreat, you experience what feels like a full-body flashback to your childhood, when you first perceived acceptance and love were conditional, and fear arose that you would end up rejected and alone. You are suffused with feelings of inadequacy and shame. However, at the same time the wiser, adult part of you responds with compassion, just as you would if you were comforting a child in front of you. The adult part of you sees how this fear of rejection is an unfortunate and universal aspect of human experience, not based in any fundamental inadequacy of yours. As your deep inner wound is recognized and embraced, it is also partially healed.

If you are engaging in Karma work, it can take some time. You may end up wondering whether this approach is working for you, whether you're ever going to find any kind of liberating answers. The description I just gave of deep inner healing may sound like a fairy tale, something beyond anything you're likely to experience. However, if you don't give up hope, you will make progress. It might not be exactly the progress you were looking for. It might not even be progress on the Karmic issue you would most like to resolve! But any Karmic issue you have does have

underlying causes, and because those causes live within us, you can uncover them. A friend of mine – a Soto Zen priest who has been practicing for around 30 years – recently gained a deeper insight into one of his fundamental Karmic issues. He observed, amazed, “There really is a bottom!”

## **Insight Versus Habit Change**

Karma work has two aspects, insight and habit change. Both are essential.

Insight can be the result of the kind of inquiry I just described, although it can occur spontaneously as well. You gain an understanding of your Karma that changes your relationship to it, or opens up some new possibilities. I find it very helpful to contemplate a new Karmic insight and then ask, “What can I let go of here?” In any difficult situation there may be things that are beyond your control, or aspects of yourself you are not yet able to change. But there may be just one small thing – one assumption you can question, one attachment you can release, one narrative you can drop – which will make a difference.

The liberation attained through insight can be wonderful, lasting, and transformative. In the example I used earlier, I talked about a deep and primal insight involving re-experiencing childhood fear and meeting that with adult strength and compassion. This kind of experience can forever change you. You may never again feel the same level of anxiety about rejection, or the same compulsion to meet the standards you have set for yourself.

However, Karma work also involves habit change. Sometimes insights bring about a significant behavioral change, and sometimes they don't. Smaller insights may open up *possibilities* for change, but you still have to act on them. Your Karma is carried in your body and in your conscious and unconscious mind. “Habit energy” is the momentum of Karma, carrying you along well-worn Karmic pathways even when you know better, or want to live differently.

One of my teachers, Kyogen Carlson, described a perfect illustration of the relationship between insight and habit energy. He had a cat who wanted to be let out the back door every morning. At some point, this door was replaced and opened on the opposite side. Although Kyogen knew this, every morning for a week or more his hand would move toward the side of the door where the old door handle had been. The cat also went and waited at the wrong side of the door, of course. Eventually, Kyogen's habit energy changed and he would reach for the new door handle automatically. Curiously, the cat's habit energy changed on almost exactly the same timeline as Kyogen's! So, in this case, insight into the situation clearly did not make behavior change any faster.

It's important not to get dualistic about Karma work and think of the hard work of gradual habit change as being separate from, or inferior to, the liberation of insight. Both are necessary and valuable. If you don't manifest your insight through habit change, your insights are fairly useless. And habit change can facilitate insight, as you experiment with different ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving.

## **This Very Body is Buddha: Karma Work and Realization are Not Two**

If you want to be transformed by Zen, Karma work definitely needs to be part of your process. Sometimes, depending on your life circumstances or the trajectory of your practice, you will feel neck-deep in Karma work. It may feel like something of a slog. At other times Karma work may seem less relevant to you, but keep in mind that until you're a completely enlightened Buddha, you always have more Karma to clean up, resolve, or gain greater freedom from. The beautiful thing is that Karma work leads into, supports, and flavors the other aspect of Studying the Self - Realizing your True Nature, which will be discussed in the next chapter as part of the Zen Field of Realization.

It's easy to forget that absolute and relative, or the independent and dependent dimensions, are simply two aspects of one Reality. It's useful sometimes to speak of Karma work as being one effort while Realizing your True Nature is another. Practically speaking, the aims of these activities are different and we employ different tools for each of them. Ultimately, though, there is only one Reality. As you become intimately familiar with your Karma and take responsibility for it, you eventually come face to face with the spiritual obstacles that lie beneath your Karma; it's precisely those obstacles that will become your gateways into Realization. When you catch a glimpse of your True Nature, you will be surprised to find that it is inseparable from this skin bag here and now. As Hakuin said, this very body is Buddha.