



| The Mirror Illuminating Karma

His Holiness the Sakya Trichen



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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and a very long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

EDITORIAL PREFACE

Drogön Chögyal Phakpa wrote *The Mirror Illuminating Karma* (also rendered as *A Mirror that Illuminates Karmic Causality*) for the Mongol prince Jimgyim. The text you are about to read presents His Holiness the Sakya Trichen's detailed commentary on this work, guiding readers to see not only actions themselves, but also the intentions that motivate them, and the karmic results that arise, along with the circumstances of life shaped by them.

Take a moment with each passage, allowing the mind to contemplate your actions, intentions, and the results that arise when causes and conditions come together. Reflect on your choices, both great and small, and the ripples they create in your own life. If even a single thought carries weight, then when guided by clarity and compassion, how might your life begin to unfold differently?



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Introduction: Why Do We Experience Happiness and Sorrow?

All sentient beings are making efforts for the sake of their happiness. Due to ignorance, however, most of them are running after one thing or another, and so they are only creating more suffering for themselves. Nobody wants suffering. Whether you are a religious person or a non-believer, an animal or a human being, everyone wishes to be free from suffering and to achieve happiness. Many spiritual masters and gods have given diverse teachings for this purpose.

There are many different religions in the world, and all of them explain something about the importance of actions and their results. Buddhism contains the most detailed teachings on this topic—it is one of the principal teachings of the Buddha. It is important to understand karma because in this universe with so many sentient beings, we all experience happiness and sorrow, prosperity and loss, and many other things. Why do we have these experiences? What is the cause? Who created this? According to

the Buddhist teachings, *nobody* created this. It is our own deeds that create the results we experience.

Explicating the Text of *The Mirror Illuminating Actions and Results*

The text I am going to teach today is called *The Mirror Illuminating Actions and Results* by Drogön Chögyal Phakpa, one of the patriarchs of the Sakya order and a true emanation of Mañjuśrī—one of seven emanations to have appeared. He is also the first Tibetan lama to have taught in other countries, in different languages, and to people of different traditions. He is a unique and special figure. He wrote this text while he was traveling in Mongolia and China. At that time—during the Yuan dynasty—China was ruled by Mongol emperors, and one of the Mongol princes, named Jimgyim^[1], requested Chögyal Phapga to write this text about karma.

The Commentary

The title of the text in Tibetan is [Tibetan]. In English, it may be translated as *The Mirror Illuminating Actions and Results*, or simply *The Mirror Illuminating Karma*.

Prostrations to the Guru and Mañjuśrī.

[Tibetan]

The teaching has three parts: preliminary, main part, and conclusion.

Preliminary: The Homage and Resolve to Write

These are both written in verse. In the homage, Chögyal Phakpa says: *Prostrations to the Buddha who can see all causal actions and their results in detail as they interdependently arise and just as they happen; who can see with perfect clarity each and every cause and each and every result, like seeing the palm of his own hand; and*

who, out of great compassion, can explain to us exactly why we have such and such a life and are facing whatever we now face—all our suffering and all our happiness. With these words, Chögyal Phakpa makes prostrations to the Buddha, who shows us causes and effects.

Next is the resolve to write the text:

[Tibetan]

He writes that, if we do not understand the relation of causal actions and their results, then we will not know what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected. In order to remove this ignorance, Chögyal Phakpa resolves to explain the nature of causal actions and their results.

Main Part

The main part, the actual teaching, has many parts.

[Tibetan]

Arising from one's own mind, there are three categories of action, or karma: physical, verbal, and mental. These produce three categories of result: unpleasant, pleasant, and neutral. Pleasant results are such things as a long life, good health, prosperity,

success, and so on. Unpleasant results include suffering, sickness, failures, and all other undesirable things. Neutral results are experienced as neither pleasant nor unpleasant states, and they arise from neutral actions like sitting, etc.

Non-virtuous actions are understood as actions that produce unpleasant results. There are ten non-virtuous actions: three of the body, four of the voice, and three of the mind.

Ten Non-Virtuous Deeds: Three Deeds of the Body

1. Killing any sentient being up to human beings and gods. This occurs whenever you intentionally commit the action yourself or have someone else do it for you, by whatever method—fire, water, poison, etc.

2. Stealing anything, from insignificant objects such as needle and thread up to precious objects, with the intention of taking the things of others for yourself, and by any means—whether quietly, by robbery, by cheating, etc.

3. Sexual misconduct, which is engaging in any kind of sexual activity with anyone apart from one's own partner.

Ten Non-Virtuous Deeds: Four Deeds of the Voice

1. Lying, which is not telling the truth with an intention to cheat, etc.
2. Divisive speech, or speaking words that create disharmony between individuals or within groups.
3. Harsh speech, or speaking words that are unkind and create pain in another person's mind.
4. Idle speech, or speech that has no purpose other than to intensify desire, anger, etc.

Ten Non-Virtuous Deeds: Three Deeds of the Mind

1. Greedy thoughts, or wanting other people's good things or possessions, etc.
2. Harmful thoughts, or wishing that something bad or unpleasant will happen to someone.
3. Wrong view, or not believing in the law of karma, rebirth, that suffering arises from non-virtuous deeds, or that happiness arises from virtuous deeds, and so on.

These are the ten non-virtuous deeds.

Temporary and Ultimate Results of Non-Virtuous Deeds

[Tibetan]

Here, he explains the results of such actions, both the temporary and ultimate results. The temporary results are what will ripen in this lifetime. For example, if someone kills in this life, they will have a short lifespan and experience pain and mental suffering. By stealing, they will experience poverty and the wasting away of all their wealth. By sexual misconduct, they will experience unhappy relations, such an unhappy marriage. If someone tells lies, nobody will believe them, and they will be deceived by others. By creating disharmony, they will lose friends. By speaking harsh words, they will always hear bad things in return. If someone has a greedy mind, they will be perpetually distracted and will be unable to fulfill their wishes. By having harmful thoughts, they will have many enemies—many people will hate them in return. By having the wrong view, they will not find happiness. These results will be experienced in this life, and they will ripen even more strongly in the next life.

[Tibetan]

Someone who kills out of hatred will fall into the hell realm in the next life—one of the cold, hot, or neighboring hells, and so on—

where there is tremendous suffering. If someone kills out of desire, such as to take another person's wealth and so on, they will be reborn in the hungry ghost realm. Beings in this realm experience tremendous hunger and thirst. Killing out of ignorance—as for sport—will cause rebirth as an animal. We have to rely on the teachings to learn about the hell realm and the hungry ghost realm because we cannot see them ourselves. But we can see with our own eyes how animals experience suffering. Just look at seafood restaurants, for example—so many animals fighting for their lives in burning iron pots, being boiled in hot water, and so on. If we had to face this kind of suffering, how could we bear it? It is impossible to bear. Other animals are forced to carry heavy loads, to work day and night, and they are beaten. When they become useless, they are slaughtered for meat. Animals experience great suffering.

Exceptions to Non-Virtuous Deeds

[Tibetan]

If you can save one hundred lives by killing one person, and you don't do it, those one hundred persons will lose their lives. If you kill that one person to save one hundred only out of compassion, the intention is not a defilement. The intention is compassion for those one hundred people. Although it looks like non-virtue

because it is killing, the intention is good. Therefore, the result is good—is pleasant.

Ten Virtuous Deeds

[Tibetan]

These are the opposites of the non-virtuous deeds. Abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct—these are the virtuous deeds of the body. Abstaining from lying, from creating schism, and from using harsh words—these are the virtuous deeds of speech. Abstaining from greed and envy, abstaining from hateful thoughts, and abstaining from wrong views—these are the three virtuous deeds of the mind.

Temporary and Ultimate Results of Virtuous Deeds

By abstaining from killing, you will have a long life, good health, and happiness. By abstaining from stealing, you will have lots of wealth. By abstaining from sexual misconduct, you will have happy relationships, such as a happy marriage. By abstaining from lying, people will trust you when you speak. By abstaining from divisive speech, you will have many friends. By abstaining from harsh words, people will praise you. By abstaining from idle talk, you will lead a peaceful life. By abstaining from greedy thoughts, all your

wishes will be fulfilled. By abstaining from hateful thoughts, many people will love you. By abstaining from wrong views, you will find the right path. The results of virtuous deeds will be even greater in the next life.

[Tibetan]

Those who have more pronounced ignorance will be reborn as human beings. Those who have more anger will be reborn as asuras in the demi-god realm. Those who have more desire will be reborn in the god realm. If all the defilements are exhausted, you will reach nirvāṇa. And if this is done with skillful means, it will be the cause of attaining ultimate enlightenment.

[Tibetan]

Without indulgence in anger, desire, and ignorance, and endowed with faith, loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta, if one then practices the six pāramitās—generosity, moral conduct, patience, endeavor, meditation, and wisdom—then through the three doors of body, speech, and mind, only virtuous deeds will be done in this life. You will have all temporal wealth and especially the pleasure of rebirth in the higher realms. You will have a good body to fulfill your wishes, peace, and the absence of ignorance. These things

will ripen in this life. In the next life, you will have all glories, fame, and qualities of the body, unique activities, meditation, omniscient wisdom, supernatural miracles, fearlessness, seeing the truth, prosperity, etc. This is the ultimate result.

Importance of Abstaining from Non-Virtuous Deeds and Practicing Virtuous Ones

Thus, it is very important to abstain from non-virtuous deeds and to practice the virtuous deeds. Even a very small non-virtuous deed can lead to serious results, just as a small fire can eventually burn an entire mountain. And small virtuous deeds will accumulate like the drops of water that fill an ocean.

We normally think that our happiness and our suffering are created by forces outside us—by other human beings, by spirits, or something else. But in reality, all of this is created by our own mind; for example, suffering arises from our own defilements. If we really want happiness, then we have to abstain from non-virtuous deeds, and we have to practice virtuous ones. We all pray that we will good health, a long life, prosperity, success, and so on, and prayers are important—they do get answered—but the main thing is to practice, to abstain from non-virtuous deeds and to perform virtuous ones. This is the only way that is 100% certain to accomplish the result you wish for.

Exceptions to Virtuous Deeds

[Tibetan]

Just like some deeds can look like non-virtuous deeds when, in fact, they are virtuous ones, some deeds can look like virtuous ones when in reality they are not. For example, giving is generally virtuous, but intentionally giving animals to a butcher is non-virtuous because the animals will be slaughtered. The result will be suffering.

At the Time of Death: “Throwing Actions”

[Tibetan]

Even if you have committed many non-virtuous deeds in your life, if you have virtuous thoughts at the time of death—such as loving-kindness, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, etc.—then, in the throwing from this life to the next (we call it “throwing” because the consciousness does not choose but is “thrown” by the force of one’s throwing actions), one will be reborn in the higher realms. However, because of the non-virtuous deeds that you have accumulated, the completing action, or result, will be non-virtuous—unpleasant. Thus, even if you are reborn in the human realm, which is one of the three higher realms, you will experience sickness, poverty, and other forms of unpleasantness or suffering,

such as in your relationships, etc. Undesirable things will happen; you will be unable to fulfill your wishes, and so on. You will suffer because the completing action of your previous deeds is non-virtuous, meaning of the nature of suffering and unpleasantness.

[Tibetan]

Similarly, if you have accumulated merit or virtuous deeds in this life, but in the joining of this life and the next you have non-virtuous thoughts—such as anger, hatred, jealousy, etc—these throwing actions will cause rebirth in the lower realms. However, because of your virtuous deeds, you will be reborn in favorable circumstances in these realms—as a nāga king, a lord of the rakṣās, etc. If both the throwing action and the completing action are non-virtuous, you will be reborn in the lower realms and suffer. If you have both virtuous throwing action and virtuous completing action, then you will be reborn in a higher realm and experience happiness.

[Tibetan]

Most of us do some mixture of virtuous and non-virtuous deeds, and so the result is also mixed. Sometimes we experience happiness and other times unhappiness; sometimes we are healthy

and other times unhealthy, etc. Depending on the seriousness, our actions will ripen in this lifetime or in future lives. Action is very powerful, and the results will definitely ripen, even if it takes a long time. Eventually, the commission of an action will ripen, and it will ripen only upon that very person who committed it. But conditions can affect this, a little bit.

[Tibetan]

If you plant rice, the crop that is produced is rice. If you plant wheat, the crop that is produced is wheat. Likewise, if you perform virtuous deeds, the result will be happiness. If you perform non-virtuous deeds, the result will be unhappiness, or suffering.

[Tibetan]

The result of intensely powerful object, action, and motivation cannot be changed even by a buddha. Action is so powerful that even a buddha cannot alter it. The Buddha cannot save you. Only you can save yourself.

The Power of Bodhicitta and the Wisdom that Realizes Emptiness

[Tibetan]

Bodhicitta is so powerful that it can defeat non-virtuous deeds, even the heinous crimes, which are very serious non-virtuous deeds. The wisdom that realizes emptiness can also defeat non-virtuous deeds.

There is a story about a king who killed his father and his mother. He experienced great suffering and regret as a result. The Buddha came to him, and the king requested the Buddha to save him. The Buddha said that he could not do this—that even a thousand buddhas could not save him. The king was so shocked that he fainted. Then Mañjuśrī came to the man and sprinkled water on him to revive him. He inquired what had happened, and the king explained that he had committed heinous crimes and then learned that even the Buddha could not save him, and he would have to suffer terribly in the future. Mañjuśrī told him that even a thousand buddhas could not save him from the results of his actions, and he explained that this is because non-virtuous deeds are not inherently existent. In this way, the king gained some experience of śūnyatā, or emptiness—the ultimate view. The man thought about this, and all of his negative deeds completely disappeared.

Bodhicitta, which is the mind of enlightenment, and the wisdom of emptiness are so powerful that even those who have committed heinous crimes can be purified by them. The Buddha cannot purify

you, but you can purify your own negative deeds through creating the enlightenment mind and through the realization of emptiness.

[Tibetan]

If you know the details about cause and result, you will realize the importance of abstaining from non-virtuous deeds and practicing virtuous ones. You will know what is the right thing to do and what is the wrong thing. A person with eyes to see will not fall from cliff's edge. But a person without eyes can fall. If you understand causes and conditions and their results, it is like having eyes—eyes that see the right view regarding karma. Such a person will never fall into the lower realms. A person who knows this and practices accordingly will never fall into the lower realms, even in a thousand future lifetimes.

[Tibetan]

If you have committed even a small non-virtuous deed, then you should immediately regret it and practice confession. You should not let the night pass without confessing. Whenever you commit a virtuous deed, you should immediately rejoice and dedicate the merit. If you do this, the power of non-virtuous deeds will decrease and the power of virtuous deeds will increase. Eventually, you will be able to achieve the state of omniscient wisdom.

[Tibetan]

Everything is Emptiness: Realizing the Ultimate View

There are two truths: relative and ultimate. Relative truth is the life that we experience now. Relatively, there are causes and results and interdependent origination. The best way to illustrate this is with the example of a television. In order for pictures to appear on the television, you need many causes: the wiring and electrical parts, electricity, and so on. Likewise, interdependent origination teaches us that when the causes and conditions for the experience of relative truth arise, the life that we experience now appears. At the absolute level, however, everything is *śūnyatā*, or emptiness.

Emptiness does not mean empty in the sense of a void or nothing-there, like an “empty” pot or an “empty” house. Emptiness is inseparable from clarity. These two are different aspects and inseparable, just like fire and the heat of fire. When you realize the inseparability of clarity and emptiness, then everything is away from all activity. Existence is a wrong view, and nonexistence is wrong view. True reality is beyond either existence or nonexistence, beyond both existence and nonexistence, and beyond neither existence nor nonexistence.

This ultimate view is something that we cannot conceive at the level of our relative minds—something we cannot explain. The Buddha realized that there is no mind that you can find anywhere, and yet, at the same time, everything is mind. It is the base of both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

[Tibetan]

This view of dependent origination is very important. If you understand this, you are on the right track.

Conclusion

[Tibetan]

Here, Chögyal Phakpa explains that the Mongol prince named Jimgyim requested him to write this, and he describes the qualities of the prince: he is young but of the age of majority. He is wealthy but cherishes learning more about the Dharma. He is high-ranking, but free of pride. Although he is a prince, a son of the Mongol emperor, he is humble.

Next, Chögyal Phakpa says that he has written this text according to the words of the exalted teacher, who knows the meaning of all texts and possesses the wisdom of discrimination concerning the

Buddha's teachings. This describes Chögyal Phakpa's own teacher who taught him these precious teachings.

[Tibetan]

Finally he says that, through the virtue of writing this book, may all beings give up indulgence in non-virtuous deeds and become able to practice the path that the Buddha pleases, which means virtuous deeds.

[Tibetan]

He writes in poetry, saying that the Buddha's teachings are like precious substances—gold, silver, and so on. Just as a smith hammers gold into a precious object such as a fine mirror, likewise may sentient beings see the Buddha's teachings on cause and result in the mirror of this text written by Chögyal Phakpa.

[Tibetan]

Here, Chögyal Phakpa says that he is the author and that he has understanding of logic and of the teachings. He has written this work illuminating the mirror of actions and their results.

Final Words

This completes the teaching. I have chosen this text because before we begin the higher teachings, we need to be good persons. This is the basis. A good person is someone who abstains from non-virtuous deeds and practices virtuous deeds.

Whether you are a Buddhist or a non-Buddhist, a believer or non-believer, you can experience happiness in the life and in future lives as long as you are a good person. If you do not believe in future lives, you will still experience happiness in this life if you practice the virtuous deeds.

Understanding cause and effect is very important. I believe that many religions—Hinduism, Christianity, Islam—they all say something about cause and effect regarding our actions, or what we call the law of karma. In Buddhism, however, this is one of the principal teachings. Buddhism teaches very precisely about karma. If you do not commit such-and-such an action, you will not meet such-and-such a result. If you do commit such-and-such

an action, the result will ripen, and it will only ripen upon the one who has committed the action—even if it takes one thousand years. Karma is a fundamental teaching, and important to understand so that we can practice properly. With this, we have completed the teaching.

Notes:

[1] Also rendered as Zhenjin. The second son of Kublai Khan, born 1243.



■ His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is revered as the forty-first throne holder of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Tibet in 1945, His Holiness is from the noble Khön family, whose predecessors date to the early days of Tibetan history and established the Sakya order in the eleventh century. In his youth, His Holiness received intensive training in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and ritual from eminent masters and scholars.

Widely regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, His Holiness is the spiritual guide to many in the next generation of Buddhist teachers and practitioners, and has bestowed Sakya's core teaching cycle known as the Lamdre (the Path with the Result) in both eastern and western countries. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, tirelessly working to establish monasteries, nunneries, and educational institutions and to impart the Buddha's teachings to countless students around the world.



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