

# Embracing Karma

By Greg Edwards

Choosing to walk a spiritual path does not guarantee that life will be easier. If life were easy, how would we learn or grow? Choosing a spiritual path *does* give us tools to be prepared to face life's challenges, and help us keep our hearts more centered and peaceful when the world around us is not.

## Karma in a Nutshell

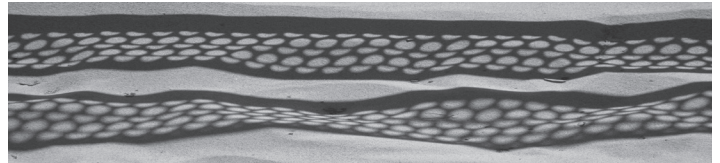
In the Tao practice, it is believed that most, if not all, of the difficulties in our lives are manifestations of karma in some form or another. Karma could be best summed up as, "Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap," as St. Paul wrote in the Bible. Or, in more relative terms, you could think of it as a spiritual credit card. You can act in ways that either increase or decrease your spiritual debt. However, the rewards or ramifications of your actions may be presented to you in this life or they may be presented to you outside of this life, so you need to have certain amount of faith to believe in this philosophy.

Karma can manifest in your life in any aspect of life, externally or internally. There can be good karma as well as bad karma, but karma is still karma. For example, having the "good" karma to be rich or beautiful can be just as challenging to cope with in terms of spiritual progression. I will focus more on bad karma in this article, since it unfortunately seems to be more common. Just to name a few examples of bad karma, it can manifest mentally through severe depression or excessive anxiety; physically through drug abuse, bodily ailments or illnesses; socially through relationships with family or friends; financially through unexpected obligations; environmentally through work or school environments; or even spiritually through direct contact with spirits to whom we owe debts.

I use the phrase "spiritual debt" for the lack of better terms. Who do we owe? The people we've hurt? The universe? I suppose there is a certain amount of speculation when you try to narrow down philosophies into rules or laws. While the more vaguely you look at it, the more truth you can see. For example, what is common in most spiritual faiths? Most include concepts of rewards or consequences for our choices made in this life. In Christianity, if you're good you go to heaven, and if you're bad you go to hell (to put it simply). The concept of karma is a different perspective on a familiar belief. Instead of being judged by God to see if we go to heaven or hell, we deal with the byproducts of our

own actions in this life to see if we evolve to higher levels of existence or sink to lower ones in lives to come. Most people can see examples of the ramifications for our actions on the physical plane. Would it seem so strange to believe that a similar set of rules also exist on the spiritual plane?

Just as certain concepts are similar in different belief systems, the different lessons offered by these belief systems can also be useful. Typically, you hear of karma being mentioned mainly in Hinduism and Buddhism. But, valuable tools and lessons on embracing karma can also be found in Christianity and Taoist philosophy. The goal is not to fight our karma or try to run from it. The ultimate goal is to accept it, embrace it, and work through it with an open heart, which will create more harmony in our lives and in the lives of the people around us.



## Lessons on Embracing Karma: Christianity

Listed below are excerpts from the Beatitudes in the Gospel according to Luke (6:20).

*"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.  
Bless those who curse you, do good to those who mistreat  
you.  
Whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt  
either.  
Give to everyone who asks of you, and do not demand it back.  
Treat others the same way you want them to treat you."*

I was raised Catholic, and when I was a teenager I thought these were stupid teachings because it seemed that they taught people how to be doormats. Now I see them more clearly as lessons from Jesus about facing karma by embracing it. We want to stop the cycle of karma and not react in a way that keeps it going. Wanting to hurt someone who hurt us only keeps the karmic cycle going. Reacting to painful karma with love and forgiveness can help stop that cycle. The last line, also known as the "Golden Rule," teaches us how to stop generating karma, and it is important that we truly act from our hearts.

## Heavenly Virtues

Another important factor in facing karma is practicing virtue, and not giving-in to intentions that add to our karmic debt. Catholicism has the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Heavenly Virtues, which I think can be related to the concept of karma. The Seven Deadly Sins are Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. They're

called “deadly” because they are fatal to spiritual progression. I see them as the intentions of the heart that generate the most karma, and they create a force of resistance against spiritual growth. The Seven Heavenly Virtues are Faith, Hope, Charity, Courage, Justice, Temperance, and Prudence. I see these as the most important virtues to practice when dealing with karma, and they help us to navigate through the stormy seas of life and lead us towards spiritual progression. The sins/virtues are signals of the intentions of our heart, which set the spiritual direction which we are heading.



### Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching is an ancient Chinese text which teaches about the philosophy of Tao. One of the lessons I learned from it was to be soft like a palm tree, not hard like an oak tree, when facing life’s challenges. Meaning, a palm tree can bend and flow in the face of a hurricane and remain standing, while a strong, stiff oak tree will just get knocked over. Being soft and flexible can also help us stay centered and not be as attached to our surroundings. When we’re not as attached, we can look at our circumstances from a more objective viewpoint, and thus be not as affected by situations that would have normally caused us distress.

### Perspective

Applying the philosophies and tools of the Tao Practice has helped me to face many challenges presented to me this year, both internally and externally, by helping me find the spiritual perspective

and the spiritual tools to face them from a more objective view. Facing karma with love and compassion, facing fortunes with appreciation, and facing challenges with humility.

I have learned to look more closely at myself and ask, “What am I doing in my thoughts and my actions that could be contributing to my circumstances?” A more objective view leads to me letting go of my ego in a difficult situation. I try to be humble and not complain, because facing challenges are like making payments on my spiritual credit card, and how I react may determine how much is paid toward it. More importantly, if I’m not complaining about something happening to me, I’ll have the opportunity and an open mind to learn from it.

I could also view karmic challenges as tests, and how I react determines my grade, and whether or not I graduate. It is much more rewarding (and less painful) for me to look at situations such as getting shingles, or injuring my back, or getting in a car accident and say, “Wow. What can I learn from this? I appreciate what is happening because it helps me learn something more about my karma. I am sorry for any harm I have caused anyone in the past. Thank you for this experience,” instead of saying, “Man, this totally sucks! Why is this happening to me?”

Each challenge I have faced over the past three years has been an opportunity to practice using the tools of the Tao practice such as the Heart Sutra and experience in new ways how much they really can help on the spiritual level.

### Tools of the Tao Practice

The Tao practice offers the following tools that we use to center our hearts when we face our karma, and most importantly, help us find the clarity to learn from our karma. We want to accept our karma, learn from it, and

pay for it willingly. The tools of the Tao practice also help us pay for our karma more efficiently.

1. **Being Vegetarian.** The best way to work on paying off a karmic load is to stop adding to it. Eating meat adds karma from the suffering of the animals that died to your debt because you’re participating in it by eating them.
2. **The Heart Sutra.** It is a famous Buddhist sutra that teaches our hearts, our karma, and the spirits around us about the mysterious truths of existence, and of non-attachment. It helps us to not pay attention to the overwhelming karmic distractions in life and listen for the softly spoken wisdom of our true hearts. Reciting the Heart Sutra helps us center our hearts during times of distress, helps our karma let go, and helps the spirits around us move on.
3. **Ke Tou.** Ke tou is the Chinese version of the word “kowitz,” or bow. Practicing ke tou is bowing at least 100, 300, or 500 times in a row. The bowing is more of an exercise in humility, rather than bowing to a particular God. The intention of the bowing is to apologize for any harm we have done to others (or any negative karma we have generated), whether in this life or in a life we don’t remember. It is also to appreciate the blessings in our lives, and for the mercy and compassion we have received.
4. **Introducing Others to Tao.** Helping others to stop generating more karma benefits us all. As the old saying goes, “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for life.” The Tao practice is like the fishing pole. The best way to help people is to help them gain the knowledge and tools to help themselves.

## Putting it All Together

The path to taking active steps in our lives to center our hearts and embrace our karma starts with an open heart. We must let go of our fears, our anger, and our material attachments. We must stay calm, think positively and try to see the big picture. We must practice virtue when times are dark and not give in to despair. We need to be soft and flexible to be able to withstand the fierce storms in life. Looking at our lives from more objective viewpoints helps us learn more from our karmic tests. We can take active steps to recognize and stop negative karmic patterns. Making vegetarian meal choices can help us stop adding as much to our karmic debts. We can recite the heart sutra when we feel distressed or when our hearts feel off-center. We can ke-tou to apologize for any harm we have caused others in the past. Finally, we can introduce others to Tao to help spread these tools and lessons to more people.

So what is the point of all this? Well, it's not to learn how to beat the karmic system. It's about living life with a greater

understanding of how we are all interconnected, being more mindful of our actions, and trying to find our path in this life (or being in harmony with Tao).

Personally, this philosophy and practice have helped me believe that I am responsible for my life and that I am not a victim. Being introduced to Tao and learning about karma have led me to take actions and make changes that have been beneficial to me, such as becoming vegetarian. It has helped me let go of anger and material desires, which have helped me to be more peaceful. Being calm has helped me to take more control of my life and cut out self-destructive habits, instead of feeling driven around by my patterns. Taking control of my life has helped me bring my life to a level of understanding and spiritual progression I didn't think I could reach. I want to help others learn what I have learned, and show them the door that I was shown by someone before me. □



Photo by Peter Brooker

*“The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.”*

- M. Scott Peck