

Concepts of dharma and karma in the tale of kieu

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



The American Heritage Dictionary defines the concept of karma as “ the total effect of one’s actions during the successive phases of one’s existence, regarded as determining one’s destiny” and “ fate, destiny” (“ Karma.” The American). Although these are definitions, and they both convey the general idea, there is so much more to karma than simply what one might find in a dictionary. In Hinduism and Buddhism, karma has a much broader scope than just the present life. It is a sort of cause and effect situation, where events one does in previous lives dictate what happens to one during the present life.

When a person does something bad, such as hurting someone else for no reason, that action is added to that person’s karma. Eventually, whether it is in that life or one following, the person must pay for that action. Often, retribution comes many lives later. Thus, it is often difficult to see what mistake one made to evoke the karma received in the present life.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines dharma as “ the principle or law that orders the universe” and “ individual conduct in conformity with this principle” (“ Dharma.”). In other words, dharma is the law that everything in the universe must follow. It is one’s dharma to follow dharma, whatever it may be for each specific person, as it varies.

The ultimate goal of one’s existence is to achieve moksha, or liberation, from the cycle of birth and death in which we all are trapped (Encyclopædia). Following dharma is the only way to reach this goal. However, due to human nature, everyone is bound to fall short of this perfect law. Thus, one has karma by which one pays one’s eternal debt to dharma.

Karma has many ways of manifesting itself, and can vary depending on circumstances. Regardless of circumstances, however, one must pay the debt of all of one's karma before gaining moksha. If one dies before paying the sum of one's debt, one is reborn and goes through everything all over again, still caught in the trap of life and trying to break free. Even though one may try one's hardest to keep dharma, it is practically inevitable that one will slip up somewhere and break dharma, resulting in more karma.

Thus, dharma and karma form an almost never-ending circle of birth and death. It takes tremendous effort to escape and most people must continue in the cycle for an extensive amount of time before they are able to break free, despite their best intentions. Karma is not only negative, however.

There is such a thing as good karma, though one comes across it but rarely. Good karma happens when one adheres to dharma. Thus, this outweighs some of the bad karma accumulated throughout one's life.

Unfortunately, one's bad karma almost always outweighs the good karma, meaning most people continue on in the circle of dharma and karma for a long, long time, continually trying to break free and reach enlightenment, or liberation. Though it may take thousands of years, one is bound to reach liberation eventually, if one only tries hard enough and lives a moral life throughout their various rebirths. Though it is immensely difficult, it is possible.

The Tale of Kiều largely features Kim Van Kiều, the main character in this book about dharma and karma and the permanence of both. Kim is a good

person, leading a normal, uneventful life (Nguyễn). However, at some point in time, she must have broken dharma and stored up bad karma for herself. Throughout the course of the book, Kim undergoes much stress and heartbreak in order to be accepted.

Though no reason for her karma is obvious, Kiều must have had a good reason for all her misfortune in the life which was recorded in *The Tale of Kiều*. Over and over again, Kiều falls in love with different men. Eventually, each and every man dies, leaves, or gets left behind. Regardless of exact circumstances, every man ends up apart from Kiều in the end, leading her to wonder if there is really anyone for her to love or not.

Besides Kiều's misfortune as one who is continually single, Kiều is a prostitute for much of the book. She sells herself into marriage to set her father free, but her new husband only wants to use her in a brothel. She tries to escape with another man, but he turns out to be a fake and she gets into even more trouble with him instead. Eventually, she temporarily breaks free from her life of prostitution and manages to live a somewhat normal life.

Alas, Kiều continues in her life and meets more men, leading to more heartbreak and karma manifested throughout everything. She gets in trouble again with her lover's wife, ending up a slave for her in a cruel twist of fate. Kiều is forced to serve her lover while both she and he pretend nothing happened between the two of them, though his wife knows exactly what happened.

Over the course of the rest of the book, Kiều meets more men and keeps thinking they will make her happy. She is always disappointed, however, when reality hits. Kiều's karma follows her throughout her entire life, despite the many times she tries to kill herself to rid herself of the terrible burden of karma. Killing herself would not solve her problems, however, but instead only prolong the repayment of her debt of karma.

At the end of the book, Kiều is finally reunited with the man she loved in the beginning, Kim Trọng. In the beginning of the book, Kim and Kiều are passionate lovers. However, by the end of the book, Kiều has been through so much that she insists their relationship remain essentially that of good friends. This it does, and they continue the rest of their lives together, playing music and singing. Kiều presumably pays off the rest of her debt of karma and achieves moksha for all the terrible things she had to go through for karma's repayment. So it is with karma. One may live a good life, but one will still have bad karma to overcome. However, if one tries hard enough, they will earn moksha and be free from mortal grievances forever.