

Message from the Administrator of the Hwa Tsang Monastery

Venerable Chun Wu



Many students ask me, why are some people born in poverty and suffering, and others born in much more fortunate circumstances ? Is it due to fate or chance ? Is there an invisible power controlling our lives ? Do you know ? Can you tell me ?

Our present conditions, whether of happiness or suffering, is the result of the accumulated force of all our past actions or karma. Karma is intentional action. It is an action done deliberately through our body, speech or mind. Every intentional action, produces a certain effect.

Actions are considered wholesome if they produce happiness for ourselves and others, and actions are considered unwholesome if they produce suffering. This is the Law of Cause and Effect at work. The effects of our past karma, (our past intentional actions), have already determined the nature of our present existence.

The three causes of evil karma are attachment, anger, and delusion, and likewise, the three causes of good karma are non-attachment, non-anger, and non-delusion. Does this sound right ? Do you know ? Can you tell me ? What have your parents taught you about such things ?

What is attachment ? Attachment is when our minds attach to the idea, that a certain situation, relationship, or tangible thing, will continue to exist in the future, exactly as we have experienced it in the past.

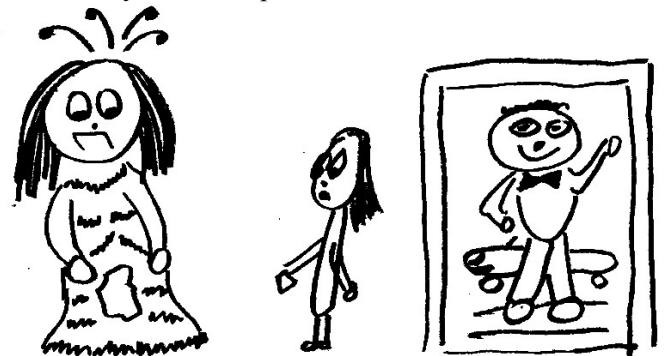
Imagine (if you are a girl), that you had bought a very special, expensive, pink dress. You had been looking after it very well, not getting it dirty, and keeping all the hems and creases in order. One day, your boyfriend rings you up, and asks you out to a date. You are so excited, and you think the pink dress will make you look the best ! You get yourself ready. Your younger sister comes into the room to admire you...

Suddenly, she accidentally spills your nail-polish remover all over your dress and ruins it ! Just then, your boyfriend knocks on the front door...

How would you feel ? What would you do ? Can you tell me ? For sure, some teenagers would be really upset. Their best dress is destroyed. But would it be good manners for you to strangle or maim your sister just as your boyfriend arrives ? Would your boyfriend be impressed to see that you had such a hot and vicious temper ? Did he come to see you, or did he come to see your pink dress ?!

There are several karmic aspects to this situation. Although the dress may have cost a lot of money, taking vengeance, would create a bad karmic result. Do you understand why ?

Your younger sister had no plan, nor intention to damage your dress. So she cannot be punished for malfeasance ! Probably she idolises you in her own way. She would be hoping very much that you can succeed socially, and that she will learn too, and follow in your footsteps !

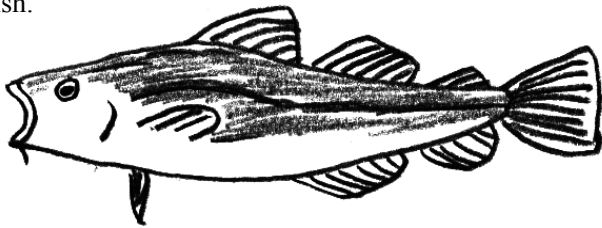


Your sister may not have known that nail polish removers are made from acetone and toluene solvents, and ethyl acetate from ethanol and acetic acid, a combination which can be very harmful to fabrics and other things! Wouldn't your sister be feeling extremely disappointed, embarrassed, and guilty about her own clumsiness already ? Is this right ?

It would be fair for your parents to discipline your sister, but the intention of any good punishment should be to train her to be more aware and mindful of what she is doing, and to be better co-ordinated when moving her body. Maybe your sister would lose her pocket money for a while, or have to do extra jobs around the house in restitution. Would this create a good karmic result ? Can you tell me ?

The Buddha, taught that there are ten wholesome actions we should strive to perform, if we wish to be happy. These actions are; (1) Helping others. (2) Self-restraint. (3) Meditation. (4) Showing reverence to those worthy of respect. (5) Service - contributing one's efforts to the community through working or having a useful occupation. (6) Transference of merits, meaning to have the good manners to acknowledge the help and kindness of others. (7) Rejoicing in the merits and successes of others. (8) Hearing the Dhamma. (9) Teaching the Dhamma. (10) Straightening our views, meaning that we often need to remind ourselves that our family, our friends, our relationships, and material things cannot last, because everything is impermanent and continuously changing.

But besides the karmic results of our own individual intentions and actions, we also experience the karmic results of our collective community actions. What does this mean ? Well do you ever go fishing with your parents ? Let me tell you a story about a special fish.



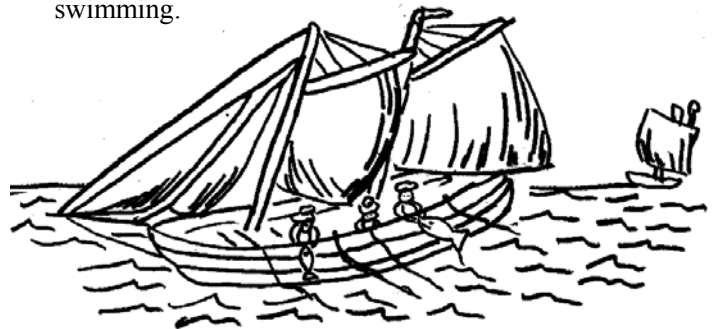
Far away from Australia, on the north eastern corner of the North American and Canadian continental shelf, where the warm Gulf Stream and the cold Labrador ocean currents meet, the waters stir up nitrates, producing a superabundance of phytoplankton. Zooplankton, tiny sea creatures, gorge themselves on the phytoplankton. Tiny shrimp-like free-floating creatures called krill, then eat the zooplankton. Humpback whales, herring and other midwater species rise to eat the krill near the surface, and seabirds dive for both the krill and the feeding fish.

This diverse and rich environment also sustains a remarkable benthic fish, the *Gadus Morhua*, known as the Atlantic Cod, which thrived in these conditions in schools of unprecedented density and numbers. The fish is recorded as growing to 2 metres long, with a weight of 100 kg. Maturing at 10 years, it is highly fecund, and can release up to five million eggs and live for 30 years. It is impervious to disease and the freezing ocean temperatures. It commonly swims at 40 metres (20 fathoms) or less, but may also found at depths of up to 300 fathoms ! Cod fish produce a protein that functions like antifreeze and enables the fish to survive freezing temperatures, but they migrate for spawning in spring to shallow waters close to shore.

Around the 14th century, Basque fisherman from Spain discovered this huge fishery at the edge of the continental shelf. This began the trade in a fish that led to the discovery of America by the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, encouraged and facilitated settlers to North America, changed and improved the diets of the Mediterraneans, Europeans and British, caused the Americans to later seek independence from Britain, was used to buy slaves for America from West Africa, and caused Iceland to invoke a 200 mile off-shore territorial limit in 1977, which is now standard practice by all nations around the world !

Gadus morhua is omnivorous, meaning it will eat anything, including other fish, worms; crabs, shrimps and prawns. It swims through the water with its mouth open, and swallows whatever will fit, - including young cod ! The cod is so greedy, (or lacking in discrimination) about what it eats, that fishermen can use a lead cod jig, without any bait to catch it !

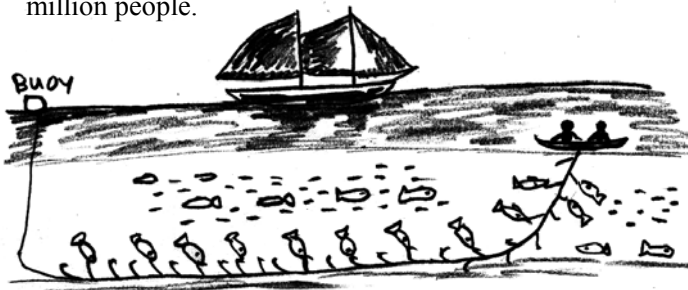
Although the cod is easy to catch, the fish does not challenge fishermen. A cod, once caught, does not fight for its freedom. It simply has to be hauled up. Some fishermen would rather catch a bluefish than a cod. Bluefish are active hunters and furious fighters, and once hooked, a struggle ensues to reel in the line. But the bluefish angler brings home a fish with dark and oily flesh, characteristic of a midwater fighter who uses muscles for strong swimming.



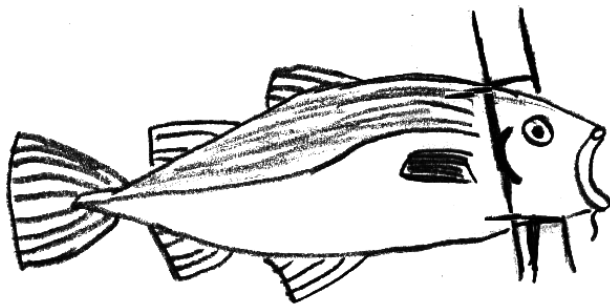
The cod, on the other hand, is prized for the whiteness of its flesh, the whitest of the white-fleshed fish, belonging to the order Gadiformes. Its flesh is so pearly white that the large flakes almost glow on your dinner plate. Whiteness is the nature of the sluggish muscle tissue of fish that are suspended in the near-weightless environment at the bottom of the ocean. Cod meat has virtually no fat (.3 percent) and is more than 18 percent protein, which is unusually high even for fish. Dried cod is almost 80 percent protein, so it is an extremely valuable fish.

The Basque fishermen caught the cod in the shallower ocean areas, with a fishing line, and nets. In 1497, an Italian, John Cabot reported that the cod fish were so plentiful in the Grand Banks area of Newfoundland, that there were 1,000 Basque fishing vessels, and that the fishermen, "lowered baskets with stones into the water, and simply hauled the baskets up full!"

International law held the concept that the oceans belonged to everyone, and so the French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English, all sent ships to the Newfoundland area for cod. Initially, cod were preserved by drying them in the frosty ocean air, until they lost 80% of their weight. By 1508, techniques for salting and then drying the fish allowed it to become part of the staple European diet. It is estimated that 60% of all fish eaten in Europe between 1550 and 1750 were Atlantic cod! In that time the European population grew from around 88 million to 127 million people.



In 1815, the French began longline fishing. This technique used a fishing line that could be up to 10 km long with up to 10,000 hooks with bait on them! Very quickly, the British, Americans, and Canadians adopted these techniques, and again, the total cod catch increased dramatically.



Around the 1870s, gillnetting was introduced to catch cod. The gill net is anchored slightly above the ocean floor, and looks something like a badminton net. Groundfish like the cod, become caught in it, and in trying to force their way through the net head first, become strangled at the gills. The nets are marked by buoys, and the fishermen only has to haul them up every day and remove the fish. In 1883, the Canadian Ministry of Agriculture advised that "it was impossible to exhaust the supplies of Atlantic cod fish or to noticeably diminish their numbers," and

fishermen continued to take greater catches than before.



Around the 1900s, steam engines revolutionised fishing fleets, and boats began trawling for cod. Trawling involves pulling a large fishing net through the water behind one or more boats. Trawlers may set their nets at any depths, or simply drag the nets on the ocean floor to capture all the bottom dwelling fish, lobsters, crabs, and prawns. From the 1930s, fishing boats called Purse seiners captured surface fish by encircling them with a long net (several km) and drawing or "pursing" the bottom of the net.

Unfortunately, trawling is so highly effective in catching targeted fish species, it can also completely deplete or destroy all non-target species in the trawled area. Trawling may generate 40% bycatch [non-targeted fish species] which is hauled up to the ship in the nets dead, and then a large part may simply be thrown back over board. This can be very damaging to the marine environment.

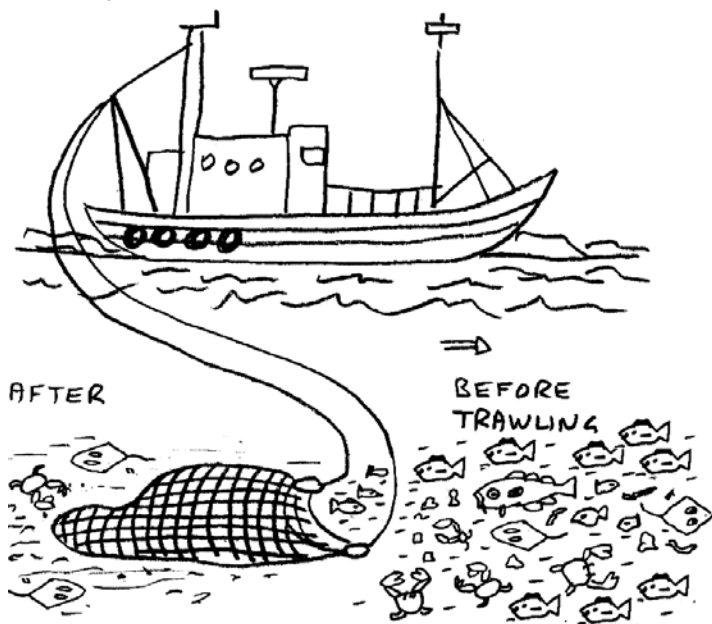
In the 1930s, Clarence Birdseye perfected methods for freezing and refrigerating cod fish, and the invention of filleting machines meant that frozen cod "fish fillets" became a popular American food.

When World War II finished in 1945, and after 6 years of little fishing, fish stocks in the North Atlantic were at a level that has never been seen since. But the principal fishing nations came back with bigger, faster and more efficient trawlers, as well as sonar. Sonar is a system that uses transmitted and reflected underwater sound waves to detect and locate submerged objects or measure underwater distances. Originally developed by the military during the war to detect enemy submarines, sonar was the ultimate invention in being able to find and track fish.

In 1955, Atlantic cod continued to be caught in greater numbers than ever before. But it was the effectiveness of modern fishing techniques that allowed the catch to grow, not growth in the fish population.

Man-made fish attracting devices (FADs) were also devised to capture fish, as it was observed that various species of fish often congregate together around objects floating or suspended in the sea. These provided known locations for congregating fish, around which vessels could operate a wide range of fishing techniques including purse seines.

In 1992, the Atlantic cod fishery of the Grand Bank, which had been the largest cod fishery in the world, collapsed. Spawning biomass had decreased by more than 95%. It had taken us just short of 500 years to fish them out. America and Canada closed the area to fishing.



In 2009, despite a 17-year moratorium on fishing, the Atlantic cod have not returned. Scientists think it is likely that the local ecosystem has changed. The waters now appear to be dominated by crab and shrimp, rather than fish. In some areas, populations of stingrays and jellyfish have exploded, as the young of these species were formerly eaten by the cod.

Why would a monk care to talk to you about such things ? Is this a useful topic for you to know about ? I happen to be a vegetarian, and do not even eat fish. So what is the collective karmic results of this situation ? Can you tell me ?

Firstly, humans have benefited tremendously from the cod fish food supply. We have many courageous fishermen to thank for their efforts in braving unknown and freezing waters to catch the fish for us. Many different people have contributed their ideas and inventions to making a reliable food supply that has helped us develop our civilization and commerce over some hundreds of years.

The karmic result of over-fishing at Grand Bank now places us all at risk. Should we blame the consumers who paid for and ate the last cod, or the governments who subsidised their fishermen to aggressively over-fish, or the fisherman who over-fished ? Can you tell me ?

The time for blame is past. The action has been completed. We must now deal with the karmic result. How has the world fishing community responded to the collapse of this and other fisheries ? Many fishermen now target the other remaining benthic and pelagic fish species within the marine environment. Some have stopped fishing in the Atlantic, and have sent their trawlers to the Pacific Ocean. Some fishermen have found other occupations, or been pensioned off by their governments.

Some fishermen are ignoring fishing moratoriums and bans, and pirating fish, as they have no alternative means of survival. Other fishermen are pirating the remaining fish purely out of greed. Some people say that fish-farming and aquaculture will save the world's fisheries. But they ignore the fact that farmed fish are fed on wild fish caught from the oceans. Many countries are using the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization forum to try and resolve the problems of sharing the ocean's resources and preventing over-fishing.

Humans have the ingenuity and resources to catch all the fish in the sea. We have proved it. We now need the wisdom to work together internationally, educating each other about the limits of nature, and the need for humans to have their own limits too.

By eliminating the cod at Grand Bank, we have eliminated part of ourselves. This is our collective karmic result.



My congratulations to all graduating students. I would like to thank our Tuition Classes teachers for all their great efforts. The results of the students, continue to highlight the valuable contribution you make. Many thanks also to Venerable Neng Rong - Tuition Class Co-ordinator, and Mr Chong Jin Chew - BOE Chairman. We would particularly like to thank Dr Ian Paterson, the Principal of Homebush Boys' High School for his support over the years, and we wish him very well in his retirement. Many thanks also to the Homebush Boys' High School for their support and the kind use of their facilities, and to Strathfield Council for their support for bush-regeneration activities.