

# THE PROBLEM WITH KARMA

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What are we going to do about karma and rebirth?

It's no use pretending they aren't a problem. Many important Buddhist teachings make more sense to us today than they did to people living at the time of the Buddha. What Buddhism has to say about non-self, for example, is not only profound but consistent with what modern psychology has discovered about how the ego-self is constructed. Likewise, what Buddhist thinkers such as Nagarjuna have said about language – how it works, how it often misleads us – is consistent with what many recent linguists and philosophers have been emphasizing. In such ways Buddhism can fit quite nicely into modern ways of understanding. But karma (Pali, *kamma*), along with rebirth, its twin, is another story. Simply to accept the popular, now “traditional” Buddhist understanding about them as literal truth – that karmic determinism is a “moral law” of the universe, with a precise calculus of cause and effect comparable to Newton's laws of physics – can lead to a severe case of “cognitive dissonance” for contemporary Buddhists, since the physical causality that modern science has discovered about the world seems to allow for no such mechanism. We can argue that research into near death experiences (NDEs) supports the possibility of psychic survival, but do we really feel comfortable basing our spiritual understanding and commitment upon such controversial evidence? How should modern Buddhists respond to this situation?

In the *Kalama Sutra*, sometimes called “the Buddhist charter of free inquiry,” the Buddha emphasized the importance of intelligent, probing doubt: we should not believe in something until we have established its truth for ourselves. This implies that accepting karmic rebirth in a literal way, simply because it is a Buddhist teaching, may actually be unfaithful to the best of the tradition. Is it wiser for contemporary Buddhists to be agnostic about it? Consider the way the *Kalama Sutra* concludes, with the Buddha describing someone who has a truly purified mind:

“Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or ill. Then it is possible that at the dissolution of the body after death, I shall arise in the heavenly world, which is possessed of the state of bliss.’ This is the first solace found by him.

“Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit, no result, of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself.’ This is the second solace found by him.

“ ‘Suppose evil (results) befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to no one. Then, how can ill (results) affect me who do no evil deed?’ This is the third solace found by him.

“ ‘Suppose evil (results) do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case.’ This is the fourth solace found by him.”

These intriguing verses can be understood in different ways. The Buddha is speaking to non-Buddhists, so he does not presuppose a Buddhist worldview in describing the fruits of a purified mind. Yet there is another way to take this passage, which is more relevant for twenty-first century Buddhists. Do our actions bear fruit in a hereafter? Are karma and its consequences fact or myth? To be a Buddhist, do I have to take them literally? For the sake of argument, at least, the Buddha adopts an agnostic view in this important *sutra*. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. In either case, a purified mind finds solace by cherishing good deeds and avoiding bad ones. Here the Buddha speaks directly to our skeptical age. In the most important sense, it does not matter which is true, because if we know what is good for us (and for those around us) we will try to live the same way in either case.

Nevertheless, challenging the usual understanding is not to dismiss or disparage Buddhist teachings about karma and rebirth. Rather, it highlights the need for modern Buddhism to *reflect on* them. Given what is now known about human psychology, including the social construction of the self, how else might they be understood today?

One of the most basic principles of Buddhism is interdependence, yet I wonder if we realize what that implies about the original teachings of the Buddha. Interdependence means that nothing has any “self-existence” because everything is dependent upon other things, which are themselves dependent on other things, and so forth. Nothing is self-originated because everything arises according to causes and conditions. Yet Buddhism, we believe, originated in the unmediated experience of Shakyamuni Buddha, who became an “awakened one” when he attained nirvana under the Bodhi tree. Different Buddhist scriptures describe that experience in different ways, but for all Buddhist traditions his enlightenment is the source of all Buddhist teachings, which unlike Hindu teachings do not rely upon anything else such as the ancient revealed texts of the Vedas.

Although we usually take the above account for granted, there is a problem with it. That enlightenment story, as usually told, amounts to a myth of self-origination – something Buddhism denies! If the interdependence of everything is true for everything, the truth of Buddhism could not have sprung up independently from all the other spiritual beliefs of the Buddha's time and place (Iron Age India),

without any relationship to them. Instead, the teachings of Shakyamuni must be understood as a *response* to those other teachings, but a response that, inevitably, also *presupposed* many of the spiritual beliefs current in that culture -- for example, popular Indian notions of karma and rebirth, which were becoming widespread at that time. In some Pali sutras, the Buddha mentions remembering his past lifetimes. In evaluating those passages, we should ourselves remember that the reality of past lives was widely accepted then, and that an ability to remember them was not unique to Buddha or Buddhists.

Consider the insightful comment that Erich Fromm made about another (although very different!) revolutionary, Sigmund Freud:

The attempt to understand Freud's theoretical system, or that of any creative systematic thinker, cannot be successful unless we recognize that, and why, every system as it is developed and presented by its author is necessarily erroneous. ...the creative thinker must think in the terms of the logic, the thought patterns, the expressible concepts of his culture. That means he has not yet the proper words to express the creative, the new, the liberating idea. He is forced to solve an insoluble problem: to express the new thought in concepts and words that do not yet exist in his language.... The consequence is that the new thought as he formulated it is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends. The thinker, however, is not conscious of this contradiction.

Fromm's point is that even the most revolutionary thinkers cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their context, whether intellectual or spiritual – which is precisely what Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. Of course, there are many important differences between Freud and Shakyamuni, but the parallel is nevertheless very revealing. The Buddha too expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, using the religious categories that his culture could understand, which he too was a product of. Inevitably, then, his (way of expressing the) Dharma was a blend of the truly new (for example, teachings about *anatta* “nonself” and *paticca-samuppada* “interdependent origination”) and the conventional religious thought of his time (karma and rebirth?). Although the new transcends the conventional, as Fromm puts it, the new cannot completely escape the conventional wisdom it surpasses.

That there is always tension between what is new and what is conventional speaks directly to a possible inconsistency that has puzzled many Buddhists over the centuries, and continues to bother us today: is *anatta* (nonself) *really* compatible with the older, more traditional Hindu beliefs in karma and literal rebirth?

By emphasizing the inevitable limitations of any cultural innovator, Fromm implies the impermanence – the dynamic, developing nature – of all spiritual teachings. The Buddha could not stand on his own shoulders, yet thanks to him those who followed could stand on his shoulders. As Buddhists, we tend to assume that the Buddha understood everything, that his awakening and his way of expressing that awakening are unsurpassable – but is that fair to him? Given how little we know about the historical Buddha, perhaps our collective image of him reveals less about who he actually was and more about our own need to discover or project a completely perfect being to inspire our own spiritual practice.

The other implication of impermanence is to remind us that Buddhist doctrines about karma and rebirth are not just given: such teachings have a history, *they have evolved over time*. Earlier Brahmanistic teachings tended to understand karma mechanically and ritualistically. To perform a sacrifice in the proper fashion would invariably lead to the desired consequences. If those consequences were not forthcoming, then either there had been an error in procedure or the causal effects were delayed, perhaps until your next lifetime (hence implying reincarnation). The Buddha’s spiritual revolution transformed this ritualistic approach to getting what you want out of life into a moral principle by focusing on *cetana* “motivations, intentions.” *Cetana* is the key to understanding how he ethicized karma. For example, the *Dhammapada* begins by emphasizing the pre-eminent importance of our mental attitude:

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.

To understand the Buddha’s innovation, it helps to distinguish a moral act into three aspects: the *results* that I seek; the *moral rule or regulation* I am following (for example, a Buddhist precept or Christian commandment, but this also includes ritualistic procedures); and my mental attitude or *motivation* when I do something. Although these aspects cannot be separated from each other, we can emphasize one more than the others—in fact, that is what we usually do. (In modern moral theory, for example, utilitarian theories focus on consequences, deontological theories focus on moral principles such as the Ten Commandments, and “virtue theories” focus on one’s character and motivations.) In the Buddha’s time, the Brahmanical understanding of karma emphasized the importance of following the detailed procedures (rules) regulating each ritual. Naturally, however, the people who paid for

the rituals were more interested in the results. Unfortunately, the situation in some Theravada Buddhist countries is arguably not much different today. Male monastics are preoccupied with following the complicated rules regulating their lives (which according to the popular view is what makes them “good” *bhikkhu* monks), while laypeople are preoccupied with accumulating merit by giving gifts to them -- especially to the “best” *bhikkhu*, because by giving to them your spiritual “bank account” accumulates more merit. Both of these attitudes miss the point of the Buddha’s spiritual innovation.

There is another problem with such distortions of karma and rebirth: they can be used to rationalize racism, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and so forth. Taken literally, karma justifies both the authority of political elites, who therefore deserve their wealth and power, and the subordination of those who have neither. It provides the perfect theodicy: if there is an infallible cause-and-effect relationship between one’s actions and one’s fate, there is no need to work toward social justice, because it’s already built into the moral fabric of the universe. In fact, if there is no undeserved suffering, there is really no evil that we need to struggle against. You were born crippled, or to a poor family? Well, who but you is responsible for that?

For these reasons, understanding karma is perhaps the most important issue for contemporary Buddhist societies. Is it a fatalistic doctrine, or is an empowering one?

Clearly, some Pali Canon passages – and is it a coincidence that these passages work to the material benefit of the *bhikkhu*? -- support a deterministic view. For example, in the *Culakammavibhanga Sutra* karma is used to explain various differences between people, including physical appearance and economic inequality. However, there are other texts where the Buddha clearly denies moral determinism, for example the *Tittha Sutra* in which the Buddha argues that such a view denies the possibility of following a spiritual path:

“There are priests and contemplatives who hold this teaching, hold this view: ‘Whatever a person experiences -- pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful -- that is all caused by what was done in the past.’ ... Then I said to them, ‘Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief... unchaste... a liar... a divisive speaker... a harsh speaker... an idle chatterer... greedy... malicious... a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.’ When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], ‘This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.’ When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should and shouldn’t be done, one dwells

bewildered and unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative.”

In another short sutra, an ascetic named Sivaka asked the Buddha about the view that “‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action.’ Now, what does the revered Gotama [Buddha] say about this?”

“Produced by (disorders of the) bile, there arise, Sivaka, certain kinds of feelings. That this happens, can be known by oneself; also in the world it is accepted as true. Produced by (disorders of the) phlegm...of wind...of (the three) combined...by change of climate...by adverse behavior...by injuries...by the results of Karma -- (through all that), Sivaka, there arise certain kinds of feelings. That this happens can be known by oneself; also in the world it is accepted as true. Now when these ascetics and Brahmins have such a doctrine and view that ‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action,’ then they go beyond what they know by themselves and what is accepted as true by the world. Therefore, I say that this is wrong on the part of these ascetics and Brahmins.”

While we take the words of the Buddha seriously, we should not overlook the humor of this passage. I imagine the Buddha farting, and then asking Sivaka, “was *that* produced by karma?” The general point to be gleaned from comparing such passages, I think, is that the earliest Buddhist teachings about karma are ambiguous, and therefore insufficient by themselves as a guide for our understanding karma today. That brings us back to the Buddha’s great insight emphasizing the motivations of our actions. How should we today appreciate the originality of his approach?

The original Sanskrit term *karma* (Pali, *kamma*) literally means “action” (*phala* is the “fruit” of action), and as this suggests the basic point is that our actions have consequences – more precisely, that our morally-relevant actions have morally-relevant consequences that extend beyond their immediate effects. In the popular Buddhist understanding, the law of karma and rebirth is a way to get a handle on how the world will treat us in the future, which also implies, more immediately, that we must accept our own causal responsibility for whatever is happening to us now. This misses the revolutionary significance of the Buddha’s reinterpretation. Karma is better understood as the key to spiritual development: *how our life-situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of our actions right now*. When we add the Buddhist teaching about nonself— in modern terms, that one’s sense of self is a mental construct—we can see that karma is not something I *have*, it is what ‘I’ *am*, and what I am changes according to my conscious choices. ‘I’ (re)construct myself by what ‘I’ intentionally

do, because ‘my’ sense of self is a precipitate of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Just as my body is composed of the food eaten, so my character is composed of conscious choices, ‘I’ am constructed by my consistent, repeated mental attitudes. People are “punished” or “rewarded” not for what they have done but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. An anonymous verse expresses this well:

Sow a thought and reap a deed  
Sow a deed and reap a habit  
Sow a habit and reap a character  
Sow a character and reap a destiny

What kinds of thoughts and deeds do we need to sow? Buddhism traces back our *dukkha* “dissatisfaction” to the three “unwholesome roots” of our actions: greed, ill will, and delusion. These need to be transformed into their positive counterparts: greed into nonattachment and generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, and the delusion of separate self into the wisdom that realizes our interdependence with others.

Such an understanding of karma does not necessarily involve another life after we physically die. As Spinoza expressed it, happiness is not the reward for virtue; happiness is virtue itself. We are punished not for our “sins” but by them. To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. When your mind changes, the world changes. And when we respond differently to the world, the world responds differently to us. Insofar as we are actually nondual with the world, our ways of acting in it tend to involve feedback systems that incorporate other people. People not only notice what we do, they notice why we do it. I may fool people sometimes, yet over time my character becomes revealed through the intentions behind my deeds. The more I am motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, the more I must manipulate the world to get what I want, and consequently the more alienated I feel and the more alienated others feel when they see they have been manipulated. This mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other side, the more my actions are motivated by generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom of interdependence, the more I can relax and open up to the world. The more I feel part of the world and genuinely connected with others, the less I am inclined to use others, and consequently the more inclined they will be to trust and open up to me. In such ways, transforming my own motivations not only transforms my own life; it also affects those around me, since I am not separate from them.

This more naturalistic understanding of karma does not mean we must necessarily exclude other, perhaps more mysterious possibilities regarding the consequences of our motivations for the world we live in. There may well be other

aspects of karmic cause-and-effect that are not so readily understood. What is clear in either case, however, is that karma-as-how-to-transform-my-life-situation-by-transforming-my-motivations-right-now is not a fatalistic doctrine. Quite the contrary: it is difficult to imagine a more empowering spiritual teaching. We are not enjoined to accept the problematic circumstances of our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to improve our spiritual lives and social situation by addressing those circumstances with generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom.

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