

The Buddhist Doctrine of Karma I

This doctrine was specifically referred as the Buddhist doctrine of karma in order to distinguish it from the other non-Buddhist doctrines of karma, which was taught by non-Buddhist thinkers prior to, during and even after the time of the Buddha. In this respect, it is important to note the significant differences between the Buddhist doctrine of karma and the doctrines of karma taught in Jainism, by certain Ajivika thinkers as well as the Brahmins.

Misconceptions

This is particularly necessary since the Buddhist doctrine of karma is often confused with and assumed to be the same as the Brahmanical karma. People tend to speak of or criticize the doctrine of karma as though there was only one such doctrine common to different religions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Ajivikism, despite the fact that they profess different teachings about the nature, operations and attitude to the alleged phenomenon of karma.

Another misconception which is partly connected with the above misunderstanding is that the Buddhist doctrine of karma constitutes or implies a fatalist attitude to life and nature, a view put forward by some (not all) Western scholars and even subscribed to by some South Asian intellectuals both non-Buddhist and even Buddhist.

Yet another source of misunderstanding is the attempt on the part of certain scholars and other individuals to rationalize (quite unnecessarily) the doctrine of karma by interpreting it to mean the social or biological inheritance of man or both, ignoring altogether and distorting the authentic teachings of the Buddhist texts.

Meaning

In the pre-Buddhist literature the word karma was used mainly in the sense of either religious rituals or the social functions and duties of man.

In the latter sense the Isa Upanishad says: “Let a man aspire to live a hundred years, performing his social duties.” (Kurvanneveha karmani jivivisechatam samah). This sense has survived in the Buddhist texts, where the word karma is used in the plural to denote the different professions or occupations of men. Thus, Buddhism recommends people to take up ‘morally blameless occupations’ (anavajjani kammani).

As a technical term, the word karma is used in the early Buddhist text to denote 'volitional actions.' These action may be 'morally good' (kusala), morally evil (akusala), or morally neutral (kiriya). They may be actions which find expression in bodily behavior (kaya-kamma), verbal behavior (vaci-kamma) and psychological behavior (mano-kamma).

The morally good and evil actions are said to be liable to give rise to consequences, individual as well as social, pleasant and unpleasant on the whole, as the case may be. The individual consequences may be manifested in this life, the next life or the lives to come unless their potentialities are extinguished or they do not find an opportunity for fruition.

Conscious volition (cetana) is a necessary condition of such a morally good, evil or mixed act, but does not constitute the whole of it especially when it happens to be purely mental. Thus we would not be guilty of the crime of murder merely because we had the intention of murdering somebody. As the Atthasalini points out, there are five constituent factors in an act of killing;

1. The existence of a living being
2. The awareness of the existence of such a living being
3. The intention of killing
4. The effort or the mean employed to kill and
5. The consequent death of the living being.

The intention is necessary but not sufficient to constitute an act of killing. As the Vinaya rules point out, where the intention is absent but one's actions are instrumental in causing the death of a person, one may be guilty of an act of negligence but not of murder.

So the word karma is used to denote volitional acts which find expression in thought, speech or physical deeds, which are good, evil or a mixture of both which are liable to give rise to consequences.

Basis for Doctrine

It is often assumed that the basis for the doctrine of karma in Buddhism is a rational argument implicit in the Culakammavibhanga Sutta MN 135. It is true that in this Sutta the Buddha seems to suggest purely rational grounds for believing in the doctrine of karma, but it would be mistaken to believe that the doctrine is accepted as true or as representing the nature of things as they are on these grounds.

The question is posed in the form: “What are the reason and the cause of the inequality among human beings despite their being human?”. The Buddha’s reply was as follows: “Beings inherit their karma and it is karma which divides beings in term of their inequalities.”

We may argue that this embodies the following rational ethical argument, consisting of an empirical and ethical premise, viz. people are of unequal status, those of unequal status ought to be such only by virtue of their own actions - therefore, since this is not due to their actions in this life, it should be due to their actions in a prior life. This means that both karma and pre-existence are the case.

But it would be mistaken to consider the passage in the above Sutta as presupposing a rational ethical argument. It is true as Ananda has said of the Buddha that, "so far as anything can be attained by reasoning (takka), thou has ascertained it" (S. 1. 36), but the doctrine of karma is not put forward in Buddhism as a product of mere speculative reasoning (takka), which is not adequate for the discovery of the facts of nature as the Buddha has elsewhere pointed out. The Buddha's statements even in this Sutta are based on clairvoyant observation and reasoning and not on mere rational speculation.

It is also mistaken to assume on the ground of the recognition of the fact of the known inequalities among mankind that Buddhism accepted the status quo of a static conception of society or denied the doctrine of what is known as 'the equality of mankind'.

For, as we shall see when we come to the social and political philosophy of Buddhism, Buddhism upholds the biological, social and spiritual equality of mankind and envisages a time in the future when with the economic, moral and spiritual regeneration of man there would come into being a social order in which people would be healthy and long-lived and the inequalities in power, wealth and social status would be greatly diminished.

In this context, we must not forget that one of the central teachings of Buddhism revolves round the conception of the destruction or elimination of the evil effects of kamma (kammakkhaya) by effecting a change in the basis of human motivation from that of greed (lobha), hate (dosa) and ignorance (moha) to selflessness (caga), compassion and wisdom (pane). Even the better social order of the future can be set up only by people

who believe in moral and spiritual values and have to some extent cultivated the qualities of selfless service, kindness and wisdom.

Verifiability

As we have said above, the statements about the operations of karma are made by the Buddha on the basis of inferences based on clairvoyant observation. The awareness of the nature of the operations of karma is said to be the second item of knowledge (dutiya vijja) obtained by the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment. It is said:

'When his mind was thus composed, clear and cleansed without blemish, free from adventitious defilements, pliant and flexible, steadfast and unperturbed, he turns and directs his mind towards an understanding of the death and rebirth (upapata) of beings. Then with his pure, paranormal clairvoyant vision he sees beings – the high and the low, the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the wretched – dying and being reborn according to their character (kamma).'

The three-fold knowledge (tisso vijja) acquired by the Buddha, which is crucial for the attainment of enlightenment, consists of the knowledge of pre-existence, of the operations of karma and of the capacity to eliminate the inflowing impulses (asava-kkhaya). It is the same knowledge held by the Arahants attaining emancipation of mind (ceto-vimutti) and in the Thera-gatha and Theri-gatha, the utterances of the Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis; we constantly hear this: "I have attained the three-fold knowledge; I have done the bidding of the Buddha."

The operations of karma are, therefore, personally verified by the Buddha and his disciples. In the Maha Sihanada Sutta MN 12, the Buddha refers to the way he tested the theory of karma as though, he was testing a scientific hypothesis. It is said:

'There are these five destinies, Sariputta. What five? The lower worlds, the animal kingdom, the spirit-sphere (petti-visaya), human existence and the higher worlds. I know these lower worlds, the path which leads to them or the kind of conduct which takes you to that state of existence at death . . . Herein, Sariputta, I comprehend the mind of a certain individual with

my mind as follows: "This individual is set on behaving in such a manner and follows such a mode of conduct that he is likely to be born in one of the lower worlds at death on the destruction of the body." I then observe him at a later time by 'means of clear, clairvoyant, paranormal perception—the same individual born in one of the lower worlds at death experiencing great pain. Just as if there were a pit of coals and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted, taking a path leading straight to it and a man possessed of sight were to observe him and say to himself: "This man is, surely, taking a path which will land him in a pit of coals," and later see him fallen in that pit experiencing great pain; even so . . . the animal world. . . experiencing much unhappiness . . . Just as if there were a cesspit and a man, tired and exhausted were to come along . . .; even so . . . the spirit- sphere . . . experiencing more unpleasant than pleasant sensations . . . Just as if there were a tree in a rugged place, with sparse foliage affording scanty shade and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted; even so . . . the human world. . . experiencing more pleasant than unpleasant sensations . . . Just as if there were a tree with dense foliage in a pleasant spot and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted . . .; even so . . . in a higher world. . . experiencing extremely pleasant sensations . . . Just as if there were a palace with all the comforts and luxuries and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted. . .'

The association of karma with rebirth is found in many of the early Buddhist texts, of which the Cula and Maha Kammavibhanga suttas of the Majjhima Nikaya are the most important

In the Mahakammavibhanga Sutta MN 136, the Buddha points out that a certain, yogis who have acquired the capacity for clairvoyant observation, nevertheless came to false conclusions and denied the fact of karma since they made invalid inferences from the observed data. This is what he says:

"Herein a certain yogin as a result of his efforts and application attains a certain state of trance, in which he sees

with his clear, clairvoyant paranormal vision a man who has misconducted himself born at death on the dissolution of his body in a happier and better world. He concludes as follows: "There are no evil actions (kamma) and no consequences of misconduct, for I have observed a man . . . Everyone whether he misconducts himself in this life or not, is born at death in a happier and better world." I do not agree [says the Buddha] with the claim of this yogin that there are no evil actions and no future consequences of misconduct. I am prepared to grant that this yogin has observed a man who has misconducted himself in this life, born at death in a happier and better world but I do not agree with his conclusion that, therefore, all people, whether they misconduct themselves in this life or not, are born at death in a happier and better world. The knowledge of the Transcendent One (Tathagata) with regard to operations of kamma are different . . . If a person who has misconducted himself in this life is born at death in a happier and better world, then he has either sometime in his past done good deeds, which have resulted in these experiences, or at the time of his death has changed his ways and adopted the right view of life.'

The mistake that these yogis made, according to the Buddha, was to form generalizations on the basis of one or few observations without observing a generality of cases and seeing that the apparent exceptions were explicable on other terms. The operations of kamma, it is said, are so complex that they are not fully comprehensible (A. II. 80) except to the vision and understanding of a Buddha. Even with regard to the universe (loka-visaya), we noted that the Buddha could observe clusters of galaxies and the vast cosmos while Anuruddha, the specialist in clairvoyance, could observe only a single galaxy.

Relation to Causal Laws

The operation of these laws of karma was only a special instance of the working of causal laws in nature, in which there were physical laws (utu-niyama), biological laws (bija-niyama), psychological laws (citta-niyama), karmic law (kamma-niyama) pertaining to moral acts and their consequences and laws pertaining to spiritual phenomena (dhammas-

niyama). But the patterns of events in nature, according to Buddhism, are neither deterministic nor indeterministic. So casual laws are only probable and statistical and not deterministic.

Karmic laws, therefore, state tendencies rather than inevitable consequences. Several of these correlations are stated in the Culakammavibhanga Sutta. The general principle is that morally good acts tend to be followed in the long run by pleasant consequences and morally evil acts by unpleasant consequences to the individual. Since it is of the nature of good acts to promote the material and spiritual well being of mankind, it follows from this general principle that one cannot gain one's own happiness at the expense of others.

Among the specific correlations are the following. Those who harm and hurt living beings tend to be sickly, while those who are compassionate towards them tend to be healthy. Those who are angry and irritable, scowl at and abuse people tend to be ugly, while the others who are not so tend to be beautiful. Those who are envious and jealous of the honor and respect bestowed on others tend to lose while the other tends to command respect.

Medieval Analysis

In the medieval period we find kamma classified, first according to function (kicca) as what gives birth (janaka), what tends to support a tendency (upatthambhaka), what tends to obstruct a tendency (upapilaka) and what destroys (upaghataka).

Secondly, according to the order of ripening, they are classified as weighty (garuka), proximate (asanna), habitual (acinna) and residual (katatta).

Thirdly according to the time of taking- effect (paka-kala), there are four sorts - what is experiencable in this life (ditthadhammedaniya), in the next life (upapajjavedaniya), some time in the future (aparaparavedaniya), or never (ahosi).

Fourthly, according to the place in which the effects occur, there are evil and good karma finding fruition in the worlds of sense-gratification, and good karma which becomes effective in the subtle material world and the immaterial ideational worlds (arupa-loka).