

## *The Buddhist Doctrine of Karma II*

### Distinction

It is necessary to distinguish the Buddhist theory of karma from the other non-Buddhist theories.

1. The Upanisadic theory of karma or moral responsibility according to which the 'self' (atman) is the 'doer' (kartr) as well as the 'enjoyer' (bhoktr) of the consequences. Karma thus becomes an activity and the experiences of the eternal 'self' in man. The result is emphasis on self-causation of suffering and happiness. All factors other than the 'self' come to be almost excluded.
2. The Materialist as well as the Ajivikas theories rejected the efficacy of karma. They denied any form of moral responsibility and upheld the view that suffering and happiness experienced by man is due entirely to the 'natural law' which they called 'inherent nature' (svabhava) of physical phenomena. Thus everything is determined by causes other than the 'self'. They followed the theory of external causation.
3. The Jain theory according to which karma is an inexorable law. According to the Jains, karma is the individual's responsibility. Man could not develop morally and spiritually without undergoing all the consequences of his previous evil karma. The Jain hoped to achieve this by indulging in ascetic practices, which they believed helped to wear away the evil effects of past karma. The value of a moral act depended on its physical expression rather than the intention, which is not so in Buddhism. Once karma is performed, it becomes something beyond his power to control. That is to say, it becomes an external force that man cannot alter.

➔ These theories reveal the fact that karma is either emphasized to the neglect of other things or completely denied. While the Buddha recognized that karma is a causally efficient phenomenon, he realized that it is not the only determining factor in the life of man.

➔ Affecting man also was the physiological state of the body, which was partly the product of heredity or the biological laws recognized in Buddhism. The other factors were changes in the physical environment, in social vicissitude, the intentional activity of the individual and lastly karma. Karma, as it appears could operate separately in a psychosomatic manner or in co-operation with the other factors.

→ Buddha's conception of causation is more conditional than deterministic. Karma is no exception. In Maha Mangala Sutta, there are three factors that could be considered auspicious in the life of man:

1. merit acquired in the past
2. live in appropriate surroundings
3. proper resolve or application.

Here, past karma as well as present resolve are only two factors. Other important factors such as good surroundings have to be taken seriously in determining consequences.

→ Since a number of factors operated in conditioning man's experience, it was wrong to say that pleasure and pain were due entirely to one's own actions (sayam-katam sukhadukkham), nor were they due to the action of an external agent like God (param-katam), nor to a combination of both (sayam katam ca param katam ca), nor were they accidents (adhiccasamuppanna). Pleasure and pain were causally conditioned (paticcasamuppanna) and man by his knowledge of himself and nature could understand, control and master them.

After rejecting all the above views as being unsatisfactory, Buddha expounded his theory of karma.

#### Causation of karma

##### 1) external stimuli

The Buddha pointed out that 'contact (phassa) is the cause of behavior (karma)'. Taking 'contact' in a more physical sense, this may be understood as a stimulus-response sort of model, where reflex movement or behavior follows sensory excitation.

eg MN it is said that "an innocent little baby lying on its back quickly draws its hand or foot if it happens to touch a live ember."

→ Responsibility :

##### 2) conscious motives

Lobha, dosa and moha → morally evil behavior

Alobha, adosa and amoha → morally good behavior

→ Responsibility:

→ this is the reason why the Buddha emphasized the psychological aspect of behavior and equated karma with volition (cetana).

3) unconscious motives

Desire to perpetuate life and the desire to avoid death; desire for pleasure and the aversion to pain.

→ these resulted from mistaken understanding of the nature of human existence.

→ Responsibility:

While human behavior is itself conditioned by causes, it is followed by correlated consequences. This correlation between action (karma) and consequence (vipaka or phala) constitutes the doctrine of karma in Buddhism. This is yet another doctrine that has been misunderstood and misinterpreted by scholars. The misunderstanding is due primarily to the fact that emphasis is laid on the correlation, to the complete neglect of the correlated.

Lonaphala Sutta: The Salt Crystal AN i. 249:

Here the Buddha said if the statement is: “Just as this man does a deed, so does he experience its consequences.”

→ then the living of the holy life would be rendered meaningless, for there would be no opportunity for the complete destruction of suffering.

However, if the statement is: “Just as this man does a deed whose consequences would be determined in a certain way, so does he experience its consequences.”

→ then the religious life will be meaningful and there will be an opportunity for the complete destruction of suffering.

Simile: Salt thrown into a cup of water and into Ganges River.

→ 2 people committing similar, if not identical, evil deeds but reaping different consequences in different ways.

Fatalism, Heredity, and Karma.

Since karmic correlations were not deterministic, karma was only one of many factors conditioning the nature of experience, while past karma (vipaka implies here) was extinguishable and modifiable in the context of one's present actions. Buddhism, it may be noted, was opposed to all forms of determinism: natural determinism (svabhava-vada), theistic determinism (issara-karana-vada) and karmic determinism (pubba-kamma-vada) or any combination of them. According to one Brahmanical text, nature (prakrti) compels man to act as he does, while nature itself is under the control or will of God.

As we have seen Buddhism states that man is conditioned by his heredity (bija-niyama), by his physical, social and ideological (salayatana paccaya phasso, etc.), environment, by his psychological past (citta-niyama) including his karmic heritage (kamma-niyama), but he is not determined by any or all of them. He has an element of free-will (attakara), or personal endeavour (purisa-kara) by exercising which he can change his own nature as well as his environment (by understanding it) for the good of himself as well as others. In this sense man is master of his fate (atta hi attano natho).

The laws of heredity, likewise, are not to be confused with those of karma. Buddhism accepts both. As a result there may be situations in which the causal lines of karma and heredity coincide. A person may have a certain trait because he inherits it from one of his parents and also because he has a particular karmic reason or affinity for it.

### Central Teaching

It must, however, not be forgotten that the central teaching of Buddhism is not that of continuing to perform good karma for the sake of rewards in continued samsaric existence (which cannot be enjoyed without the subsequent suffering from the evil which finds fruition), but the elimination of the effect of karma (kammakkhaya).

The immediate ideal of the Buddhist should therefore be that of attaining the first stage of spiritual development (sotapanna) by the elimination of attachment to notions of ego and ego-centered desires (sakya-ditthi); by the elimination of doubts regarding the Buddhist account of the nature and destiny of man in the universe (vicikiccha) through examination inquiry into and partial verification of the truth of the Dhamma, and the realization that religion is part and parcel of one's daily living and experience and not of obsessional attachment to rites and rituals (silabbata-paramasa). Such a person is 'not liable to fall below the status of human existence' and is destined to achieve the goal of enlightenment before long. This is the path leading to the destruction of karmic effects (kammakkhaya) in which the good life is cultivated with the growth of selflessness, love and understanding for its own intrinsic worth and not for egoistic rewards.