

Karma, Tantra, Action Dharma: Liberation and Engagement

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Introducing Karma

In Buddhism, the concept of causality - or *karma* - is closely linked to both the Buddha's unique approach to the human condition of impermanence and to the puzzling paradox of rebirth without soul or self.¹

Buddhist thinking about causality starts from the general observation that everything one thinks, says or does creates consequences.² Accordingly, future pleasant, unpleasant or neutral conditions are effectuated. This is the law of cause and effect: karma (Pāli *kamma*). "Karma" literally means "action;" it does not necessarily denote only a law of nature as such, but can include specific contexts and imprints (*vāsanā*) in the consciousness (*viññāna*) which express themselves in past, present and future conditions.

Early Buddhist teachings identify karma as the glue and motor of conditioned reality, *saṅgāsaṅgā*:

kammunā vattati loko / kammunā vattatī pajā /

kammanibandhanā sattā / rathassāṅgīva yāyato

The world exists due to karma; by karma everyone exists.

The beings are fettered by karma, just as a chariot wheel is pinned down by a peg.
(Suttanipāta 654)³

The effects of actions do not vanish with death in a causal chain of births or rebirths. Rather, unlike its rival Indian philosophies, Buddhism sees this dependently arising chain as a mere continuation without any substantial or ontological identity (soul, self) being passed on from birth to birth: continuity without identity. One can liken this process to a chain of domino tiles, one pushing over the next; or to streams of waves in an ocean or to recurring patterns in a rainbow – discernable but insubstantial or lacking intrinsic existence. Hence, the Buddhist theory of karma is a conundrum from the start: developing and transforming gradually in competition and exchange with Brāhmaṇical and heterodox Indian philosophies, the Buddhist concept of karma forms a powerful yet disturbing philosophical riddle.

Let's first examine the actions and their effects. How do we accumulate these positive or negative imprints for future conditions? For example, how serious is it to have harmful thoughts? Well, it depends on whether these thoughts are part of our day-to-day delusional Disneyland of disturbing emotions, or if they are combined with conscious intent. In the first case, the imprints are easily counteracted, such as by filling the mind with positive imprints, especially mentally generating universal compassion and loving-kindness. In the second case, the firm intent to do harm leaves a difficult and confusing imprint, which will result in unpleasant consequences.

The idea of *karma* in Buddhism explains the state of our experience following purely natural principles; no moral pressure needed. Buddhists know, "When I hate, I cause many unpleasant impressions for myself and others. When I love, I bring about many happy moments." Therefore it is not a question of morality, sin or guilt, but a question of insight, of

¹ See Scherer 2009, from which this paper is developed.

² On the polarisation into body speech and mind cp. e.g. AN 53, 11; MN 56; *Abhidharmakośa* iv.i.

³ PTS [Pali Text Society edition] p. 121; = v. 657 BJT [Buddha Jayanta Tripitaka edition] p. 200; = v. 659 Chaṅgāyana, p. 173; cp. Krishan 1997, 60.

wisdom. Furthermore, *karma* means that nothing happens by chance. Everything has its meaning, i.e. a cause. Who we are, which abilities and limitations we have, and what happens to us – in the end, it is all an expression of our past decisions.

Karma is the also opposite of chance or coincidence. We experience solely the consequences of our past actions. Of course, at first glance, it seems easier to live when there is a supernatural power that rules us, something like fate or God. It seems harder to breathe when carrying one's own responsibility. But after all, one breathes freely only then; real freedom exists only where we have to bear the consequences of our decisions ourselves. This is *karma*. Still, *karma* is not only applicable to harmful actions. If we understand the law of cause and effect correctly, we realise that we have a precious opportunity to do endless good here and now. Today we are sowing the seeds for our future. This is also the reason why Buddhists are not greatly interested in our previous rebirths. To us, the question of what possibilities they have now to benefit other beings matters more. It is not important what we were or what we are; what matters is what we want to be and what we will be. It is the goal that counts: the full realization of enlightenment.

Vedic Karma, Buddhist Karma

The Indian concepts of karma and rebirth can be traced back into the Vedic period of Indian culture; the Vedic sacrifice itself was called "karma" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.1.2.1). In the Vedas, the concept of rebirth was not yet developed; instead, one finds the idea of "re-death" or "repeated death." This concept points to the fate of a deceased ancestor when the descendants do not maintain the "nourishment" of the new body by fulfilling the death rituals. The sacrificial act produces a "treasure" (*nidhi*) or nourishment: the "desired reward". This forms the analogous compensation for the ritual act in the other world.⁴ The transactional side of karma was not ethically charged. In the Vedic death rites we find the concept of the transference of merit fully developed. Slightly before and/or roughly contemporaneously with the rise of Jainism and Buddhism, the Upaniṣads firstly ethicised karma and connected "action" to good or bad rebirth.⁵ Further, the notion of rebirth proper is developed: instead of any post-mortal entering of heavens or ancestor realms, ethical retribution is instigated by rebirth in the *saṁsāra*, the cyclic existences comprising the birth realms of humans, animals, etc. The term karma now clearly expands beyond the limits of Vedic sacrifice towards an ethical, causal concept connected with human existence. Still, it is up to Buddhism to develop fully the ethicization of karma towards action as intention.

The Early Buddhist teachings on causality⁶ developed the Upaniṣadic gradual process into full ethicization.⁷ Further, Buddhism diametrically opposed the competing Jain concept of karma as minimal transaction⁸ (emphasis on the act, not on the actor) by putting forward the re-interpretation of karma as intention-led action ('maximal transaction' with emphasise on the actor, not on the act).

In the *Deep Penetration of Wisdom Sutta (Nibbedhikasutta)* of the Aṅguttara-Nikāya, the Buddha states concisely:

Cetanāhaṁ bhikkhave kammaṁ vadāmi "Monks! I define 'mental resolution' as karma." -(AN Vol. III, p. 415 PTS, p. 208 BJT).⁹

⁴ This forms the analogous compensation for the ritual act in the other world. For instance, the funeral liturgy of the *Atharva Veda* (AV 18.2.57) calls upon the dead to follow the *iṅṅhapūrta*.

⁵ For instance, the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states *púṅyaṁ púṅyena kármaṁā bhavati pāpāṁ pāpéna*: "merit (*puṅya*) is produced by a meritorious action, demerit (*pāpa*) by a demeritorious action" (BĀU 3.2.3).

⁶ On karma in Early Buddhism cp., e.g., McDermott 1980; Obeyesekere 1980; Sakaki 1986, pp. 24-41; Gombrich 1988, pp. 66-69; Gombrich 1996, Ch. 2; Krishan 1997, Ch. 6; Wayman 1997, 243-276.

⁷ See, e.g., Gombrich 1988 & 1996.

⁸ McKim Marriott 1976, see Potter 1980, pp. 260-265.

⁹ Cf. Abhidharmakośa iv, 1b.

Still, by denying the existence of a soul or self (ātman), Buddhism created a paradox which spawned the different quirks of the Buddhist concepts of karma:¹⁰ causality and re-birth without essence being passed on. At its beginning, Buddhist philosophy seems to be stranded with a seemingly purely mechanical process of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), births following each other like flames being passed on from one torch to the other. The major role attributed to volition/intention within the causal nexus of reality appears to contradict this mechanical process. At this point, a psychological model of an empirical individual without inherent, independent essence is introduced: with an anti-Upaniṣadic assertion of a No-Self (*anattā*), Buddhism places the karmic intention (*saṅskāra*) into an intricate model of interaction: the five 'heaps' or 'groups of grasping' (*upadāna-skandha*). In this model, the conditioned and misguided notion of a 'Self' arises as the result of a process of demarcation, dualization of reality into subject/object, and alienation of the part from the whole. This process could be likened to the misguided notion of separateness, for instance, a wave could "feel" with regard to the rest of the ocean. Our self-awareness as separate and individual (5th skandha: *vijñāna*) arises as the result of intentionally charged impulses (4th skandha: *saṅskāra*) towards reality (cf. 1st skandha: *rūpa*, form) as we perceive (2nd skandha: *vedanā*, feeling) and conceptualise (3rd skandha: *saṅjñā*) it. Buddhism recognised these immediate impulses of separation as fuelled by desire ('I like something', *tīṣṇā*, *rāga*), or aversion ('I dislike something' *dveṣa*) or confusion ('I am not sure', *mohā*, *avidyā*). It is according to these basic categories that sentient beings are thought to be constantly pigeon-holing their environment and by doing so asserting their own identity i.e. demarcating the boundaries of the Ego. But since beings construct Egos without there being any inherent essence or self, this individuation is ultimately the reason for them being in a state of suffering, i.e. of pain, change and not being enlightened. The three impulsive psychological reactions (like, dislike, confusion) are therefore characterised as the 'roots of the unwholesome' – the causes of difficult conditions.

The difficulty still lies with the notion of rebirth without a Self. Without employing an agent or subject to re-birth and suffering, how is it possible to reconcile the concept of intention with a seemingly mechanical process of causation resulting in continuous re-becoming? Here it is vital to realize that karma in early Buddhism is not only fully ethicised and intention-driven; but also that karma is so completely mental in nature that accidental or even ignorant actions cause no offense (*Milindapañhā*, iv. 2. 27); non-intentional karma does not cause grave negative results (Harivarman, *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 2, 84).

Karma and transfer of merit

How did Buddhist karma theories evolve during the historic transformations of Buddhist philosophy? In Early Buddhism, "the result (*phalam*) of an action" was seen as "unalterable" (*dhruvam*).¹¹ On the other hand, the karmic seeds would surely develop differently, if mitigating, accelerating or repressive factors occur? The Māhāyana Śālistamba Sūtra¹² (around 250 CE) clarified the relationship between primary causes (*hetu*) and secondary causes or circumstantial conditions (*pratyāya*), allowing more flexibility in the explanation of the ripening of karma (*karma-vipāka*): the seed of rice (*hetu*) brings fruit according to its growth conditions (*pratyāya*). Influencing karmic seeds would hence relate to the conditions, not to the cause itself. And soon, mitigating factors would be identified in the form of transfer of merit and the compassion of the Bodhisattvas.

This line of thought seems to have been driven by the need to ameliorate the rigorous mechanics of karma. In theistic systems, normally the mercy of a/the God can take away the

¹⁰ Cp. McDermott 1980.

¹¹ Aśvagoṣa, BC 20, 32, cf. Dhp 127. 167; Krishan 1997, pp. 68-70.

¹² See Ross Reat 1993.

consequences of negative actions. How to meet this human need in a spiritual method involving no creator god, divine redemption and external salvation? At this point we find the Brāhmaṇical notion of transfer of merit (*puṇyadāna*) (re-)entering Buddhist thought, i.e. the idea that actions can counter or even annul the ripening of someone else's actions (karma). This is seemingly a clear contradiction to the Buddhist emphasis that everybody is fully responsible for his/her own actions.¹³ However, this paradoxical softening of the concept of karma in mainstream Mahāyāna thought clearly resonates with the prerogative of altruism; further self-responsibility also entails the freedom to act beneficially in each and every present moment anew. The affirmative and intentional focus of karma is the focus on the present shaping the future, rather than eradicating the past. As Śāntideva puts it in his chapter on patience in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

Why did you act like this previously, so that you are now oppressed by others? All are subjected to karma. What is my role in any change here? However, having realized this, I make such efforts in the collection of merits, that all will mutually generate the attitude of loving-kindness (BCĀ 6, 68-69).¹⁴

Mahāyāna thought consequently developed the idea that far advanced realised beings (Bodhisattvas) are sometimes able to take away negative karma of other sentient beings. Also the notion of transference of merit as practised today in Theravāda society has been linked to that Mahāyāna thought, although without conclusive evidence.¹⁵ It is important to note, that the mechanism of this apparent interfering with the course of causality is ultimately strictly consistent with the concept of karma: Buddhist karma is predominantly mental intention with mental and physical results; strong positive imprints can be left in the consciousness and can counter other/earlier imprints; such positive counter-imprints can be the development of altruistic motivation such as willing to better the karmic position of a being by transfer of merit; and, at the other end of the transfer, the ultimate trust in the methods of the Buddha and the realisation of a Bodhisattva.¹⁶

As for karma within Mahāyāna philosophy, it is well known that Mahāyāna refocused from the Ābhidhārmic (scholastic) inventories and discussions about the ontological value of the basic components of reality (*dharma*s) on the ineffable experience of enlightenment. Nāgārjuna scrutinised karma mercilessly in chapters 8 and 17 of his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, deconstructing any realist or nihilist notion of transaction in order to arrive at a cognitive *aporia* which leaves only the openness beyond substantialism and nihilism: *śūnyatā*, emptiness.¹⁷ In Yogācāra philosophy, the ripening (*vipāka*) of mental imprints was elaborated with the introduction of 'karmic seeds' (*bīja*) and karmic pregnancy within the field of storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*).¹⁸

Tantra and the transpersonal dissolution of karma

Late Medieval Indian tantric Buddhism brought with it an unprecedented radical and transgressive application of Buddhist teaching into a transformative practice for transpersonal development and liberation; this practice often aims at enlightenment within a single lifetime. The methods used in Tantric Buddhism (both in their Indian expression and its successive

¹³ Cp. Brekke 1998, p. 296.

¹⁴ *kasmādeva kṛtaṃ pūrvaṃ yenaiva bādhyase parai / sarve karmaparāyattā ko 'ham atrānyathākṛtau // Eva buddhvā tu puṇye u tathā yatnaṃ karomyaham / yena sarve bhaviṃyanti maitracittā parasparam //*

¹⁵ Cp. Gombrich 1971.

¹⁶ Cp. also Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, ch. 4 und 5.

¹⁷ On MMK 17 see Kalupahana 1986, 243-262 & T.K. Sharma 1993.

¹⁸ Cp., e.g., Schmithausen 1987, pp. 134-137 on *Yogācārabhūmi* 192, 6-9. On karma in Yogācāra philosophy see, e.g., Prasad 1993, pp. 84-89.

Tibetan assimilation) imply a far-reaching modification to the karma conundrum: Tantric methods are seen as bringing karma towards accelerated ripening and even "destroying all permanent karma" (*sarvānāsthītakarmabhedavidhāna*).¹⁹ The triad of intention (motivation, view), self-responsible action (meditation) and application counters and neutralises any mechanistic leftover in the concept of karma. Karma mechanics are overcome through the engineering of transpersonal development. The artificial and rapid ripening of karmic seeds on the tantric path is safeguarded by taking refuge in the three jewels and the three roots, as well as the Bodhisattva promise, the blessing and power field of the transmission represented by the teacher (*guru*, Tibetan: bla ma). The student – teacher relationship and the strict ritual context of a Tantric meditation trajectory include specific purifying preliminary practices (*ngon 'gro*). During the first two of these practices, negative imprints of body, speech and mind are purified, just like dormant bombs are brought to a controlled explosion in a safe environment. Therefore, ripening karmic seeds, although experienced unpleasantly in form of disturbing emotions, lack the full strength they would otherwise have. The powerful imprints of the student-teacher bond and the rigorous altruistic effort and the constant meditational encounter with enlightenment protect the practitioner from the full ripening of the karma. The guardian and safety net of these shortcut methods, the realised Buddhist master or *guru*, is hereby seen as beyond karma. For instance, the Late Indian Buddhist Mahāsiddha Saraha (9th Century CE ?) sings in one of his poetic-didactic expressions of his Tantric realisation of the Great Seal, *Mahāmudrā* (*Dohāko*□*a*, *People's Treasury of Verse* 43a, Jackson):

*Hey, scrutinize your sensorial faculties! From these, I do not gather {anything}. Near the man who is done with karma (las), cut through the rope of mind (attain absolute certainty about the nature of mind).*²⁰

In contrast to that, not liberated beings are characterised by their bondage to karma (*Dohāko*□*a*, *People's Treasury of Verse* 40 Jackson):

The mind is bound by karma; free of karma, the mind is free. By freedom of mind, it realises the indefinite ultimate nirvā□*a.*²¹

Saraha's spiritual songs of spontaneously/co-emergently arising (*sahaja*) realisation became a celebrated heirloom for his Tibetan successors. In the poetic language of these and similar Tantric songs, causality, rebirth, and their underlying philosophical concepts are deconstructed by realisation. In a Tantric *Song of Practice* (*Caryāgīti*) preserved in Old-Bengali, Saraha points to the liberating deconstruction of all concepts including karma and the Tantric experience of totality in the state of Great Seal, *Mahāmudrā*, the union of space and bliss:

The world, through false views, chains itself, generating existence and cessation (nirvā□*a) itself.*

I, the Yogin without thoughts, do not know what Birth, Death and existence are.

Whatever is birth, this is also death. There is no difference between the living and the dead.

He, who fears birth and death in this world,- he may put his hope to the mercury elixir (i.e. the alchemical elixir of life).

¹⁹ That is the title of the ninth chapter of the Abhidhānottara Tantra, a text of the Yoginī Tantra class (translation in Kalff 1979, pp. 153-182). On karma in Tantra see also Stablein 1980 and Elder 1993.

²⁰ *kye lags dbang po ltos shig dang / 'di las ngas ni ma gtogs so /las zin pa yi skyes bu yi / drung du sems thag gcad par byos.*

²¹ *vajjhai kamme*□*a u*□*o kamma-vimukke*□*a hoi ma*□*amokkha*□ */ ma*□*amokkhe*□*a a*□*ūna*□*pāvijjai parama*□*ivvā*□*a*□.

They, who wonder around in the world of the moving and not moving and in the heavens of the 33, - is it not possible for them, to become free of old age and death? Is birth due to karma, or karma due to birth? Saraha says, the teaching is without thought (goes beyond mental fabrication).²²

Action Dharma and liberating altruism

In the modern critiques of karma theories expounded by Socially Engaged Buddhism, karma is generally re-interpreted as to aid taking charge of social change.²³ Here, the early Buddhist “scientific” (empirical) method with its emphasis on self-responsibility is meaningfully combined with altruism: an engaged-compassionate universal response to No-Self and Ego-delusion in order to make space for pro-active social engagement. A prominent example is Ambedkar’s political utilisation of Buddhism in his fight for Dalit (outcast) rights in India, which has earned him the criticism of abandoning both karma and enlightenment all together and reducing Buddhism to a social system.²⁴ Factually, Ambedkar’s political Buddhism is simply skilful means for social change. However, “Action dharma”²⁵ is truly Buddhist skilful means: re-focussing action (i.e. *karma*) on changing social conditions - understood as summative and inter-dynamically transforming individual conditions. Hence, while the tantric deconstruction of karma theory aids transpersonal development, the karma critiques of Buddhist modernism aids at social activism and liberation: Action dharma is Buddhist “Liberation Theology.”

In their radicalism, Modern and contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhism’s contestations of karma theories share much with medieval Tantric Buddhist perspectives on individual karma. And while Tantric practices employ radical methods for transpersonal liberation, transforming *saṃsāra* and its fuel – karma - in the process, Socially Engaged Buddhism utilises the dharma as “Action Dharma” for social liberation within conditioned reality.

Remarkably, on the level of social engagement, it is the tantric Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan which has developed the transpersonal value of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This Bhutanese socio-economical theory is both tantric and engaged, orienting itself not on productive growth but on societal well-being.

Conclusion

Karma continues to puzzle Buddhists and scholars alike. Naturally, the karma riddle has been solved and will continue to be solved in different and sometimes surprising ways. Taking his point of departure from earlier theories, the historical Buddha stressed the fact that karmic results require intention/motivation as well as the action. The Buddhist explanations of karma evolved further and karma came to be seen as something that can be purified or removed. Some intellectual theories around karma continue to evolve and, for instance, the rejection of karma theory by a segment of Buddhists testifies to a certain uneasiness with the socio-political implications of the law of cause and effect; still, on the karmic playground, Tantric teachings consider the unbroken bond with the teacher as the most crucial protection. And compassionate, transpersonal development results seamlessly in Action Dharma: Conscious social engagement for Gross *Universal* Happiness.

²² CG 22, 1-6: *apaṃ e raci raci bhava nirbāṃ / michē loa bandhābae apaṃā // ambhe na jāṃah / acinta joi / jāma maraṃa bhava kaisaṃa hoi // jāiso jāma maraṃa bi taišo / jībante maalē nāhi biśeso // jā ethu jāma maraṃa bi saṃkā / so karaū rasa rasānere kaṃkhā // je sacarācara tiasa bhamanti / te ajarāmara kimpī na honti // jāme kāma ki kāme jāma / Saraha bhāṃanti acinta so dhāma.* (Kværne 1977, p. 168).

²³ Cp. Kraft 2000: 499-500 and Pietz 2005: 206-7.

²⁴ See *The Maha Bodhi* 1959: 352-3; Queen 1996: 47; King 2009: 159-66.

²⁵ Queen 2003: 1, 27

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