



Buddhist views on karma and social position

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A British schoolteacher specialized in Buddhism once asked me how exactly Buddhists understand the karmic dimension of social position. A Thai monk had informed them that the reason young girls in Bangkok are prostitutes is because they had done something bad in their past lives. Hence, they were prostitutes as karmic punishment for their past evil actions. Is this a correct understanding of karma? And if not, how did the historical Buddha account for social misfortune?

The question is very understandable and raises lots of issues, both about Buddhism and about the conventional way any of us tend to view things. In terms of Buddhist thought, is it ever correct to think of karmic consequences as ‘punishment’ for harmful deeds? And is it correct to assume that any life situation we find ourselves in has been directly caused by good or bad deeds in the past? In terms of the conventional thinking that is dominant in contemporary societies, we need to ask ourselves why a karmic account of social position sits so uncomfortably with modern values. Why is it that karmic causation is so problematic a theory?

In this article I deliberately bring in scriptural and other references to strengthen and clarify arguments in the debate.

The Buddha on karma and social position

The Buddha defined karma as intention.

Intention (or will, or volition), I call karma. Through intention one produces karma by way of body, speech and mind.ⁱ

Whether the intention manifests itself in physical, vocal or mental form, it is the intention alone which has a moral character: good, bad or neutral. In his book *Theravada Buddhism*, Richard Gombrich points out just how significant the Buddha’s approach is, because it is quite different from other theories of karma in India in his time. The focus of ethical interest shifted from physical action, involving people and objects in the real world, to



psychological process. In Buddhism, ethics is not only about doing the right thing in the correct way, it's about why you act in the first place, and what your intention and purpose is. Gombrich hails this as a great innovation which overturns the Brahmanical ethics of early Hinduism. It is a rejection of caste-bound differences, giving the same possibility to reach liberation to everyone, regardless of social status.

Not by birth is one a brahmin or an outcaste, but by deeds (karma).ⁱⁱ

In the *Dhammapada* this theme recurs repeatedly. We should remember that brahmins were the highest social caste in ancient India and were respected for their moral and religious worth. The Buddha basically redefines the term.

Who is a true brahmin? I call him a brahmin who has trained his mind to be still and reaches the supreme goal of life. (386)

I call him a brahmin who is never angry, never causes harm to others even when he is harmed by them. (389)

Saffron robes and outward show do not make a brahmin, but training of the mind and senses through the practice of meditation. Neither riches nor high caste make a brahmin. Free yourself from selfish desires, and you will become a brahmin. (395-6)

Indeed, this is one of the key ways in which the Buddhist understanding of karma is quite distinct from the Hindu theory of karma. In the traditional Hindu system of social castes, one's whole life was defined and determined by the caste into which one was born. There was no social mobility. One accepted the structure of society as being part of the natural order of the universe, and one simply did one's best to play one's part within that framework. The Buddha rejected this view and placed the emphasis on cultivating personal qualities. In Buddhism, everything shifts from the outer world to the inner world. The Buddha did not uphold social determinism.

How did the Buddha understand karma then?

In the *Mahasaccaka Sutta* (Majjhima Nikaya 36) the Buddha describes the stages of his enlightenment under the bodhi tree, and what he realized at each stage. He speaks of three stages, and for the second stage he says this:

When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. Thus, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and



reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions. (verse 40)

This insight describes the Buddha's understanding of the process of rebirth and of how that rebirth takes place. He saw that there are causal connections between a person's actions and the type of rebirth(s) they will have. He links a person's actions specifically with their physical appearance in the next life (whether they are seen as attractive or not, for example), with their social position (inferior or superior) and with their general quality of life (fortunate or unfortunate, happy or miserable). In other words, karmic causes are an important type of causal factor that determine the shape and health of our body, the social, economic and environmental circumstances into which we are born and in which we subsequently live, and the range of opportunities that present themselves to us.

This principle is repeated in various ways in other Suttas of the Pali Canon. The historical Buddha clearly taught that karma determines both the circumstances of rebirth and our individual physical and mental characteristics. Buddha was asked the following question in the Majjhima Nikaya:

What now, Lord Gotama, is the cause, what is the reason that lowness and excellence are seen among human beings? For we find short-lived people and long-lived people; people with many illnesses and others who are free from illness; ugly people are seen and beautiful, too; there are weak people and powerful people, poor people and wealthy people, people of lowly birth and others of high birth; people of little wisdom and ones that possess insight. What is the cause, what is the reason for such lowness and excellence amongst human beings?

The Buddha replied: *Possessed of their own karma, beings are the heirs to karma. Karma distinguishes beings, that is to say, by lowness and excellence.*

In the *Shorter Exposition of Action (Majjhima Nikaya 135:15)* the Buddha elaborates on the precise causes of inferior social position.

Some man or woman is obstinate and arrogant, does not pay homage to one who should receive homage, does not rise up for one in whose presence he should rise up, does not offer a seat to one who deserves a seat, does not make way for one for whom he should make way, and does not honour, respect, revere and venerate one who should be honoured, respected, revered and venerated. Because of performing and undertaking such action...that person reappears in a state of deprivation [in realms of existence other than the human]. But if instead that person comes back to the



human state, then wherever they are reborn they are low-born. This is the way that leads to low birth.

In another Sutta (*Majjhima Nikaya 129*) the Buddha makes a distinction between fools and wise men. He defines a fool as someone who has bad thoughts, speaks bad words and does bad deeds. A fool is a person who is untrue. He describes the way their deeds will cause them to be reborn in various states of deprivation, particularly in the animal realm, and then speaks of what kind of human rebirth they will have.

If, sometime or other, at the end of a long period, that fool comes back to the human state, it is into a low family that he is reborn – into a family of outcastes or hunters or bamboo-workers or cartwrights or scavengers – or that is poor with little to eat and drink, surviving with difficulty, where he scarcely finds food and clothing; and he is ugly, unsightly, and misshapen, sickly, blind, cripple-handed, lame or paralysed; he gets no food, drink, clothes, vehicles, garlands, scents and unguents, bed lodging and light.

Misunderstanding the Buddha's view of karma

The karmic causes behind social position are therefore clearly stated by the historical Buddha but they are frequently misinterpreted, in several ways.

1. People often think that if bad deeds are the cause of one's suffering, they are the only cause. In Buddhist thought, however, there is one general principle regarding the laws of causation and that is, that nothing anywhere is ever produced from a single cause. For example, the 4th century Indian scholar Vasubandhu asserts that the idea that things are produced from a single cause is inadmissible.ⁱⁱⁱ The process of production, be it on the material level or the mental level, always involves multiple causes and conditions coming together to produce something. That means that karma is only one of many causal factors that together bring about the circumstances of rebirth.

The Buddha's teaching of karma is not strictly deterministic, therefore, unlike that of the Jains; it invariably incorporates circumstantial factors. It is not a rigid and mechanical process, but a flexible, fluid and dynamic one. Importantly, there is no set linear relationship between a particular action and its results. The karmic effect of a



deed is not determined solely by the deed itself but also by the nature of the person who commits it and by the circumstances in which it is committed.

2. Not all present conditions can be ascribed to karma since karma is but one of five different types of causal law. Buddhist philosophy identifies several different types of causation; some laws apply to physical matter while others apply to the mind. The Theravada tradition, for example, describes five ‘niyamas’ or natural laws. They are:

- a. Physical laws operating in the natural environment such as those that govern the weather, the way plants grow, gravity
- b. Genetic laws governing heredity, described as ‘as the seed so the fruit’
- c. Laws governing the workings of the mind in terms of the perception process, the ways we know things, and how we react to things (what we would call psychology and epistemology)
- d. Moral laws governing intentional actions and their results: these are the laws of karma
- e. The generic law governing causal relationships between all things, the law that determines how everything arises, exists and then ceases.^{iv}

These different levels of causation can operate simultaneously in any given situation, and it is therefore impossible to isolate karma as the only cause of suffering or happiness. In Buddhist thought, the causal process is a complex one.

Furthermore, it is good to remember that the causal process described in the twelve links of dependent origination involves only two links that are karmic in nature. The second and tenth links are directly connected with karma but the others are not, showing very clearly that karma is not the only causal factor involved in our lives.

3. Karma is about two things: what we have done in the past and what we are doing right now. Our present life situation depends on both of these, not only on past actions. If we take the above example of prostitutes in Thailand, past karma will no doubt have played a role in the social circumstances of their birth but, in the Buddhist view, each one has a choice as to how they respond to those circumstances. Social deprivation and economic poverty do not necessarily, in themselves, result in prostitution. A choice is made by the person and possibly her family, and other choices could have been possible. Working as a prostitute is therefore not seen as completely determined by deeds in a previous life, other causal factors are also involved.



4. It is a mistake to view unfortunate karmic results as a form of punishment in Buddhism.

Walpola Rahula writes:

The theory of karma should not be confused with so-called 'moral justice' or 'reward and punishment.' The idea of moral justice, or reward and punishment, arises out of the conception of a supreme being, a God, who sits in judgment, who is a lawgiver and who decides what is right and wrong. The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the idea of justice or reward and punishment.^v

Ideas of justice and punishment originate from the belief in a supreme God (or gods) who determines what is right and wrong and who rewards and punishes our actions accordingly. For Buddhists, there is nobody there to punish or reward us. Karma is merely one type of causation that is as natural as the law of gravity, and that does not depend on anyone's agency.

This is a very important point because the Buddha emphasized (in the story of Angulimala, for example) that the action is not the person, or the person cannot be reduced to their actions. In other words, even though someone's actions may be harmful, that is an evaluation of the action, not the person. The person can always change their behavior, given conducive circumstances, and should never be type-cast or forever labelled as a thief or a criminal, and so forth. The idea of punishment tends to be associated with the notion that it's the person who is bad, not just their actions, and this is not a Buddhist view.

Modernist views on karma

Some western commentators have taken exception to aspects of karma theory, especially with regard to its social implications, and they have proposed revisions of various kinds. These proposals are part of what is known as Buddhist modernism. The primary critique is that some feel "karma may be socially and politically disempowering in its cultural effect, that without intending to do this, karma may in fact support social passivity or acquiescence in the face of oppression of various kinds."^{vi} Dale S. Wright, a scholar specializing in Zen Buddhism, has therefore proposed that karmic theory be reformulated for modern people, and "separated from elements of supernatural thinking," so that



karma is asserted to condition only personal qualities and dispositions and not rebirth or external circumstances and events.

This move is shared by the psychotherapist Mark Epstein who re-interprets the Buddhist Wheel of Life in *Thoughts without a Thinker*. He speaks of the six realms of existence only as psychological states, ignoring the idea of some Buddhist scholars that they also denote actual worlds and forms of life. His explanation of these psychological states leaves out karmic causation and rebirth altogether, as well as the twelve links of dependent origination.

David Loy argues that karma has been used to rationalize racism, caste, economic oppression, congenital disabilities and everything else.^{vii} He believes that the view that suffering such as that undergone by Holocaust victims could be attributed, in part, to the karmic ripenings of those victims is "fundamentalism, which blames the victims and rationalizes their horrific fate," and that this is "something no longer to be tolerated quietly. It is time for modern Buddhists and modern Buddhism to outgrow it" by revising or discarding the teachings on karma.

Other scholars^{viii} disagree, however, and refer to the relationship between karma and the principle of no-self. They say that the teachings on karma do not encourage judgment and blame, given that the victims were not the same people who committed the acts, but rather were just part of the same mental continuum with the past actors. On the contrary, they claim that the teachings on karma provide "a thoroughly satisfying explanation for suffering and loss" in which believers take comfort.

Modernists tend to equate karmic conditioning with social and/or cultural conditioning despite there being no evidence in the early scriptures to support this. David McMahan analyses the situation in this way:

The early texts give us little reason to interpret 'conditioning' as the infusion into the psyche of external social norms, or of awakening as simply transcending all psychological conditioning and social roles. Karmic conditioning drifts semantically toward 'cultural conditioning' under the influence of western discourses that elevate the individual over the social, cultural, and institutional. The traditional import of the karmic conditioning process, however, is primarily ethical and soteriological—actions condition circumstances in this and future lives.^{ix}

To put it simply, the modernist view limits the scope of the traditional understanding of karmic effects so that it encompasses only habits, dispositions and tendencies, the so-called 'mental formations' of the fourth skandha. Karmic results would thus not manifest as external effects but solely as psychological effects. At the same time, modernists expand the scope of karma to include social conditioning even though this does not



particularly involve intentional action and therefore does not readily fit the definition of what karma is about. It is an irony that modernists relate karma to social conditioning when the Buddha explicitly rejected this view, as mentioned by Gombrich.

The lively debate around these issues is still ongoing since these new interpretations of karma are frequently viewed as highly controversial and suspect by traditional Buddhists. The question therefore remains: does it work to bend the Buddhist understanding of karmic results? Traditional scholars would say that adaptation to modern times is certainly conceivable but only if it does not contradict the scriptures.

ⁱ Anguttara Nikaya, 6.63

ⁱⁱ Sutta Nipata 1366.

ⁱⁱⁱ Abhidharmakosha 2.64d.

^{iv} P.A.Payutto, Good, Evil and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching, Buddhadharma Foundation, Bangkok, 1995, p.1-2.

^v What the Buddha Taught by Walpola Rahula, p.23.

^{vi} Wright, Dale S. (2004), "Critical Questions Towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 11.

^{vii} Loy, David R. (2008), Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution, *Wisdom*.

^{viii} Burke, Erin (2003), "Karmic Calculations: The Social Implications of Karmic Causality in Tibet," *Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston*, Volume 2, 2003.

^{ix} McMahan, David L. (2008), *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford University Press.