



Fate and freedom

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

A common misunderstanding about karma, which is indeed part of the Oxford English dictionary definition, is that the law of karma is basically a law of fate. This is not the case in Buddhism. The idea of fate implies determinism: the idea that the future is determined by the past in a rigid way that allows for no changes or exceptions or freedom. In a theistic religion the idea of fate might also refer to a decision that God takes about your future, and which you are powerless to influence. The Buddha rejected fatalism because it does not allow for individual freedom and therefore undermines the very existence of morality. The law of karma is never presented as deterministic in Buddhism.

It is true that a particular karmic action will inevitably produce its associated karmic consequence if left unchecked. But the crucial point is that there are ways we can intervene and change the course of our future. As Buddhist masters put it, ‘the future is in our hands.’ We can divide the methods used into three groups: a) methods to purify past harmful actions before their effects fully ripen; b) methods to create a wholesome future by changing our behaviour now and acting ethically; and c) prayers when a loved one dies that are especially directed at purifying their karma.

- a. **Methods to purify past harmful actions before their effects fully ripen.** Buddhism offers a number of ways to purify past karma, and each Buddhist tradition places special emphasis on one or another of these ways. The practice of meditation and mindfulness helps us to become aware of our thoughts and mental habits, and in that process they can dissolve. The practice of loving kindness and compassion enables us to transform judgmental, aggressive or jealous thoughts into wholesome ones. The practice of confession (usually to peers) is also a way of coming to terms with past misdeeds. Regret and the resolve not to act in a harmful way again are also considered important for purifying karma. Finally, Vajrayana Buddhism employs visualisation and mantra as a practice of healing and transforming negativity.
- b. **Methods to create a wholesome future by changing our behaviour now and acting ethically.** Ethical conduct outlined in the Eightfold Path and the Bodhisattva Path provides the guidelines for moral behaviour. By following these guidelines, one accumulates virtue or ‘merit’ (*puñña*), which is the positive energy that will give rise to favourable circumstances in the future. Sometimes Buddhists will engage in deliberate acts of charity or kindness (generously giving to monks, for instance, or freeing animals being sent for slaughter) so these acts serve as an antidote to negative actions committed in the past.
- c. **Prayers when a loved one dies that are especially directed at purifying their karma.** The moment of death is critical for a Buddhist because it is at that juncture that one’s rebirth will be determined by one’s past karma. Buddhist rites for the dead involve directing the power of prayer to transferring



one's own merit to the deceased person to enable a more favourable rebirth. When a parent dies, some Buddhists will do a short retreat or go on pilgrimage as a conscious way of accumulating merit that is then directed to the deceased through prayer.

There are also very striking examples in the scriptures of individuals of doubtful moral character who regret their bad actions and completely change. One such story is that of Angulimala, the mass murderer converted by the Buddha; another is the conversion of the emperor Ashoka. These stories illustrate that we are not necessarily a slave to our past; it is possible to change the course of our future if our wish to do so is strong enough. They show that nobody should ever be judged on their actions alone because each of us has the ability to change.

*One who previously made bad karma but who reforms and creates good karma brightens the world like the moon appearing from behind a cloud.*¹

This discussion implies that if Buddhism seeks to defend the possibility of moral action, it must believe in some form of freedom. However, it is difficult to say that Buddhism accepts free will in the sense that this is understood in Western ethics. If we take free will to mean an inherent freedom of the mind to make moral judgments, then Buddhism does not accept this because it considers the mind to be conditioned. Just like everything else in the world, my mind is produced by causes and conditions, and in particular is conditioned by society, education, life experience, past karma and so forth as well as the functioning of my body. I would be deluding myself if I imagined that I was really free to make all the choices that present themselves to me in life. From a Buddhist point of view mental freedom is certainly possible but it is difficult to achieve. As Walpola Rahula reminds us, "Mind is only a faculty or organ like the eye or the ear. It can be controlled and developed like any other faculty."²

This is arguably the key to understanding the entire theory of karma. If the mind functions just like the sense organs, and is dependent on numerous factors to exist and to operate, then the intentions it produces are subject to natural laws just like other senses are subject to natural laws. And surely it is because many other philosophies and religions consider mind (or spirit) to be an ontological principle radically opposed to matter, and irreducible to matter, that they address morality quite differently. Non-Buddhists might hold, for example, that laws of causation apply only to matter and that the mind, being of a radically different nature, is not subject to them; this is one definition of freedom. Materialists might hold that there is no such thing as mind defined as a different entity from matter, and then mental freedom and morality are impossible to explain. The ontologies of other religions and some other philosophies allow for the God-given existence of moral values which human beings simply need to know and follow; what is good and bad is already laid down for us. This, too, is quite different from Buddhism where no absolute values exist as such in a metaphysical dimension.

In Buddhism, freedom of mind is present only when one is free of the Three Poisons; that is what 'liberation' means. Until then, thoughts and emotions are entirely at the mercy of the Poisons. The point of attaining nirvana is to liberate oneself from suffering by freeing oneself from the causes of suffering. Until one has reached nirvana, freedom is only ever relative and occasional; different people have different

¹ *Dhammapada* 173.

² Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p.21.



degrees of freedom according to the extent to which they are able to tame their minds. Within the human world, then, moral freedom is not absolute but relative. Only a buddha is totally free.

Discussion

We are usually very attached to our personal freedoms, but how free are we in reality? How do you understand the relationship between freedom and conditioning?

Compare the Buddhist view of freedom with Western theories of soft determinism.



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