



Karma and the law of karma: Introduction

Dominique Side

The Indian word *karma* is now in the Oxford English dictionary which defines it as: “(in Buddhism and Hinduism) the sum of a person’s actions in one of his or her successive existences, thought to decide his or her fate for the next.” This is generally what Westerners understand by karma; that it is about the moral consequences of our actions, and that it determines our future. Although that is basically correct, this dictionary definition refers primarily to the Hindu understanding. In Buddhism, for instance, karma does not entail any idea of fate.

Literally, the Pali word *kamma* and the Sanskrit word *karma* both mean ‘action,’ ‘doing.’ (We will use the Sanskrit word because that is the term that has current usage in English.) In the Buddhist theory of karma, the word is given a more specific meaning and refers only to ‘volitional action’ or ‘intentional action,’ in other words, an action that is deliberately willed. This means that Buddhists distinguish between actions that are carried out with no clear intention – like getting out of bed, brushing your teeth, walking down the street and so forth – and actions that are motivated by the wish to achieve a goal. Only volitional actions carry a moral consequence; other actions are morally neutral. On this point the Buddhist view differs from that of the Jains for whom all actions, whether intentional or not, carry the associated karmic consequences. For the Jains, for example, the karmic result of accidentally treading on an insect is the same as that of deliberately killing it.

Many of us use the word ‘karma’ quite loosely to refer not just to actions but to the results of action. If someone is in a difficult situation, a friend might turn to him and say, ‘it must be your karma.’ In fact, this is a mistake and in Buddhism karma does not technically refer to the effect of our actions which is known as the ‘fruit’ (*phala*) or ‘result’ of karma.

In addition to using the word karma for volitional action Buddhism also speaks of ‘the law of karma,’ and indeed it is the law of karma that this article is really about. We can define this as follows:

The law of karma is the moral law of cause and effect related to intentional action.

There are a number of points to note in this definition. First, we are dealing with the *moral* nature of action and the moral consequences of action, not all consequences. For example, if I throw your favourite cup on the floor the physical consequence of my action is that it breaks into pieces, but the moral consequence is something quite different. It might be that I acted out of anger or spite, that I was deliberately trying to upset you, so according to Buddhism the karmic result will come according to these intentions. You might fly into a rage and hit me, for example.

A second point to note is that the law of karma is a law of causation, a law that says that certain types of causes (actions) will bring about certain types of effects (karmic consequences). Here we are talking specifically about the laws of causation that govern moral actions, not about causation in general. Theravada philosophers identify five laws governing causation called the five *niyamas* or ‘natural laws.’



1. physical laws operating in the natural environment such as those that govern the weather, the way plants grow, gravity
2. genetic laws governing heredity, described as ‘as the seed so the fruit’
3. laws governing the workings of the mind, the process of perception and knowledge, and the way we react to things
4. moral laws governing intentional actions (the law of karma)
5. the generic law governing the causal relationships between all things, the law that determines how everything arises, exists and then ceases.¹

The five *niyamas* make it clear that we cannot ascribe everything that happens to the law of karma in a simplistic way. Several different types of law can operate together in any given situation. So, for instance, if we go out in winter without a coat and catch a chill, we can explain this by reference to physical laws that mean our bodies are affected by outside temperatures; we could explain it in terms of genetic laws, because we happen to have inherited from our mother a chronic weakness of the chest; and we could also ascribe it to our own mindlessness, acting thoughtlessly without taking care of ourselves, which means we acted out of ignorance. Any or all of these possibilities can be present.

The law or laws of karma set out what types of cause produce what types of effect. Many different factors are taken into account to explain this causal process, so karmic results never arise from one single cause, they are produced from a number of causes and conditions coming together. The law of karma is therefore not simplistic nor is it straightforward; on the contrary, it is complex and so many interdependencies are involved, spanning vast periods of time, that it is impossible for karma to be fully understood by the ordinary human mind. That is why the Buddha conceded that karma can only be thoroughly understood once one has attained enlightenment.



Windows into Buddhism is licenced under a Creative Commons 4.0 international licence.

¹ P.A. Payutto, *Good, Evil and Beyond: Karma in the Buddha's Teaching*, Buddhadharma Foundation, Bangkok, 1995, p.1-2.