



THE LAW OF KAMMA (CAUSE AND EFFECT): A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The teaching of Kamma as taught by the Buddha differs greatly from that which was believed at the time of Buddha. One of the three divergent views that prevailed at the time of the Buddha was whatever happiness or painful or neutral feelings that a person experiences all that is because of the supreme Deity or God. The Buddha contested this version by saying that if everything is left to the creation of almighty God then men will become murderers, thieves, unchaste, liars, and slanders, abusive, covetous and malicious. This world will be a chaos and placed disorderly. The Buddha was negotiating with 62 different sects of his time and 6 of them were very prominent worthy to be recognized. Of these schools of philosophies one was Purana Kassapa his doctrine was "Akriyawad". According to him the soul was not affected by Karma. One may do injury to others and one may get someone kill nothing affect the soul. Another school of thought was known as "Niyatiwada" led by Makkhali Ghosala. He propounded that the things are predetermined and no one can change it. No one can remove, increase or diminish the happiness. The third important school was "Ucchedwada" or Annihilationism headed by AjitKesakambal. He believed that there is no such thing as fruits or effects of any deeds to be enjoyed or suffered by the soul. The sorrow and unhappiness will end automatically. The Mahavir (NiganthaNathaputta) had his own school of philosophy called Chaturyamsamvarvad. He taught that soul had to undergo rebirth because of the bad kamma done in the past life and the present life. It is noteworthy that none of the above school of thoughts appeals to the Buddha and he therefore decided to seek light elsewhere. In his journey of finding the truth he expounded the Law of Kamma which was so different, so unique and so emancipatory that has benefitted the humanity for thousands of years and led the moral foundations of human civilization.

The researcher in this paper have attempted to discuss and highlight the nature, meaning Concept and working of Kamma in a Buddhist point of view and underline the tenants as to how it differs from the other Indian and eastern traditions.

Keywords: Kamma, Karma, Cause and effect, Buddhism



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1. Introduction

The doctrine of karma is found in almost all the eastern religions that includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism and Confucianism. However, the nature and working of the kamma doctrine are not same, they differs fundamentally from each other. The fatalistic theory of karma based on varna and caste propounded by the Vaidiakas and

Brahmins was refuted by Buddha. According to Brahmanical social philosophy, superiority and inferiority of a person depends upon birth into one of the four different castes (Varna). When we look at the Jainism, it also emphasised the doctrine of karma (Kriya) in a very deterministic way. For them every physical act both voluntary and involuntary constitutes Karma and is bound to have result in the past, present and future. Buddha on the contrary brought the Karma doctrine out of the purview of metaphysics and made it more practical. In the words of a Tibetan Buddhist Scholar Lama Thubten Yeshe,ⁱ "Karma is not something complicated or philosophical. Karma means watching your body, watching your mouth, and watching your mind. Trying to keep these three doors as pure as possible is the practice of karma." The Buddha emphasized on the psychological dimensions of Karma. The presence or an absence of Lobha, Dosa and Moha at the time of committing an action is going to determine its results. The Buddha called it as volitional activity which is the key (cause and effect) of the Buddhist theory of Karma. Karma determines the moral or immoral character of the person. There is no place for any permanent essence or entity like Soul (Aatman) in Buddhism. It upholds the law of impermanency, anatmavad, (No soul theory) at all levels. Lord Buddha presented the karma as one of the dispositions (Sankhara) / one of the aggregates of human personality. Disposition means putting things together (Sam+kara, from the root kr= to do)ⁱⁱ One of the important characteristic of the Buddhist theory of Karma that differs from the other religious theories is that the consequences of the any deed depends not only on the deeds itself but also the circumstances in which the act was performed and the nature of the person who performs it. The effect is conditional.ⁱⁱⁱ This goes in line with the principle of dependent origination one of the central doctrine of Buddhism. The law of cause and effect is another name for Karma in Buddhism. However, this principle of causality in Buddhism is also misunderstood by many. His holiness Dalai Lama in his book Path to Bliss has openly expressed his views in this regards in the following words:

"Some people misunderstand the concept of karma. They take the Buddha's doctrine of the law of causality to mean that all is predetermined, that there is nothing that the individual can do. This is a total misunderstanding. The very term karma or action is a term of active force, which indicates that future events are within your own hands. Since action is a phenomenon that is committed by a person, a living being, it is within your own hands whether or not you engage in action." (Dalai lama, 1991)^{iv} In short, the discourse of karma was present even in pre-Buddhist period. But was kept as secret and not discussed openly. The law of karma according to them was created by god and governed by God. In a way, it was

rule of God to control and govern the universe. Many of the ancient philosophers and asceticseven did not believed in Karma. To them soul is not affected by good or bad Kamma. It was in this context that Buddha formulated his theory of Karma. According to Dr Ambedkar the original theory of Karma in early Buddhism was meant for controlling, to maintain and run the universe in a harmonious way. It is the Kammaniyam and not God Niyam which maintains the moral order of the universe. ^vHe ways, it was an instrument (niyamas), rutuniyamas, Bijaniyamas, that governs the cosmic world and in the same way in order to run the human world in peaceful manner Buddha advocated for Karma based on Kusala and Akusalakamma and its vipaka or phala. Buddha's admonition was: Do KusalaKamma so that humanity may benefit by a good moral order which the kusalakamma helps to sustain; do not do AkusalaKamma for the humanity will suffer from the bad moral order which the Akusalakamma will bring about. ^{vi} Not many, argues Dr Ambedkar, are aware that law of kamma was propounded by the Buddha as an answer to a question, "How the moral order is maintained?" He further argues that Buddha's law of Kamma is concerned with the maintenance of the moral order of the universe and it has nothing to do with the fortunes and the misfortunes of the individual. At another place he says that the Buddha's Law of Karma applies only to the karma and its effect on present life, however, there is an extended doctrine of karma that includes karma done in the past life or lives. This is a very pernicious doctrine he argues, since, everything is predetermined by his past karma and there is no room left for human effort. This extended doctrine of Kamma is the later interpolation by the Brahmins so as to make karma doctrine same in both the traditions that is Hinduism and Buddhism.

2. What is Kamma?

Kamma is a Pali word meaning action. It is called Karma in Sanskrit. In general sense Kamma means all good and bad actions. It covers all kinds of intentional actions whether mental, verbal or physical-thoughts, words and deeds. In its ultimate sense Kamma means all moral and immoral volition. The Buddha says: 'Mental Volition, O Bhikkhus, is what I call action (kamma). Having volition one acts by body, speech and thought'. (AnguttaraNikaya III) ^{vii} The Kamma according to Buddhist perspective is neither fatalism nor a doctrine of predetermination. The past influences present but does not dominate it. Kamma is past as well as present. The past and present influences the future. The past is the background against which life goes on from moment to moment and future is yet to be materialised. Only

the present moment exists and the responsibility of using that present moment for good or bad lies with each individual.^{viii}

Kamma is nothing but Cause and Effect.

The principle of causality is at the heart of Kamma in Buddhism. That makes it a very scientific doctrine having no dogmatic elements. Every action produces an effect and it is cause first and effect later, we therefore say the kamma is nothing but cause and effect. To elaborate the causality, law of cause and effect further Ashin Thittila gives the example of throwing a stone and breaking of the glass window. He writes throwing a stone is an action; stone strikes a glass window and breaks it. Breaking is the effect of action throwing, but it is not an end. The broken window is now a cause for further trouble. Someone's money will have to go to replace it, he will not be able to save the money, that will make him disappointed and irritable. So, there is bound to be chain reaction of cause and effect, every effect is a cause and each cause is an effect in itself. We, therefore need to be very careful while doing any action effect of the action (Kamma) come back to us throwing stones in a pond of water create number of waves round the place where stone strikes the pond. If we sow a mango seed, a mango tree will come and bear mangoes and if we sow a Chili seed, a chilli plant will grow and produce chilis. The Buddha Says:

According to the seed that's sown
So is the fruit you reap therefrom,
Doer of the good will gather good,
Doer of the evil, evil reaps.^{ix}

We must never forget that kamma is always just. It neither loves nor hates, neither rewards nor punishes. It is never angry, never pleased. It is simply the law of cause and effect.

Cause of Kamma

Ignorance (avijja) or not knowing things as they truly are is the chief cause of Kamma. Depending on ignorance arises kammic activities (mental volition) that is to say avijja paccaya sankhara. Associated with avijja is its ally craving (tanha), the other root of kamma. All the good deeds of putthujana though associated with generosity-alobha, adosa and amoha are regarded as kamma because the two roots of ignorance and craving are dormant in it. ^x

The Doer of Kamma

Who is the doer of kamma and who reaps the fruits of Kamma that is an important question needs to be answer because there is no soul in Buddhism. While answering this question

Mahathera Buddhaghosha writes in Vissidhimagga:

“No doer is there who does the deed, nor is there one, who feels the fruit, Constituent parts alone roll on; this indeed is the right discernment.”^{xi}

Who then is the Doer of Kamma who Experiences the Effect?

Volition (chetana) is itself the door. Feeling (vedana) is itself the reaper of the fruits of action. In this case Buddhisan agrees with the Prof, William James who says, thoughts themselves are the thinkers. ^{xii}

3. Misconceptions Regarding Kamma

The misinterpretations or irrational views on Kamma are stated in Anguttar Nikaya which suggests that the wise will investigate and abandon the following views:

Everything is not Due to Past Kamma

As the stated in Atthasalini, depending on the difference in Kamma appears the difference in the birth of beings in high and low. Depending on the difference in Kamma appears the difference in the individual features of being beautiful and ugly.....depending on the difference in Kamma appears the difference in worldly conditions of beings as gain and loss, fame and disgrace, blame and praise happiness and misery. Although Buddhism attributes this variation to the law of Kamma, as the chief cause among many, it does not however assert that everything is due to Kamma. It is one of the twenty four causal conditions (paccaya) describe in Buddhist philosophy. Refuting this erroneous view that whatever good or bad happens to oneself is all due to some past deeds (pubbekatahetu), Buddha says that those who fall back on the former deeds as the essential reason, there is neither a desire to do, nor effort to do, nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed ^{xiii}This important text contradicts the belief that all physical circumstances and mental attitudes springs solely from past kamma. If the present life is totally conditions and controlled by our past Kamma then it leads to fatalism or pre-determinations and one will not be free to mould one's present and feature. Life under such condition would become a machine. Such fatalistic and pre-deterministic view does not fit into a Buddhist law of Kamma. ^{xiv}

Belief that all the Result of Creation by a Supreme Ruler

Some people consider that God is the creator of who sit up in the sky and operater the universe from there. For them, he gives rewards and punishment to his devotees. According to Buddhism the external agency has no rule in the governance of the life of human beings. The thing happens on their own, based on causality.

Belief that the Kamma Operates According one's Faith

Yet another misconception about Kamma is that it operates according to the faith they believe in. In fact, faith has nothing to do with kamma. Faith cannot remove or change the result of your actions. No amount of mantra can be of any use to reverse the result of any good or bad Kamma. The fate of the man does not depend upon what his religion is or what his sect is. Whatever may his religion he will reap the fruits as per the seeds he has sawn. So, Buddhism puts the Kamma above religion by declaring it just a law of nature. According to K. Sri Dhammananda (1998)^{xv} Kamma is a Karmik energy it is not a by product of any particular religion, even though every religion tries to explain this energy, according to Buddhism, this Karmik energy is an existing universal law without any religious label. Therefore, this Karmik law is unbiased to every person, whether they believe it or not; whether they have a religion or not.

4. Working of the Kamma

The Working of the kamma is well comprehended by Buddha. In order to understand the working of this difficult law we need to get acquainted with the thought-processes (chittavithi) as explained in Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma is the third basket of Tipitaka that predominantly attributed by the scholars to the study of mind and its thought processes. Mind or consciousness is the essence of beings and plays a major part in his making or breaking. As Said by Buddha in Dhammapada mind is the forerunner in all our affairs. Mind in fact is both the bitterest enemy and the greatest friend of oneself.

When a person is asleep and is in a dreamless state, he experiences a consciousness which is more passive than active. It is similar to the consciousness we experience at the time of conception and also at the time of death (cuti). The Buddhist philosophical term for such type of consciousness is bhavanga which means factor of life, cause or condition of existence or life- continuum. We experience this type of consciousness not only in dreamless state but also in our waking state. Arising and perishing every moment it flows on like a stream not remaing same for every two consecutive moments. Bhavanga, is so called because it is an essential condition for continued existence.^{xvi} Bhavanga consciousness which we always

experience as long as it is uninterrupted by an external stimuli or object. Now, when the bhavanga is interrupted by an object in a physical form before it, sense door consciousness (pancadvaravajjana) whose function is to turn the consciousness towards the object arises and passes away. Immediately after this arises the visual consciousness (cakkhuvinnana), which sees the object but knows nothing about it. This is followed by a moment of the reception of the object so seen (sampaticchana). Next to that arises the investigating thought -moment (santirana) which momentarily examines the object so seen. This is further followed by determining thought-moment (vothapana) when discrimination is exercise and free will may play its part. On this depends the subsequent psychologically important stage javana. It is at this stage that action is judged; whether it is moral or immoral. Kamma is performed at this stage. If viewed rightly (yoniso manasikara), it become moral. If viewed wrongly (ayoniso manasikara), immoral. Irrespective of the desirability or undesirability of the object presented to the mind, it is possible for one to make javana process moral or immoral.^{xvii}

The awakened beings have no kamma and no effect. They have ended the Kammic force that propels them to a new becoming, because their mind is pure and free of attachments. They have destroyed this endless flow of becoming again and again in the Samsara, The force that is accounted for countless births and deaths no more exists. They are freed from wheel of rebirth. They are liberated so to called in a Buddhist terminology.

5. Kamma and Rebirth

The dying man at his critical stage, according to Abhidhamma philosophy is presented a Kamma, Kamma nimitta or gati nimitta. By kamma means any good or bad done during his life time or immediately before the dying moment. It is a good or bad thought. If a dying person has committed one of the five heinous (garuka kamma), he will experience such kamma before his death. They are so powerful that it negates all other kammas and appears very vividly before the mind's eye. If he had done no such weighty action, he may take a kamma done immediately before death (asanna kamma) as an object of the dying thought-process. Such a Kamma is also called death proximate Kamma. In the absence of death proximate kamma, habitual good or bad act (acinna kamma) is presented. Failing all these some causal trival good or bad act (katta kamma) becomes the object of dying thought process. Kamma nimitta or "Symbol" means a mental reproduction of any sight, sound, smell, taste or idea which was predominant at the time of some important activity such as vision of knives or dying animal in case a butcher or a patient in case of a physician. The gati nimitta or "symbol of destiny" means some symbol of your feature destiny, the place of

feature birth, frequently present itself to the dying person and stamps it gladness or gloom upon their features^{xviii} If these indications of feature birth occurs and if they are badm they can alter by influencing the thoughts of the dying man. These indications of the feature destiny may be in the form of fire, forest, mother's womb or celestial mansions. There are some other Buddhis scholrs like Ashin Thittila from Myanmar who holds the view that the thought presented befor the Mind's eye are exceptional. As a rule last thought moment is conditioned by the general conduct of a dying person. In any case it is always advisable to remind the dying person of his good deeds and to turn his attention away from all his worldly bonds and worries.^{xix}

Conclusion

Kamma is a law in itself which operates in its own field without the intervention of any external independent ruling agency. The happiness and misery which we see as a common feature of humanity are the inevitable effects of the causes. From Buddhist point of view they are not rewards and punishments offered by some supernatural almighty or omnipotent divine ruler. But it is in accordance with natural law and justice. The past Kamma even though is the important cause of misery but it is not the sole cause, factors other than past Kamma are also responsible for the present conditions. Buddhism denies the existence of arbitrarily created immoral soul. According to Buddhist law of karma, the natural law brings their own rewards and punishments to the individual doer irrespective of whether human law of justice finds them or not. Finally, we can conclude that even though the Kamma principle is common in all the religions in the world, Buddhist law of Kamma fundamentally differs from them and it expounds the law in a natural, scientific way and keep it out of the purview of metaphysics, God and soul.

Notes and References

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xv *Ibid.*

xvi *Ibid P. 201*

xvii *Ibid.*

xviii *Ibid. P. 257*

xix *Ashin Thittila, (1987) Opcit. P. 192*