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ASCERTAINING THE NEXUS BETWEEN KARMA AND ECOLOGY

Anmolpreet Kaur

Ph.D. Research Scholar and Assistant Professor
Department of Philosophy
Miranda House College, University of Delhi
Delhi, India

Abstract

Buddha denied the existence of God and replaced it with the Law of Karma, which means for every action there would be subsequent consequences. We observe that Buddhist morality is primarily based upon compassion towards every being, teaching importance of interdependence within cosmos. The paper aims to discuss the theory of Karma as to how Buddhists recognize it under the domain of morality and its relation with ecology; how it works and influences our lives. The paper also discusses concisely how one produces good/bad karma and attempts to know the relation with ecology.

Keywords: Buddha, Karma, Ecology.

Introduction

The law of karma holds significant place with Indian philosophical tradition. Generally, it strands for the cause-and-effect relation; do an action and there will be consequences of that action. Sometimes, we tend to link the law of karma with the ecology. The two appears to be of different nature, one concerns the actions of the person and the other is regarding the environmental surroundings of people. However, the two are interconnected because of human interference. The paper aims to discuss the relation between karma and ecology with reference to Buddhism.

Let us first analyze the notion of karma as understood within the Buddhist school of Indian philosophy.

KARMA

Buddha denied the permanence of Brahmā as the creator of universe, leading to denial of God's existence. According to Buddha "man himself is the instrument of his will"¹. But if Brahmā is neither the guiding force nor the ruler of this cosmos then who is responsible for all that occurs in the cosmos? Who could be held responsible for old age, death, birth, and happiness and all human conditions? Buddha concludes it to be the Law of Karma² and declares that God too is caught in the grip of this law. In Buddhism, the concept of God is replaced with the law of Karma, which takes up the responsibility to punish/reward for one's deeds. The law of Karma (focusing the early Buddhist tradition: Theravada) is one of the most important teachings of Buddha, focus of which is upon humans and their actions.

Buddha in Aṅguttara Nikāya says, "O monks, that I call karma; having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind"³

Karma denotes doing of an intentional, motivational or volitional action emanating through any of the three mediums—thought (mind), word (speech) or deed (body); hence called the intentionally built action. The force behind our actions determines the motive and the immediate mental intention is called cetna. Buddha says:

"ye dhamma hetuppabhava tesam hetum yathagatoaha; tesam ca yo nirodha, evamvadi Mahasamano"⁴

This means that neither is there any creator nor any origin of this cosmos/universe. Karma could also be deciphered as cause and effect relation, i.e. doing of an action, will bring about subsequent consequences depending upon that action as discussed in the second noble truth (there is a cause of suffering, which means nothing comes out of nothing) and every birth is subject to the previous actions.

¹ Dr. Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe, Buddhist concepts old and new, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi (ch. 3 Law of Karma) p. 20.

² Karma in Sanskrit and kamma in Pali

³ Aṅguttara Nikāya III 415, Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist ethics, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000, (ch 1, The shared foundations of Buddhist ethics) p 17

⁴ Dr. Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe. Buddhist concepts old and new, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi (ch 3, Law of Karma)p.23



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According to Buddha this law holds validity with respect to each aspect of the world, affecting our lives, influencing our suffering and happiness. Karma presumes us to be responsible for our fate and makes us learn our obligations (moral and spiritual) towards others and ourselves. Our actions define our character. Our deeds follow us from afar, and what we have been makes us what we are.⁵

Social identity, rebirth are the consequences of karma. Based upon our karma, we take birth in 'six realms.'⁶ When and under what circumstances will a person take birth, to what parents, his nature, qualities everything is determined by this law. Martine Batchelor says, our every action leaves an imprint because of which we have rebirth (kammayoni).⁷

Peter Harvey says doing a good action is appreciated since they advance goodness to the doer while bad actions are discouraged as they promote badness. Good actions are bright, moral, lovely which bring good results, having qualities of punya (auspicious, fruitful), leading to the purity of mind and thoughts, thereby to good future.⁸

Mind is the supreme forerunner as all our thoughts, words, deeds yield through it. Our thinking makes up our good/bad mental karma. An attempt to undertake bad action amounts to bad mental karma and giving up such thoughts leads to good mental karma. Buddhism furnishes two qualities which govern our actions: (a) hiri- self-respect (encourages us to do good actions); (b) ottappa- thought of future consequences (prevents us from doing bad).⁹

In Saṃyutta Nikāya it is said that Karmic results depend upon the purity of mind of the giver and the manner of act performance. It is said that if someone feeds a monk with a hope of receiving favourable results (of being born rich or a celestial birth), but regrets afterwards, then he will get mixed results, such that he will be born rich on rebirth (for feeding monk), but will be deprived of enjoying his wealth (because of that regret).¹⁰ Majjhima Nikāya says that the purity of the gift is determined by the donor, recipient, and the gift itself. the gift should be "rightfully acquired", and intention of the giver should be pure.¹¹

Karma can also be compared to a seed i.e., when planted (an action done), it will bring fruit (results). Whatever seed we sow, we will reap that fruit. For instance: if we plant the seeds of banana, the fruit we will get would be banana; it cannot turn out to be a mango. Similarly, if our actions are governed by greed, hatred etc., then we are planting suffering for our future. Thus, the karma doctrine can be summarized in two sections:¹²

- (I) Cause and effect
- (II) Quality of mind while performing an action

There are three categories of actions and these are¹³

- (I) Formative/Projecting- shaping our rebirth, its identity, body etc.
- (II) Accomplishing- how we will come into being.
- (III) Completing- set forth the conditions of our lives (happiness/suffering).

There is another aspect of karma which helps in the development of humans. As Buddha says that there is no permanent self- "I", this means that we are constantly changing; this change is unique in each one of us, therefore we consciously/unconsciously create

⁵Dr. Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe. Buddhist concepts old and new, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi (ch 3, Law of Karma) p.23

⁶ Six realms are: heavenly/God's realm, humans realm, titans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings

⁷ Martine Batchelor, The Spirit of the Buddha, Manjula Publishing House, 2011

⁸ Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist ethics, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000, (ch1 The shared foundations of Buddhist ethics), p 17,18 ; opposite of *punya* is *apunya*

⁹ Aṅguttara Nikāya I.51 and Atthasalini 124-7 [Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist ethics, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000, (ch 1 The shared foundations of Buddhist ethics), p 17, 11]

¹⁰ Saṃyutta Nikāya I 91-2

¹¹ Majjhima Nikāya III 257 (Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist ethics, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000, (ch-1 The shared foundations of Buddhist ethics), p21

¹² Joseph Goldstein: A Buddhist view of Karma ; p 62

¹³ Geshe Sonam Rinchen, How karma works, ch.11 Advice about actions; p 85



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different states of mind, which gradually cultivate our mind, resulting into happiness or suffering. For eg, if we experience a particular emotion repeatedly, then that emotion becomes stronger (like anger or loving-kindness), and accordingly it will shape our character and personality.

In *culakammavibhanga sutta*, Subha asks Buddha: What are the causes and conditions of inequality among people? For people are seen to be short-lived/long-lived, sickly/healthy, ugly/beautiful, influential/uninfluential, poor/wealthy, low-born/high-born, stupid/wise? Why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior?¹⁴

To this Buddha replies that "beings are the owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, originate from their actions, bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is actions that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior".¹⁵

This implies that depending upon our actions, our next birth will be decided. Killing people result in short-life and non-killing, in long-life. Injuring others would result in sickness while non-injuring, in being reborn as healthy. Anger would result in ugliness and opposite of it, in beauty. Envious people reborn as uninfluential while content as influential. Those who feed recluse/monks would reborn as wealthy and those who don't, as poor. Humble would be high-born and arrogant- low-born. Visiting Brahmin would result in wise rebirth and stupid otherwise.

To explain karma Buddhist often quote the example of *Aṅgulimāla*¹⁶. *Aṅgulimāla* (finger garland) wanted to kill Buddha. While Buddha was walking at a normal pace yet *Aṅgulimāla* could not catch him. He then orders Buddha to stop and ask the reason of why he could not reach Buddha. To this Buddha explained that he will have to stop harming others in order to catch him. Hearing this *Aṅgulimāla* gave up killing, became a monk and attained arhantship.

When as a monk *Aṅgulimāla* asked for alms he was insulted by people as they could not forget his previous evil deeds. Buddha explained it to be the result of his previous bad actions which *Aṅgulimāla* cannot escape.

The motive behind this story is to enlighten people that our sufferings are the outcome of our actions i.e., our present sufferings are the installment against the loan of bad actions committed by us. Generally, people understand their sufferings as punishment but Buddha says that we need to introspect to know the reason for our present condition.

According to Buddha (in *Dhammacakka Sutta*), this universe also has a cause which he calls craving- *trṣṇā*.¹⁷ Our cravings keep expanding and make us undertake all negative actions. Craving for wealth, power, life, to live more etc, would bring birth after birth. Buddha explained this craving in *Pratītyasamutpāda* whereby the first link, ignorance serves as a root cause of craving leading to our sufferings. Ignorance keeps us in the cycle of birth and death. The sole manner to break this chain is the removal of ignorance and breaking the *bhavachakra/dharmachakra*, leading to nirvana.

Karma has a close connection with eight-fold path as it flows from right speech, right thought, making up its essence. Buddhist law of Karma has no linkage with predestination. Whatever we do today, will bring the results tomorrow and nothing is pre-determined.

Having discussed the law of karma, let us now understand the relation between karma and ecology.

KARMA AND ECOLOGY

Buddhist morality is primarily based upon compassion for every creature. It provides basis for interdependence within cosmos, thereby Buddhism can be described as an Ecological Religion. Within Pali Canon¹⁸, we observe how early Buddhism talks

¹⁴ *Majjhima Nikāya* 135 *culakammavibhanga sutta*

¹⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya* 135, *culakammavibhanga sutta*

¹⁶ *Majjhima Nikāya* 86 *Aṅgulimāla sutta*

¹⁷ *Samyutta Nikāya* V 248, *Dhammacakka Sutta*

¹⁸ *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I 160, ; Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, *Buddhism and Ecology*, MLBD, New Delhi-1994, (ch 2 The hills wherein my soul delights) p 20 [Buddha emphasizes this idea of relation between morality and environment with the help of five natural laws that operate in the cosmos such as : season-law (*utuniyama*), seed-law (*bijaniyama*), mind-law (*cittaniyama*), action-law (*kammaniyama*), and phenomenal/universal-law(*dha*



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about a close relationship between environment and human morality, having karma theory at its center, demonstrating their relation of reciprocity i.e. change in one would necessarily cause change in other, thereby having a cause-effect relationship.

Buddha says that a person would be called wise if he forebears from harming others.¹⁹ Buddhism emphasizes upon 'right livelihood' such that one shouldn't indulge in five kinds of trades²⁰ that are detrimental to other forms of lives.

Karma along with rebirth provides a link between environment and our actions. It teaches us to sympathize and practice non-violence with the motive of doing good actions. So, one should not kill any being because: (I) animal life is most painful, harming them would create bad karma, resulting into suffering; (II) the animal could have been our father or brother etc.-this creates a relation within cosmos. Thus, the possibility of our dead relatives living the life of an animal and fear of being reborn as an animal, prevents us from harming animals. This way, theory of Karma creates a sense of oneness- that entire universe is our family and is related to us. We do not know our parentage of previous birth and so we should treat all as our parents. This concept is relevant in Pratiṭyasamutpāda as well that everything is linked through time and space.

To explain the point, a story can be narrated. Once an aged couple approached Buddha and called him their son, complaining that Buddha did not show up to them. Buddha explained that he had so many births and parents that entire cosmos is his parent image and he is the son of all. This gesture generates a feeling of loving-kindness towards every entity.²¹

We need trees for our basic needs so we should maintain non-violence towards vegetation. Buddha's life's important events also took place under trees (his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, death etc). Buddha says, "Here, O Bhikkhus, are the roots of trees, here are empty places: meditate"²². He taught his disciples to 'resort to natural habitat', where they can meditate in silence, unaffected by worldly activities, thus leading to attainment of liberation. Therefore, trees are important for our social agendas. But Ian Harris²³ rightly points out that trees within Buddhism are neither sentient nor non-sentient, which means they have an ambiguous status.

All things are inter-related and inter-dependent, including our own existence, therefore, we should co-exist with nature in harmony. Just as bees make honey from different flowers without harming them, we should also live in harmony with nature, without harming it in our self-fulfilment.²⁴ Idea of inter-relatedness will help us perform spiritually and morally good actions, which will serve two-fold purpose (I) good actions leading to good karma, thereby good rebirth and (II) compassion towards every entity within nature. And thus, karma and ecology go hand in hand with karma and rebirth showing us to be a part of the same cycle and that we should respect every being.

Buddha in Aggañña Sutta²⁵ preaches as to how moral decline emanating through greed, hatred affect our natural environment and human well-being. It explains that human life expectancy would decrease, until life span is reduced to ten-years and marriageable age to five-years²⁶. Martine Batchelor says, "Moral decline is a double-edged sword, affecting humanity and nature".²⁷

Thus, we should inculcate compassion (metta) towards all sentient beings. It enables us to understand our own suffering and that of others and promotes loving-kindness and equanimity.²⁸ We should always be mindful of our actions, four postures²⁹ and it's

mmaniyama);translated as physical-law, biological-law, psychological-law, moral-law, and causal-law, respectively.

¹⁹ Aṅguttara Nikāya II 179

²⁰Aṅguttara Nikāya V.177 (five trade practices prohibited by Buddha are : trading of weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat, trading in intoxicants, and trading in poison; because these practices may harm the nature.)

²¹ Jātaka story 68 (J.I.308-9)

²²Majjhima Nikāya 118, [Ananda k. Coomaraswamy, Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt, 2003, (part2, chX II, Early Buddhism and nature), p161]

²³ Ian Harris, Buddhism and Ecology, in Damien Keown (ed), Contemporary Buddhist ethics, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, p117

²⁴ Digha Nikaya III 188

²⁵Digha Nikāya(III 80) Aggañña sutta

²⁶Dhammapada Atthakatha III 854, Cakkavattisihanada Sutta

²⁷Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, Buddhism and Ecology, MLBD, New Delhi 1994, (ch 2 The hills wherein my soul delights) p28

²⁸Majjhima Nikāya 62, (Buddha explaining his son Rahula that compassion begins with "I" such as May I/You/All beings be happy and so on.)



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impact upon the world³⁰, to make sure that we are not harming others. Being mindful means we should be aware of our actions' consequences. Buddha constantly preached the lesson of equanimity, that all life (big/small) is precious, equal and all sufferings are common. Thus, the four divine-abidings (Brahmavihara) construct Buddhist environmental ethics, giving way to accumulation of good karma at the same time.

Padmasiri DeSilva³¹ says "an authentic follower of the Buddha would be concerned about the consequences of his actions on others, themselves, society, future-generation and non-human world, as a good environmentalist would do." But it has problems which we will discuss in the next section.

PROBLEM

While understanding theory of karma, one can observe its ambiguous nature too. Why are we so much concerned about future? We should give appropriate reasons for not harming others, that it is immoral to do so and not merely the fear of rebirth. This is so because none has seen one's future nor could it be ascertained. Also, there is a need to discuss as to what all would come under generation of good/bad karma such as our actions within dreams, thinking processes of good/bad mental karma etc.

Buddha, the enlightened, perpetrated so many good karmas but where was he reborn? Is it really true that having attained Nirvāṇa, he freed himself from the cycle of birth and death? There is no evidence as to whether he was born again or not or whether he freed himself from saṃsāra.

Buddhism's first precept of non-injury (ahiṃsā), which is mandatory for monks and laypeople, requires Buddhists to be vegetarian. But here we find a contradiction as pointed by Ian Harris³² that if it is so then, why did Buddha himself accepted meat? It is justified on the grounds that only 'intentional' killing would bring karmic consequences. Also, monks can accept meat on three conditions, that they should not have either heard or seen or suspected the slaughter³³. Therefore, if only the intention behind action is considered, would it mean that the 'unintentional' by-product of vast industrial expansion also is of no concern to Buddhism? Moreover, we find that the precept of non-injury is flexible in its application, as lay-people can undertake farming, during which many insects get killed unintentionally but monks are prohibited from practicing any such activity. It seems to be controversial as to whether lay-people would get karmic results for 'unintentional' killing of insects or not? And if the answer is affirmative that there will be no bad result since act was 'unintentional', then why monks do not practice it? Does it not signify that Buddhism is maintaining kind of hierarchy even within humans, keeping monks above- pure, upholders of ahiṃsā etc and laity -lower, doing unintentional killing, feeding monks and continuing sangha?

It now seems to be contradictory as to how karma theory can inspire reverence and construct environmental ethics within Buddhism. Either this is problematic or we are selfish in protecting environment since we need balanced environment to stay healthy along with a good rebirth.

On one hand Buddhism talks about equanimity that all life is equal and precious, generate feeling of oneness belonging to same cycle of saṃsara. On the other hand, it maintains a hierarchy saying that humans are potential Buddha, thereby assigning indirect superiority to humans, an idea not acceptable to environmental ethics and ecology. P. Waldau³⁴ criticises Buddhism saying animals being part of saṃsaric cycle, are deprived of being able to attain liberation for three reasons that they are inferior to humans existentially, morally and intellectually.

Buddhism believes that there is no permanent self, so what is that which gets spilled over to the next life? And how would it function according to the past? Moreover, we don't have any scientific proof of rebirth. Being the upholders of the doctrine of impermanence, according to which everything is impermanent, Buddhists may consider environmental issues such as pollution etc. to be impermanent. Even from the teleological point of view, we find a problem with Buddhist theory of impermanence, as to why

²⁹Samyutta Nikāya, XII, 18,43, four postures are- sitting, walking, standing and lying down.

³⁰Majjhima Nikāya 123

³¹Padmasiri De Silva, Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism, Macmillan Press,1998, (ch3, Buddhist ethics) p72

³²Ian Harris, Buddhism and Ecology, in Damien keown(ed), Contemporary Buddhist ethics, Richmond, Surrey:Curzon Press2000, pg115

³³Jivikasutta, Tikotiparisuddha rule

³⁴Paul Waldau, Buddhism and Animal Rights, in Damien keown (ed), Contemporary Buddhist ethics, Richmond Surrey:Curzon Press,2000, p81-112



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should we care about the nature, protect or preserve it when nothing is permanent? But would this be acceptable to environmentalists? Our existence, indeed depends upon various things in nature, but we cannot live in absolute harmony. We unintentionally kill insects while walking, cutting wood, farming etc. Should we stop walking then? No, we cannot. But would that mean we do not love or respect nature? We might be required to kill a mosquito as it could cause dengue. So, if in order to save oneself, one harms it, would this be a bad Karma bringing bad results? Should one save oneself or indulge in creating wholesome karma, practicing loving-kindness and not harming anyone as all life is equal? This needs to be thrown some light over.

When Buddha says we should abandon five kinds of trading, would that concept work today? Presently, for many people, these trading practices are the means of their bread and butter. No doubt they are not good practices but when it comes to one's survival, it will have some justifiable grounds. This can be charged with anachronism and antiquarian thinking as discussed by Waldau.³⁵

CONCLUSION

Due to our increasing craving, greed for more possessions we have become violent towards nature. Also craving makes us undertake negative actions. Therefore, craving is the common cause for degradation of karma and environment. We should make morality and spirituality an integral part of our living for maintaining balance in nature and accumulating wholesome karma. Buddha teaches us to follow the middle-path i.e. avoid both extremes of self-deprivation and self-indulgence. We should control our greed, avoid consumerism and live sociably within environment. We also need to remove the misconceptions about 'I', 'self', as we are just a small part of the cosmos, existing because of nature and not vice-versa.

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24. Digha Nikaya III188
25. Ibid III80
26. Dhammapada Atthakatha III854
27. (18) pg 28

³⁵Paul Waldau, Buddhism and Animal Rights, in Damien keown (ed), Contemporary Buddhist ethics, Richmond, Surrey:Curzon Press,2000, p84,85 ; anachronism means transplanting old ideas in new theory; and antiquarian thinking implies the study of history.



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28. Majjhima Nikaya 62
 29. Samyutta Nikaya XII18,43
 30. Majjhima Nikaya123
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