

# Cause and Effect: A Study on the Concept of Karma in the Buddhist Tradition

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## Abstract

The most fundamental aspect of the Buddhist tradition is the concept of Karma. Karma is the basis of Buddhist ethics and principles that maintain that the entire universe is bound to a similar law. Our actions will decide what will happen to us, for we caused it. The current state of our existence is with our past Karma, and the present action will determine our future condition of existence. Karma is a special instance of cause and effect, according to which all our actions of body, speech, and mind are causes and all our experiences are their effects. The Law of Karma explains why each individual has a unique mental disposition, a unique physical appearance, and unique experiences. These are the various effects of the countless actions that each individual has performed in the past. We cannot find any two people who have created the same history of actions throughout their past lives. So we cannot find two people with identical states of mind, identical experiences, and identical physical appearances. Therefore, each person has different individual Karma, and each individual has to face the action of one's own Karma. Thus, the significance of this study is to determine the true concept of karma and its implication beyond our life in the Buddhist tradition.

**Keywords:** Karma, Cause and effect, the Buddhist tradition, doctrine, Buddhist ethics, existence

## Introduction

The concept of Karma is the ultimate doctrine of causality of cause and effect. All kinds of actions, negative or positive, bring about its result. Karma can be good and evil, right and wrong, impartial and partial, depending on the person's intent to do the action, and the motivation of one's action is significant (Bruce, 1990). For every action we perform, we experience a similar result. If a gardener sows a seed of maize, a stem of maize and not a potato will grow, and if we do not sow any seeds, then nothing will grow.

Similarly, if we perform positive actions, we will experience good results of happiness rather than unhappiness. If we perform negative actions, we will experience only unhappy results, and if we perform neutral actions, we will experience neutral results. For example, the main cause of the suffering of poverty in the present life is stealing in the past life. Usually, we assume that bad experiences are based on the conditions of this present life, which will also decide our future Karma. In reality, however, most of our experiences in this life are caused by actions we committed in past lives (Rinchen, 2006).

Moreover, we can begin to understand how our experiences in this life arise from actions in previous lives and how the results of actions increase over time, just as a small seed can grow into a large tree. We cannot experience its effect (Longchenpa, 1308-1364). We can see that understanding Karma helps us positively accept what we may experience. Understanding karma will help us develop the wisdom to change our situation positively and generate the inner strength to accept positive things that we cannot change. This will enable us to enjoy a more peaceful and happier life. Every individual is exclusively responsible for the consequences of their Karma as the action done by the individual cannot be transferred to the

other person, and one cannot avoid the result of their Karma (Dasgupta, 1940). Although there is no beginning to Karma, there is an end to Karma. The chain of Karma could be broken or destroyed through the eightfold path practice (Longchenpa, 1308-1364).

The paper's basis is to study and understand the fundamental ideas of the concept of cause and effect "Karma" in the Buddhist tradition, which is the ultimate way to understand some of the underlying ideas in Buddhist teachings (Santina, 1984 p.80-84). The paper adopted the qualitative methods to fulfill the objectives of this research with data based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources of consulted materials: government documents, reports, journal articles, online resources, newspaper articles, magazines, Buddhist sutras, with core concepts of Buddhist ideas encouraging the readers towards the introduction to the concepts of cause and effect in the Buddhist tradition.

## Literature Review

Karma refers to the actions of our body, speech, and mind. Every action we take leaves an imprint on our minds, and each imprint eventually produces its effect. Our mind is like a field, and performing actions is like sowing seeds in a field. Virtuous actions sow the seeds of our future happiness, and non-virtuous actions sow the seeds of our future sufferings. Because of our Karma, we are born in an impure, contaminated world, which leads us to so many difficulties. Our actions are impure because our mind is contaminated (Longchenpa, 1308-1364).

In the entire Buddhist teaching, the word Karma and its concept has been elaborated repeatedly, which is comprehended as an ethical system of reprisal negative karma, and good Karma. Karma is the universal truth of cause and effect, and it is indeed not associated with ethical conduct or morality (Bruce, 1990). Any action that deviates from understanding the truth, such as all conditioned things are transitory, can result in negative Karma. The actions that reveal us closer to understanding such truth disturb emotions that bring suffering, resulting in positive Karma Bodhi B. (2000). Simply put, it is not for anyone to judge, but every individual is solely responsible for knowing the motivation behind their activity. Dasgupta (1940) states that everything in this "phenomenal world comes into existence due to specific causes and conditions" p.64). There is nothing that does not depend on reason and needs to exist. For instance, the emptiness of our body relies on the body. If there is nobody, then there cannot be the emptiness of the body. This example teaches us that everything arises out of cause and condition. Bruce (1990) explains that the Buddhist concept of "Karma is grounded in the interpretation of cyclic existence, the wheel of existence, and the fundamental idea of desire as the root cause of all pain and suffering" (p.109). Therefore, the illustration of the wheel of existence will provide us with logical evidence to appreciate the concept of Karma and the principle of its cause and effect influencing future suffering. In the Buddhist tradition, all things exist through previous reasons and conditions of the exact nature and essence. "The cause of the same entity in the last phase can give rise to the same quality and nature" (Bodhi, 2000, p.211).

In the Buddhist tradition, Karma can be classified into wholesome Karma or good Karma and unwholesome Karma or bad Karma. (Santina, 1984 p.85). In addition to this

classification, Karma is subdivided into six types: virtuous, non-virtuous, unmoving, changing, cause, and result (Longchenpa, 1308-1364). Thus, all these are based on the experience of one's body, speech, and mind. All physical actions, thoughts, and speech caused our past actions. Padma Tseka Sutra states that The Buddhist idea of Karma is that in one of our previous lifetimes, we might have done something similar to our actions in the present life. All negative Karma can be condensed into the ten types of non-virtues; killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, harsh speech, slander, idle words, craving, ill-will, and perverted views in Buddhist teaching. The first three non-virtues are related to the physical body, and the others correspond to speech and the mind (Lobzang,1998). Therefore, all positive Karma can be subsumed into the ten types of virtues. To accomplish the ten virtues, one must refrain from the activities of the ten non-virtues.

Karma is the result of a person's action and the action itself. It is an infallible series of cause and effect, which is the repercussion or the reward (Bodhi, 2000). Every being is bound to be influenced by the Law of Karma. The action of a person will determine what will happen to him, for he caused it with his actions. Karma is a core part of belief in many religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. All living creatures are responsible for their actions and the results of their actions. The Karma of the afflicted act is the root cause of all sufferings as diverse causes of Karma, in which living beings are created. In the Abhidharma sutra, varieties of the world are born from Karma. The force of Karma creates the Karma of mind, thought in the mind. Therefore, our mind and its thoughts give rise to all forms of Karma. The mind and its thoughts give rise to the Karma of the mind, which is the Karma of consciousness. Thus, it is the Karma of the physical body and speech.

Anuruddha (2000) explains that the mind is the Karma of consciousness, and through the force of the Karma of consciousness, the Karma of the physical body and speech manifest. The repercussion of Karma is inevitable, which means that unless we develop an antidote to Karma, our actions will come without waste. The karmic action will remain dormant for a long time, and when it encounters the proper conditions, the result of Karma matures. Due to our fear of the misery, we will experience in our cyclical life and our intimidation by karmic deeds, we begin to believe in karma and its effects.

Bruce R. (1990) explains that the Karma of all living beings will not be wasted even in a hundred Kalpa; when all the causes and conditions come together, the result will mature. This concludes that Buddha enunciated the concept of karma through a precise and succinct formula known as "Dependent Origination" It means the moral causation of all life; the conditioned arising of all those psycho-physical phenomena.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper followed the qualitative literature approaches with the close textual documents analysis with the systematic reading of primary and secondary sources to support and find out the different perceptions and concepts of different people on the cause and effect of Karma in the Buddhist tradition. To achieve the purpose of the study, a wide range of literature written from different backgrounds of Buddhist expertise, Buddhist sutras, and online resources was compared, explored, and analyzed as the different people interpret differently in different conditions. To come to a common consensus on the concepts of karma in the Buddhist tradition, the study adopted the literature method as it gives a platform to compare, and analyzed the different interpretations of the study.

## Results and Discussion

An accumulation of our Karma determines the distinction of existence among sentient beings. Unlike human beings and other living beings, some are born rich. Others are born in poor conditions. Some are intelligent, and others are dull, pleasant, and repulsive. Some live long. Others die relatively young. All those dissimilarities are mainly due to differences in Karma (Rinchen, 2006). Likewise, a similar kind of analogy is recorded in Majjhima Nikaya III, that it is Karma that divides people into high and low.

The Dhammapada text explains that, not in the sky, not amidst the sea, nor anywhere else, on the earth is there a place where a living being may be freed from the outcomes of evil deeds. It also states that the evil deed is done by oneself, and one suffers, the evil deed can be refrained by oneself, and one is purified by oneself. Therefore, we must understand that the consequence of karmic actions is unavoidable, and it is the infallible law of individual responsibility based on one's action. Understanding karma enables us to live in harmony with daily people and conditions. By recognizing that the leading causes of our experiences are our previous actions of body, speech, and mind, motivated by delusions, we can learn to accept our experiences, both good and bad. Also, recognizing that our actions determine our future experiences encourages us to live a positive way of life, acting now in a way that brings greater happiness to others.

On the other hand, if we do not accept Karma or fail to live in accordance with a positive understanding of it, we will have to experience again and again the unwanted effects of our negative actions again and again (Rinchen, 2006). Karma is an essential aspect of Buddhist teaching, which comes under four noble truths. If our actions are motivated by greed or aggression, it results in negative Karma. If our actions and thoughts are inspired by loving kindness and forbearance, we give rise to positive Karma (Rinpoche, 2003). Buddhist teaching has solutions to karmic actions. For instance, being mindful can be a remedy for negative karmic deeds because we do not allow ourselves to provoke negative actions if we are aware. Understanding the concept of Karma will help us clear our past desire and develop genuine compassion for others (Hopkins, 1992).

In the Tibetan language, "*Lanchak*," where "*lan*" stands for receiving and "*chak*" for attachment, refers to the karmic obligation we owe to other living things when we take something good from them or hurt them. This karmic debt will later ripen and manifest in our lives depending on the infallible Law of Karma. (Rinpoche, 2001) explains that this karmic debt (*Tib: Lanchak*) can be understood as the residue that revisits us from the connection from the previous life to the present life stimulated by the re-happening of habitual responses. All ignorant and deluded beings are subject to Karma and are victims of karmic debt. No living beings subject to Karma can escape this repercussion. Everything we experience in this life and whatever happens to us is caused by our karmic debts, which are unavoidable. As every living being is karmically connected and indebted to each other, there is no single being who hasn't been our parents, children, friends, and enemy in one of our lifetimes. We experience ailments, success, and failure due to our karmic debts. We go through excruciating pain because of our karmic debt. We experience suffering because of our karmic debt toward the world and closely related people. Therefore, the karmic debt (*Tib: Lanchak*) will not spare us

but will follow until the debt is cleared with the practice of Buddha dharma and creating good Karma.

(Rinpoche, 2001) explains that we have to experience various suffering and problems throughout our lives without choice. We do not understand what actions we need to abandon and what actions we need to practice. There will be no basis for experiencing suffering and problems if we have this knowledge and practice. Understanding the Law of karma will naturally develop and strengthen the determination and intentions in our daily lives that will purify our actions and minds. Since our state of mind determines our experiences, we will eventually experience a pure world where there is no suffering, conflict, or unhappiness but only peace, joy, and everlasting happiness. The karmic result may not mature immediately, but it is inevitable (Karmapa).

## Conclusion

The Buddhist tradition believes that the cause of our existence is nothing physical but our karmic force. Our physical body will continue to manifest and exist as long as the power of our Karma is active. The physical body can display at any given time once our habitual patterns or karmic imprints in the ground-of-all consciousness have fully matured. It is said that the material existence, the universe, and the body of living beings are but the result of the ground-of-all consciousness.

The Karma we have accumulated in this or our past lives, be it positive or negative, will infallibly bring its result. Through karmic influence, we create more suffering delusions and stimulate more actions. Until the seed of bad Karma and karmic debts are entirely uprooted, we will continue to exist and experience suffering as the wheel of samsara continues to go around. Unless we repay our karmic debt and repair our breaches, Samaya, we may not remove our obstacles and sufferings. Therefore, to remove our obstacles and sufferings and repay our karmic debts, practice the dharma daily with pure devotion, refrain from negative thoughts and behaviors, and try to accumulate merit positively. Understanding the law of Karma discourages one from performing unwholesome actions that have suffered as a fruit. (Santina, 1984 p.85)

Therefore, once we have purified our minds and other delusions, our actions will naturally be pure. As a result of our pure actions or pure Karma, everything we experience will be pure. We will abide in a pure world, with a pure body, enjoying pure enjoyments and surrounded by pure beings who no longer suffer impurity or problems.

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### About the Author

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