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## CRITICALLY EXAMINE THE BUDDHIST VIEW ON DETERMINISM AND KARMA THEORY

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### Abstract

One of the most significant theories in the philosophy of human existence is the theory of karma which also causes the most misunderstanding and controversy. Some people think karma is predetermined and that it must be accepted as such. In Buddhism, karma (Pāli: kamma) means action with intention (cetanā) manifested through the body, speech, and thoughts. This paper used qualitative literature approaches with textual document analysis and in-depth reading of primary and secondary sources in order to critically examine the Buddhist perspective on determinism and karma theory. Our intentions affect each and every action we take, whether it is good or bad. This means that we are accountable for our behavior. According to the Buddhist perspective on karma, karma can be changed rather than being determined. The law of cause and effect is always in effect, and every person in this world has a different karma. Everything is changeable and not permanent and unchanging because of the impermanence and non-self of all things and phenomena, including karma.

**Keywords:** Karma, Determinism, Volition, Impermanence, Non-self.

### Introduction

There are doctrines that provide a point of view on human life and cosmology in the treasure of Buddhist teachings and philosophy, and they all provide an extensive description of the nature and practices of Buddhism related to the cosmos and humans. The doctrines that present about human existence, such as the doctrines of five aggregates, the four elements, impermanence, non-self, and the Twelve Links of Interdependent arising; doctrines that are presented about the universe, such as the doctrines of dependent origination, impermanence, etc. The concept of karma is one of the most crucial human life doctrines - as well as one of the subjects of the most confusion and debate. Some individuals believe that karma is determined, so it cannot be changed and must be lived with. With this understanding of karma, they believe that those who suffer will suffer their whole lives, those who are happy will be happy their whole lives, etc., and that leads to many views such as no giving alms, no making offerings, there is no good or evil, no cause and effect, no this life or next life.

## Literature review

The Sanskrit term karma (Pāli: Kamma) refers to the actions of the body, speech, and mind. Karma is described in the Nibbedhikasutta as an action that is connected to volition (cetanā) which is manifested by means of the body, speech, and mind: “It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind.” (Bodhi 2012: 963) “Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti – kāyena vācāya manasā.” (Thanissaro 2010) Contact is the origin of karma in the endless samsara universe. Karma is one mode that the mind as a whole function, according to Nalini Devdas, who wrote about it in the *Cetanā and the Dynamics of Volition in Therāvada Buddhism*: “In the Upanisad, volition is a mode of functioning of the citta as a whole. There is no evidence of an autonomous principle of volitional energy or ‘will’ that governs the citta. Though manas is often featured as a centre of decision-making, manasyati connotes the entire citta operating in such a way as to form an intention and initiate action to achieve a chosen goal.” (Devdas 2008: 64)

Regarding the idea of karma, Gananath Obeyesekere distinguished between Buddhism and Vedic thought. In Vedic thought, which predates Buddhism and the Upanishad and in which ethics and rebirth are unrelated, the word karma has the meaning of ritual action. In contrast, the concept of karma in Buddhism refers to an ethical action that determines the nature and place of rebirth in subsequent lives. The author also said that the best way to study the origins and progression of the idea of karma is to follow its evolution from the earliest forms of Vedic thought to the Brahmana and Upanishad to Buddhism and other Ganges valley religions. (Obeyesekere 2002: 2)

There will be consequences for a person's good or evil conduct. Each moral deed that the doer has carried out, it's very equitable. Because of this, the Buddha stated very clearly the non-deterministic nature of the law, saying that if it were said that a man must reap results according to his deeds, then at that time he would not have a religious life and would not have the chance to end all suffering; instead, it must be stated that the reward that a person reaps according to his deed, that is, the person would have a religious life and would have the chance to end all suffering. (Warren 1962: 221)

In *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma*, James McDermott argued that the world was portrayed as a fabric made from the threads of individual karma; regardless of the families, races, or nations to which they belong, the individual karma is interwoven as the karmic threads of other people; for instance, their deeds affected the world, such as those of Hitler and Alexander on the one hand, Gandhi and Buddha on the other. (McDermott 1971: 152)

## Research Methodology

To critically examine and learn more about the Buddhist view on determinism and karma theory, this paper used qualitative literature approaches with close textual document analysis and comprehensive reading of primary and secondary sources. In Buddhist doctrinal treasure, an extensive variety of works from multiple fields of Buddhist studies, and online resources were compared, investigated, and studied to fulfill the study's objectives because different people understand things differently from various perspectives. As it provides a foundation to compare and examine the many interpretations of the study, the study utilized the literary method in an effort to examine the Buddhist view on determinism and karma theory.

## Results and discussion

Regarding the theory of determinism, Buddhism does not accept this doctrine of determinism. Every action has a corresponding result. When one does a good deed, there will be a good result; when one does a bad deed, there will be a bad result corresponding to that deed. The problem is that when the condition and time are ripening, the results will be reaped, maybe now, or in the future, sooner or later.

Going back in time, we may see that Indian society was a hierarchical caste system based on two corporate affiliations, including the jati (birth group) and the varna. (Bayly 1999: 8) Varna means class, order, or caste. There are four social varna, which are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The varna of Brahmins are priests who perform rituals; the varna of Kshatriyas are the rulers and warriors; the varna of Kshatriyas are those who do commercial works and create material wealth; the varna of Shudras are servile toilers; there is one more class that is not listed in this varna system, which is the Untouchables. (Bayly 1999: 8-9) Each caste has its responsibility and determination. But Buddhism does not determine between classes, as human beings are responsible for themselves and in control of their own determination.

It is critically important to mention Makkhali Gosāla's school of the doctrine of fatalism while discussing determinism in the critical sense. At the same time as Mahāvīra and Buddha, he founded the Ājīvikas (Long 2009: 199) He was among the six ascetic teachers in ancient India, along with Pūraṇa Kassapa, Ajita Kesakambalī, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, Sañjaya Belatṭhiputta. According to Piotr Balcerowicz's analysis in *Early Asceticism in India: Ājīvikism and Jainism*, he analyzed that Ājīvikas perceive karma that nothing is said to change by the course of events and its predicted future, including future rebirth and final liberation. (Balcerowicz 2016: 138) All that happens to humans is beyond their control, they cannot steer their existence in this life or their rebirth in the next life nor can they shorten or prolonging its period. (Balcerowicz 2016: 138) All efforts to bring about change or escape this inevitability ending in failure; One achieves inner omniscience and perfection and becomes completely liberated when one receives the sanction of foreordination when his accumulated karma is exhausted. (Balcerowicz 2016: 138)) This demonstrates that all human endeavors are futile and powerless to change things and their lives. One has no the capability to change or eliminate his karma until his karma is exhausted. Any value of good deeds or the retribution of evil karma is not received as its proportionated retribution.

Makkhali Gosāla asserted in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta that there is no cause or condition, sentient beings are guided by their fatalism, and sentient beings after circulating over samsara, suffering will be eliminated. It is likened to a rolled thread that will last to a certain extent, as presented as follows:

Your Majesty, there is no cause or condition<sup>102</sup> for the defilement of beings, they are defiled without cause or condition. There is no cause or condition for the purification of beings, they are purified without cause or condition. There is no self-power or other-power, there is no power in humans, no strength or force, no vigour or exertion. All beings, all living things, all creatures, all that lives is without control, without power or strength, they experience the fixed course of pleasure and pain through the six kinds of rebirth. (Walshe 2012: 94-95)

He further stated that no matter what vows or practices of morality, virtue, discipline, or asceticism were made, they could not ripen unripe karma or measure its misery or happiness in the endless and immeasurable world of samsara. Specifically, as follows:

Therefore there is no such thing as saying: 'By this discipline or practice or austerity or holy life I will bring my un-ripened kamma to fruition, or I will gradually make this ripened kamma go away.' Neither of these things is possible, because pleasure and pain have been measured out with a measure limited by the round of birth-and-death, and there is neither increase nor decrease, neither excellence nor inferiority. Just as a ball of string when thrown runs till it is all unravelled, so fools and wise run on and circle round till they make an end of suffering. (Walshe 2012: 95)

However, the Buddha used many descriptive examples and means to explain in *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* that there is cause and effect in life. There are great results in the holy life of a monk, such as leaving the family to become a monk, living in control of the senses, living with few desires and being content, being with mindfulness and awareness; living in morality and precepts, knowing clearly the karma of living beings. (Walshe 2012:97-109) Clearly seeing the karma of sentient beings means clearly seeing the law of cause and effect and karma. Living beings in this conditioned world have countless different karmas, each person has different causes and consequences, such as there are ugly people and beautiful people, wealthy people and poor people, wise people and stupid people, and so on. All those differences are due to their karma. A person who commits evil deeds through body, speech, and mind because of wrong views will be born into a realm of suffering and hell at the breaking-up of the body after death. A person who has the right views and does good deeds will be reborn in the world of Devas and humans at the breaking-up of the body after death. As the Buddha explained in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*:

These beings, on account of misconduct of body, speech or thought, or disparaging the Noble Ones, have wrong view and will suffer the kammic fate of wrong view. At the breaking-up of the body after death they are reborn in a lower world, a bad destination, a state of suffering, hell. But these beings, on account of good conduct of body, speech or thought, of praising the Noble Ones, have right view and will reap the kammic reward of right view. At the breaking-up of the body after death they are reborn in a good destination, a heavenly world. (Walshe 2012:107)

Four types of karma are described in the *Kukkuravatika Sutta*, including dark action with dark result, bright action with bright result, dark-and-bright action with dark-and-bright result; neither dark nor bright action with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 495) These four types of karma serve as evidence of the universality of all creatures on this planet. Despite the fact that living things come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, they are all characterized by these four types or characteristics, which also provide an explanation for the paradoxes surrounding good deeds and bad deeds, respectively. *Dark* action with dark result refers to evil deeds that cause harm to oneself and others, leading to suffering feelings in this life and the next; *bright* action with bright result is for doing good deeds, not causing harm to oneself or others, leading to pleasure feeling in this life and the next; *dark-and-bright* action with dark-and-bright result means actions that are both good and evil, leading to both suffering and pleasure; *neither dark nor bright* action with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action is when one has intention or volition

(cetanā) to eliminate the above karmas, karma leading to the elimination of karmas. (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 495-496)

We are the owners and heirs of our own karma. Every action we take, whether it is wholesome or unwholesome, is determined by our intention. That implies that we are responsible for our acts and must accept that our actions will have the outcomes they were intended to. As stated in the sutta: “*Beings are owners of their actions, student, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.*” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995: 1057) However, we must realize that we are the ones responsible for our karma, which demonstrates that it is not a determined karma. So, we have the capability and possibility to change and transform our karma because we are the owners of it.

### Conclusion

In short, the doctrine of karma from the Buddhist perspective is that karma can be transformed, not karma determined. Every person existing in this world has different karma, and the law of cause and effect is always operating. Because of the nature of impermanence and non-self of all things and phenomena, everything is subject to change and is not permanent and unchanging, so is karma.

Each person is an island or a lamp for oneself to take refuge. This island or lamp is the Dhamma (dhammadīpā) that the Buddha taught. Overcome your own determinism, transform bad deeds into good ones, harmful words into words that bring harmony and peace, and negative thoughts into positive ones. Aim for a life full of energy, brightness, peace, and true happiness in the light of the Buddhist teachings and compassionate energy as the Buddha taught and spread.

Monks, be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves with no other refuge. Let the Dhamma be your island, let the Dhamma be your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a monk dwell as an island unto himself, as a refuge unto himself with no other refuge, with the Dhamma as his island, with the Dhamma as his refuge, with no other refuge? Here, a monk abides contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world, he abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ... he abides contemplating mind as mind, ... he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. (Walshe 1995: 395)

Attadīpā bhikkhave, viharatha attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā, dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā. Kathaṅca pana bhikkhave, bhikkhu attadīpo viharati attasaraṇo anaññasaraṇo, dhammadīpo dhammasaraṇo anaññasaraṇo? Idha bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati. Ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ. Idha bhikkhave, bhikkhu vedanāsu vedanā passī viharati, ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ. Idha bhikkhave, bhikkhu citta cittānupassī, viharati, ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ. Idha bhikkhave, bhikkhu dhammesu dhammānupassī viharati, ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ. Evaṃ kho bhikkhave, bhikkhu attadīpo viharati attasaraṇo anaññasaraṇo, dhammadīpo dhammasaraṇo anaññasaraṇo. (D iii 58)



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