

Karma and Rebirth In Buddhism

- Thupten Tenzing -

A Summary Introduction to Karma

The doctrine of Karma is the foundation of Buddhist ethics. It maintains that the whole world is subject to the same kind of uniform law. It recognises the rule of law both within and outside in inner life as well as in outward nature. Every action accordingly produces its effect not only in the physical world but also causes certain impression in the inner self of the agent. These impressions inevitably determine the future mode of existence of the agent and one cannot escape them. The present placement of an individual in a particular social situation and the association of a particular type of psycho-physical complex with it is all solely due to the past Karmas of that individual. The past actions determine our present state of existence and our present actions would in turn determine our future state of existence.

The doctrine of Karma is therefore based on certain fundamental postulates: (i) It is the law of causality of cause-effect. All Karmas or deeds produce effect or bear results. In the case of volitional Karmas, they are classified as good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust, depending on the intent of the doer. It is the motivation of one's action which is important. (ii) It is the law of personal responsibility in which a doer himself must bear the consequences of his actions. Thus liability cannot be shifted. (iii) It is the law of retributive justice. There is no escape for doer from the consequences of his Karmas. (iv) And the Karma is supposed to have no beginning, but it can have an end. The means of attaining that end, of destroying the working of Karma is the Eight Fold Path, as the Master set forth in his first discourse.

A Summary Introduction to Rebirth

The theory of rebirth envisage that all sentient creation is endowed with consciousness and this consciousness transmigrates at the time of death to a new birth. This transmigration is regulated by the accumulated Karmas which have yet to mature and fructify. The cycle of rebirth and the process of thought-formation are one and the same thing¹.

In Buddhist tradition rebirth is an accepted fact. Jataka (Mzad-bryga - dpag -bsam - khri- shing) which narrates about the previous career of the Buddha as Bodhisattva bears an evidence of rebirth. It is also seen in that context that Bodhisattva was born in different forms of existence before becoming the

¹ Reading the mind: Advice for meditators by Tan Acharn Kor Khao - Saun-luang. The Wheel Publication 1993.

Buddha. Since he was always exerting for the benefit of all the sentient beings, his birth was always in a good state of existence. For example, the Body of Bliss (Sans. Sambhoga-Kaya. Tib. Longs-sku) is regarded as the result of the previous virtuous deeds of the Buddha of the biotic force, which, owing to its sublime character, brings out the attainment of this highest of corporeal forms¹. But there are also number of peoples who suffer in many ways, who are born in various planes of existence.

Diverse Nature of Karmas

It is the doctrine of Karma that explains the difference among living beings. Once a young man named Subbha went to Lord Buddha and put this question: Ven'ble Gotama, I see so many differences among living beings, and human beings for that matter- some are born in rich conditions and others in poor conditions, some are intelligent and others are dull, some are lovely and others are repulsive, some live long and others die quite young. So what could be the reason for all these differences? Lord Buddha said that these differences are due to differences in actions². Similarly Majjhima Nikaya III, 204 says that it is Karma which divide people into high and low. Milindapanho elaborates, "it is through a difference in their Karma that men are not alike; some lived long, some lived short, some are healthy and some are weak, some wise and some foolish. Karma allots to beings meanness and greatness".

Constituent Factors

After examining the causation of Karmas, Buddha found that man is determined by one of the three factors: (i) external stimuli, (ii) conscious motives, or (iii) unconscious motives.

External contact as a cause of Karma is explained as behaviour in terms of a stimuli-response sort of model, where reflex movement or behaviour follows sensory excitation. Conscious motives are those such as greed or attachment (Sans. Raga, Tib 'Dod-Chags), hate or aversion (Sans. Doasa, Tib. L'Khonpa) and delusion (Sans. Moha, Tib. Gti-mug). Generally it is evil behaviour that is produced by these motives, while morally good behaviour is motivated by the absence of greed, hate and delusion (alobha, adosa and ahoma). Thus Buddha emphasized the psychological aspect of behaviour and equated Karma with violation (Cetana). Among the unconscious motives are the desire to perpetuate life and the desire to avoid death; and desire for pleasure and aversion to pain. These motives, though unconscious, result from mistaken understanding of the nature of human existence. While human behaviour is itself conditioned by causes, it is followed by correlated consequences. This correlation

1 . Abhisamayalamkara, VIII, pg - 19,20

2. Culakammavibhanga Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya, III, pg - 202-206

between action and consequence constitutes the doctrine of Karma in Buddhism¹.

Law of Cause and Effect

We are responsible for our actions. We are what we have made and we shall be what we make. Dhammapada (Chos-kyi-tseg-ched) asserts, "not in the sky, not in the midst of sea, nor anywhere else on earth is there a spot where a man may be freed from the consequences of evil deeds". The text further says, "by oneself evil is done, by oneself one suffers. By oneself evil is undone, by oneself one is purified". Thus the doctrine of Karma became an unescapable law of personal responsibility and retributive justice based on one's action. Here we may take into consideration the nature of these actions. They are threefold: verbal actions, bodily actions and mental actions. Their moral significance is not the same. Verbal and bodily actions are physical in nature, and these actions are only the manifestations of thoughts. Therefore they assume their moral significance according to the thoughts that give rise to them.

Mind is the Foundation of all the Actions

As the Dhammapada says, "mind proceeds all unwholesome (Sans. Akusala, Tib. Mi-dge-wa) states and is their chief: they are all mind-made. If with an impure mind, a person speaks or acts, misery will follow him. Similarly mind proceeds all wholesome (Sans. Kusala, Tib. Dge-wa) states and is their chief: they are all man-made. If with pure mind, a person speaks or acts, happiness will follow him". It is something like this:

Sow a thought and
reap an act
Sow an act and
reap a habit
Sow a habit and
reap a character
Sow a character and
reap a destiny.

But thought is a general term which covers so many aspects of our mental life. In Abhidhamma (Chos-mngon-pa) they have analysed the functions of eighty nine consciousness in continuous process of birth-death-rebirth till the life process ceases². The Lankavatara sutra (Lang-kar-gshes-pa'-mdo) mentions in details regarding the functioning of mind and its relation with potential consciousness, otherwise known as store consciousness (Sans. Alaya-vijnana, Tib. Kun-gzi nram-par-ses-pa). The same sutra deals with the problem of the

1 Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis by David J. Kalupahana, third printing, 1982.

2 Visuddhimagga, pg - 454.

mental state immediately before death and the desire for rebirth under the influence of Karmic effect.

Among these mental states the most important one is known as Cetan i.e. volition including intention and motive. It is the intention or motive that determine the ethical nature of our action. Acts are divided into three categories in relation to doers having their respective effect: (i) acts resulting effects in this life of the doer (Ditthadhammavedaniya Kamma), (ii) acts bearing results in the next life (Uppajjavedaniya Kamma), (iii) and acts having result in a future life (Apparapariyavedaniya Kamma).

Generating Factors of Motivation

How the motivation or intention arises in the mental process? According to Abhidhamma, when an object which may be internal or external appears within the range of our mind, we first become conscious of it. Then we try to ascertain what it is in the light of our previous experience. Then we have some feeling towards it in the light of our relation or association with it. This is feeling (Sans. Vedana, Tib. Tshor-ba).

Upto this point the whole mental process is receptive. So far there is nothing wrong. They are said to be resultant (Sans. Vipaka, Tib. Rnam-smin). But then we do not stop here. After experiencing Vedana or feeling we take an attitude towards the object, pass judgement and take a decision what to do with it. This is the active or rather the reactive stage of mental process known as Javana¹ leading to the formation of impression (Sans. Samskara, Tib. 'Dus-byas) involving volition (Cetana). In fact samskara is synonym for Cetana. So if our attitude is right then there is wholesome act (Sans. Kusala, Tib. Dge-wa), if it is wrong then there is unwholesome act (Sans. Akusala, Tib. Mi-dge-wa). It is this stage of the mental process that leaves Samskaras or impressions in our mind. And it is these impressions that give shape and form to our character. But then Samskara which keeps on multiplying are not of the same nature. They can be divided into three groups: (i) some Samskara are weak in nature and the impression left behind by them is like a line drawn in water; (ii) there are other Samskaras which are somewhat strong in their impression lasts for sometimes like a line drawn on sand; (iii) and there are still other Samskaras which are very strong in nature and they leave a lasting impression on the mind like a line cut into a rock with hammer and chisel².

Though we create all types of samskaras in course of a day, we may remember only one or two which are very strong at the end of the day. So is the case at the end of a week, a month or a year. And at the time of death, the strongest Samskara gives a push to the life process and there is rebirth. So this

1 Manual of Avhidhamma by Narada Maha Thera, pg - 167-170

2. Puggalapannatti, pg - 32

cycle of birth and death keeps on revolving giving happiness and misery according to the nature of Samskara we create. In this context we can divide all persons into four categories according to their conduct: (i) one who goes from darkness to darkness; (ii) one who goes from darkness to light; (iii) one who goes from light to darkness; (iv) and one who goes from light to light¹.

So we know that Karma or act is actually the processing factor by which the clinging to life inherent in the beings continues.

Karma is not Bondage

However the theory of Karma should not be mistaken for fatalism. It does not regard the stock of past Karma as a dead weight lying on the shoulders of man, hindering his work and implying complete pre-determination as what the individual will be so. Instead it views the individuals as free agents who are not only supposed to have a capacity to distinguish between right and wrong but also have a capacity of a free choice. In fact if the doctrine of Karma were to advocate complete determinism it would have gone against the very spirit of the scriptures, which enjoin certain prescriptions and prohibitions, because if one is bound to do what one does all prescriptions and prohibitions would be rendered useless. Far from advocating determinism this doctrine highlights our free agency but in doing so it also makes us aware of our responsibilities and enlightens us towards our duties. Thus it links freedom with responsibilities.

We may sum up our analysis of the theory of Karma by restating that neither it stands for the denial of human freedom nor for discouragement in moral effort. It implies that we are at every moment making our character and shaping our destiny. As the Buddha said, "action is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture which lead to the rebirth of a being"².

Rebirth

Many scholars held that the Buddhist did not believe in a transmigration of soul. The source of the doctrine of Anatmavada or absence of soul is the Anattalakkhana sutta or the Vinayapitaka ('Dul-wa'i sde-snod) which is the basis of the doctrine of Pudgala sunyata (Gang-zag bdag-med). The doctrine of Anatmavada (Bdag-med kyi lta-ba), these scholars say, leads to a very anomalous situation such as there is no actor apart from action. More importantly it repudiates the concept of transmigration and rebirth and of personal responsibility for Karmas without a person and its rebirth to experience the consequences of the Karmas is perplexing.

Transmigration of Consciousness

Buddha replaced the soul by the theory of mind-continuum, by a series of physical states rigorously conditioned as to their nature by the casual law governing

1 Jataka, II, pg - 17

2 Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis by David J. Kalupahana, third printing 1982

them (Dhama-sanketa). According to him this alone provides for progress (change, efficacy) and continuity (responsibility), as each succeeding state (good or bad) is the result of the previous state. Therefore rebirth does not mean that the soul bodily, as an identical individual essence, transports itself from one place to another. It only means that a new series of states is generated conditioned by the previous states. Nothing is lost, and a new birth is a result of the previous. The Salistamba sutra puts the matter definitely: "there is no element which migrates from this world to the other; but there is recognition (realisation) of the fruition of Karma, as there is continuity of causes and conditions.

Consciousness and Psychophysical Personality

The human personality is analysed into two ways: first, in terms of six elements—earth, water, fire, air, space and consciousness; and second, in terms of the five aggregates—material form, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness. They all form a human personality denoted by psychophysical personality (Sans. Nama rupa, Tib. Ming-gzugs). The process of rebirth is therefore explained as the combining of the two factors, consciousness (Sans. Vijnana, Tib. Rnam-ses) and the psychophysical personality (Sans. Nama rupa, Tib. Ming-gzugs). The psychophysical personality referred to here is the foetus formed in the mother's womb (gabbha) and which represents the beginning of a new life span. Consciousness surviving from the past is said to become infused in this new personality, and thus continuity is maintained between the two lives. The latent dispositions in this surviving consciousness therefore determine to a great extent the nature of the new personality.

Thus three factors are generally taken as a necessary conditions for the birth of a being: (i) coitus of the parents, (ii) the mother being in the proper season to conceive, and (iii) the presence of a gandhabba. The first two factors go to produce what is called gabbha or foetus that is formed in the mother's womb. This living organism is called Namarupa or the psychophysical personality. It becomes complete only when influenced by a surviving consciousness which in the above context, is represented by Gandhabba. This connection between a surviving consciousness and the psychophysical personality is emphasized in the casual sequence of the twelve dependent origination (Sans. Pratityasamutpada, Tib. Rten-'brel yan-lag bchu-gnyis) which shows nothing stands permanent like soul from ignorance to death. Whatever is originated under casual sequence is to perish. This is only the reality of moral consciousness and the efficacy of Karma¹.

The Sphere of Rebirth

In the Wheel of Life (Sans. Bhavacakra, Tib. Srid-pa'i 'khor-lo) the continuous process of revolving state from one birth to another is depicted in the six re-

1 Central Philosophy of Buddhism by T. R. V. Murti, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 2nd edition - 1960

gions of rebirth ('Gro ba rig-drug) namely, the three higher realms of god (Sans. Deva, Tib. Lha), human being (Sans. Purusa, Tib. Mi), and titans (Sans. Asura, Tib. Lha-ma-yin); and the three lower realms of hell (Sans. Naraka, Tib. Dmyal-ba), hungry ghosts (Sans. Preta, Tib. Yi-dvags), and animal (Sans. Triyak, Tib. Dus-'gro). The sphere of rebirth is further divided into three world system namely, the world of desire (Sans. Kamaloka, Tib. 'Dod-khams), the world of form (Sans. Rupaloka, Tib. Gzugs-khams), and the world of formlessness (Sans. Arupaloka, Tib. Gzugs-med-khams) in which beings are born to these different planes of existence due to the force of Karma. Then there is intermediate state (Sans. Antarabhāva, Tib. Bardo) between birth and death. This intermediate state is generally believed to be consciousness (Sans. Vijnana, Tib. Rnam-ses) that continues after death. This is in tune with the theory of unbroken continuity of life process (Avicchina) which became one of the major doctrinal standpoints of Santarakshita¹. It is in accordance with the theory of Vijnanavada which fundamental doctrine is the mind only (Sans. Citta-matrata, Tib. Sems-tsam-pa) and it is the Vijnavadins that emphasises the concept of Antarabhava². They affirmed that matter (Sans. Rupa, Tib. Gzugs) is a projection of mind and therefore there was an intermediate existence which consists of Vijnana only. The Lankavatara sutra says that but for Antarabhava (Bar-do), no consciousness (Sans. Vijnana, Tib. Rnam-ses) will evolve in the earthly existence of womb-born (Sans. Jarayuja, Tib. Mnal-skyes), the egg-born (Sans. Andaja, Tib. Sgong-skyes), moisture born (Sans. Sams-vedaja, Tib. Drod-skyes), and super-natural-born (Sans. Upapaduka, Tib. Rzus-skyes). The Abhidharma Kosa (Chos-mngon-pa'i mzd) discusses the concept and gives many descriptive epithets for the intermediate state. It is said that it is Manomaya (product of mind). It searches deliberately for the world in which it is destined to be born. It feeds on smell (Sans. Gandharva, Tib. Dri) and it lasts only for a time being. The same text also listed the Antarabhava as one of the seven existences.

In the Tibetan spritual tradition there is a practice called 'Pho-ba' or 'the great transference'. This practice is designed to lead one to a good future life. After the dissolution of the elements, senses, and the sense objects, there is a space of time, just as the three last stages are about to begin. This space is the most efficacious moment to practice 'Pbo-ba or transference. The individual goes into the post-death stage called 'Bar-do' which is of threefold division: (i) the Bar-do of dying, (ii) the Bar-do of the being of the Bar-do Chos-nyid, (iii) and the Bar-do of finding the place of rebirth. The duration of time it will take for each of these stages can vary widely from one individual to another and particularly the exact duration of each stage during the meditative or spiritual development of individual may change significantly. So whatever ordinary actions,

1 Origin and Doctrines of early Buddhist Schools by J. Masuda.

2 Lankavatara Sutra

virtuous actions and unvirtuous actions an individual was accustomed to, he will see himself going through again as a mental experience. For an ordinary person of no spritual development this will go on for about forty nine days, through a variety of stages. A person of some meditative development may begin to understand this state as it goes on and thus escape from this delusory experience in the first two weeks¹.

Thus one can reborn in the higher realms by the force of virtuous acts of charity (Sans. Dana, Tib. Sbyin-pa), moral conduct (Sans. Sila, Tib. Tshui-khrim) and contemplation (Sans. Samadhi, Tib. Tin-nge-'zin). The sum results of these virtuous acts is transferred to a formation of distinct consciousness. The consciousness from its embryonic stage in the mother's womb gradually takes the shape of six sense organs and at the completion of ten months would appear in the external world in the shape of body and mind. But one can be condemned to the birth of three lower realms by the force of ignorance of one's action in which a Karma is accumulated that will result in the formation of consciousness having a distinctive mark of various Karmic inclination (Vag-chags). Thus consciousness frequently cultivated by thirst and clinging leads to the three lower worlds of hell, hungry ghosts and animal.

Therefore, a being is reborn, according to the Karma and rebirth, as a result of ignorance (Sans. Avidya, Tib. Ma-rig-pa), craving (Sans. Tanha, Tib. Sred-pa), and the resultant grasping (Sans. Upadana, Tib. Nye-war len-pa).

Extinction of Rebirth

Freedom (Sans. Vimukti, Tib. Rnam-par-grol-ba) or the attainment of Nibbana consists in eliminating these three causes by the development of insight or knowledge and elimination of craving and non-grasping. Therefore, the attainment of happiness in this present existence and the elimination of future suffering by putting an end to the vicious cycle of existence can be attained by the elimination of craving. But for achieving this one must emphasise on the practice of meditation, higher state of mental concentration and many other means of achievement. The attainment of Nibbana is the extinction of Karma and thereby no existence occurs. For this attainment two distinct courses of practice has developed, namely, practice enunciated in Paramita-way and practice as made in tantric way. Both ways aim at neutralisation of Karma with its effect by performing Karma producing good effect. For the neutralisation of Karmic effects simultaneous cultivation of wisdom (Sans. Prajna, Tib. Ses-rab) and compassion (Sans. Karuna, Tib. Snng-rje) are essential according to both the ways. Through these practices one can achieve the cessation of life and death process symbolized by a full moon at the top, outside the circle of the Wheel of Life.

1 Past, Present and Future Life in Tibetan Medicine by Venerable Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche. Bulletin of Tibetology, spl. Volume of 1993, pg - 45