

Understanding Karma and Transmigration in Buddhism

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The concept of Karma has permeated American and Western societies. It is widely referred to when a person explains striking events for which they do not know the immediate cause. The response is: "It's my Karma." Generally there is little reflection on just what it means. It sometimes appears as another way to say, "It was meant to be" or "That's Fate." It becomes a mysterious, impersonal force that shapes our lives.

The term Karma is an Indian Sanskrit term meaning Act and it is associated with all major religious traditions that evolved in India, including Buddhism. Actions have causes or motivations which give rise to consequences or effects. These effects appear in the course of life, depending on the preponderance of good or evil deeds which create those outcomes.

As the concept developed in India, it became inseparable from the belief in Transmigration. The idea of repeated rebirths in forms correlated to one's Karma also was based on the belief in an eternal soul. Ancient evidence for this belief was observed in the molting of snakes, shedding the old skin for a new one. Also the phases of the moon suggested it as does the transformation of caterpillars to butterflies.

Karma assumes the ultimate justice of life. The punishment always fits the crime. The conditions of one's birth into this world and the succeeding developments in one's life are seen as the result of one's decisions and actions in previous lives. Karma and Transmigration explained the birth of disabled people, prodigies, or one's status in life, high or low, such as the economic or social class one is born into.

The appeal of these concepts can be illustrated from a story in the Christian New Testament. Jesus encountered a man born blind. His audience asked whether the man himself or his parents had sinned, resulting in this affliction. Jesus replied to the effect, neither, but that God may be glorified. Whereupon, he healed the man. However, that was not really an answer. Without the concept of Karma and Transmigration there was no answer if the man and his parents are excluded. That it would be an occasion for a miracle on that occasion does not deal with the situation of all the other people with similar afflictions from birth who were not healed.

The teaching of Karma and Transmigration spread through Asia, because it answered perplexing problems of suffering. It also transcended the whimsy of gods whose anger or maliciousness is unpredictable. It also rules out miracles by a beneficent spirit because everything runs by strict cause and effect. Rather, there is a moral law governing the universe rooted in cause and effect which responds to the quality of our actions.

Karma and Transmigration are popular beliefs also because they appeal to an individual's self-interest and self-benefit as a means to induce good behavior. They depend on the pleasure-pain response. We all seek pleasure over pain. Through accumulating good Karma one's life can be enhanced and our fortunes in the afterlife improved.

The concept of Karma is more complex than the popular understanding. How does Karma ripen or come to fruition? In the philosophy of Buddhism, Karma may ripen or mature in the immediate next life, or after several lives or from an indeterminate past. The ripening of Karma may be compared to a seed which is dormant until the conditions of moisture and sun, activate the seed. We see it in human life as the child which possesses all the potentiality of an adult from the start does not mature until the proper time.

Karma is also associated with conditions. When conditions are right, the karmic consequence may emerge. Although the concept of Karma is sometimes seen as a fate when viewed from hindsight, Buddhism rejects fatalism. Buddhism allows that the consequences of good or bad past Karma can be either augmented, balanced or counteracted through compensating acts which create good Karma. Also it can be moderated by producing good conditions that inhibit the fruition of bad Karma. Based on the principle of freedom of the will, Buddhism teaches that evil Karma can be overcome by good. It is therefore positive and optimistic.

The belief in Karma can be used to enhance the financial and social conditions of a religious Order. Giving to the monks is the highest priority in acquiring good Karma. Buddhist followers are encouraged to perform services on behalf of the dead in order that the additional good Karma of relatives and friends can be transferred to the deceased in order to increase his\her good Karma and bring about a good Transmigration. As a result, in Buddhist countries the monasteries and temples have, through the centuries, become wealthy, often owning great tracts of land. They also sponsored and inspired great works of art which the world admires, not taking account of the social cost. Encouraged by Buddhist Sutras or Sacred Texts, the people believed that maintaining the priestly Order contributes to harmony with the cosmos and creates prosperity and peace in the society.

With the emergence of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, there came a shift in the understanding of religious and metaphysical reality. The goal of monastic and spiritual discipline was now to become Buddha rather than individually entering into Nirvana and gaining release from karmic suffering in repeated transmigrations. In Mahayana the goal of Buddhahood meant to become one with the force that works selflessly for the salvation of all beings. It became more altruistic.

On the level of ordinary people, Karma and Transmigration remained. Beings could process through hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans angry spirits and gods. Karma dictated each person's attainment. Depending on the ripening of Karma one might ascend or descend. When they become human, they have the potentiality to work for enlightenment and escape the karmic process. They attain release from the total system of transmigrations in Mahayana Buddhism by becoming Buddha whose nature is the condition of Nirvana, that is, (true) self, purity, bliss, eternity. It is oneness with reality.

In Mahayana Buddhism the person begins his\her religious striving by seeking individual enlightenment. In the process one comes to realize that all beings are essentially one and interdependent, that I cannot be saved unless all others are equally saved. There is no salvation that does not include all others as well. There is no singular, isolated salvation. We are all the same reality and all have the same potential to become Buddha. Like liberty and freedom, salvation is indivisible. Mahayana Buddhism involves a broader concept of society and human responsibility.

Therefore the inspiration and motivation for striving for salvation or Enlightenment transform from the search for self-benefit to aiming at the welfare of all. Among the virtues stressed in Mahayana Buddhism is Dana or selfless giving. This is the essential mark of the Bodhisattva-one aiming to become Buddha, a Buddha-to-be whose self-giving is highlighted by the refusal to enter Nirvana until all others gain it with him as well.

With the development of the concept of Pure Land or Buddha-land, the principle is also expressed by the idea of the return of the Bodhisattva from the Pure Land for one more life to work for the welfare of others. According to the general belief, after birth into the Pure Land, one is in the perfect environment to realize and perfect one's bodhisattvahood by practicing in the presence of a Buddha, such as Amida Buddha, whose spiritual influence enables perfect fulfillment. Thereafter, the Bodhisattva returns to the world to assist other beings. This rebirth is not dictated by Karma but by voluntary, spiritual motivation.

Following the completion of the Bodhisattva path, Bodhisattva also becomes Buddha and continues the work of salvation. However, some Bodhisattvas such as Guan-yin (Kannon) voluntarily remain in the world to continuing helping suffering beings while putting off their Buddhahood.

What is important to note in Mahayana myth and symbolism is that the process of Karma-transmigration is transcended by the desire to dedicate oneself to the welfare of others. Religious motivation transforms from self-serving efforts to altruism in sacrificing for others with no concern for oneself. Therefore, the deeper reason in Mahayana Buddhism for being Buddhist is not simply to acquire good Karma and benefit oneself but to uplift and work for others' welfare.

At an initial level, Karma and Transmigration motivate people with personal religious concern. It is motivated by desire for self-preservation. However, with deepening of spiritual insight and understanding, one gains a vision of the ocean of suffering beings beyond oneself, arousing compassion and commitment to their welfare.

One further observation concerning the understanding of Karma is important. Karma must always be seen as My Karma. If it is viewed objectively, apart from oneself, in reference to others, it can become a way of blaming the victim for their life conditions, becoming judgmental and indifferent to the fortunes of others. It can give rise to feelings of superiority, dismissing the plight of others as just "their Karma." It affirms the status quo and supports moralism and legalism. On the other hand, seeing Karma as "My Karma" means to take responsibility for one's own life. This recognition encourages sensitivity to one's actions, accepting their consequences.

In conclusion, the concepts of Karma and Transmigration are perhaps the most important and influential teachings to develop in ancient India, spreading throughout Asia, while gradually permeating the Western world. It has been the most appealing and enduring response to the issue of why people suffer and why the wicked prosper and good suffer in life. It satisfied the human need to know: "Why?" It relieved the anxiety or fear of whimsical, capricious gods. In the West, the Bible teaches that you reap what you sow but the idea of transmigration does not appear. In Greek philosophy Pythagoras taught a comparable idea, but it did not catch on as a solution to the human question of "Why do things happen as they do?"

Perhaps it is the instability and complexities of modern life with its many unknowns that has led to the increasing popularity of the concept. Nevertheless, Karma is not a solution to life's problems. That must be sought in the spiritual teachings which aim to bring the process to an end through Enlightenment. Karma represents the beginning stage of religious faith and stimulating the search for solution.