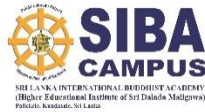


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## **A Three Dimensional View of Karma in Early Buddhism**

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## A Three Dimensional View of Karma in Early Buddhism

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### Abstract

Detailing the connection between the various functions of Buddhist karma theory and rebecoming is a profoundly difficult aspect of Buddhist philosophy. While there is no definitive answer to these questions, suggestions can be found in early Buddhism that may help to reconcile the early Buddhist interpretations of karma with other philosophical and scientific theories.

A great difficulty in analysing the functional aspects of Buddhist karma theory is the conflation of karma as causality with karma as ethics to create a strongly deterministic ethical theory of karmic retribution which de-emphasises notions of free will and personal responsibility that are fundamental to Buddhist practice. This research is intended as a new model to evaluate karma in light of early Buddhist karma theory.

Following this model may allow karma theorists to shed our accumulated assumptions from the *Abhidharma* and western philosophy that bring substance metaphysics into the analysis of Buddhist karma doctrine. This essentialism is an unnecessary obstacle to understanding. When karma as causality is located within early Buddhist process metaphysics it can easily be analysed in a practical fashion and is found to accord with contemporary thought. Karma as ethics is more properly analysed as a satisfactory, but underdeveloped ethical theory. Only with these conceptions in place can the connection between karma and rebecoming can be detailed.

### Introduction

Few things have been as contentious in Buddhism as karma (*kamma*) and rebecoming (*punabbhava*). In fact, the connection between the two was at the centre of the controversies addressed at the 3rd Buddhist Council in 250 BCE. While there is still no definitive answer to the questions raised, the theories of karma and rebecoming are of great importance to Buddhist thought. The Buddhist concept of karma, much like rebecoming, encounters great resistance in the west where it is not an integral part of what we refer to as the “cultural metaphysics”. A society’s cultural metaphysics are the cosmological, eschatological and metaphysical/mythical presuppositions underlying the ideological worldview of any particular culture. In this view, cultural metaphysics are comprised of beliefs pertaining to first causes, cosmology, purpose, meaning, eschatology, ontology and epistemology upon which the culture’s historically changing worldview (German: *weltanschauung*) and cultural hegemony are founded. An example of this is the move towards secular liberalism in western societies in which a messianic warrant and eternalist eschatology of eternal salvation or oblivion that is derived from Christian theology still prevails. The cultural metaphysics underlying Buddhism often conflict with their counterparts in the west, which leads to fundamental

misunderstandings of the Buddhist concept of karma when it is viewed in the light of modernist western cultural metaphysics.

Along with the problem of differing cultural metaphysics, we agree with Richard Gombrich in saying that the coherence of the Buddha's system of thought means that key concepts considered in isolation from the whole will certainly lead to misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup> However, we contend that the greatest difficulty in understanding the early Buddhist conception of karma is a failure to isolate the functions of karma within its broader context, thereby resulting in it being conflated with the karmic theories of other religions and of later Buddhist schools. Although the Buddha himself is often thought to have held karma as "self-evident, requiring no speculative defence,"<sup>2</sup> speculative metaphysical defences of karma were added to the practice of Buddhism early in its history.<sup>3</sup> This has resulted in incoherence among various Buddhist karma theories and it is hoped that a thorough analysis of the early Buddhist conception of karma can remove many of the misconceptions found in Buddhist scholarship.

### **The Indic concept of karma**

The definition of the Sanskrit word karma is action, particularly action of a ritual variety. The incorporation of karma into rebirth eschatologies appears to be a distinct feature of Indic thought<sup>4</sup> and it is thought to have arisen from the ritual actions and sacrifices of the Brahmins<sup>5</sup> dating back to the Vedic period.<sup>6</sup> In its simplest terms, or what Karl Potter called the "Classical Karma Theory of India", karma theories declare that certain fundamental features of one's present life, particularly "one's birth, length of life and type of experiences", are conditioned by one's actions in previous existences and can only be outcomes of "one's own past actions and no one else's".<sup>7</sup>

Rebirth eschatology is found in many cultures<sup>8</sup> throughout the world in forms such as reincarnation, metempsychosis, and transmigration. However, what Obeyesekere calls the "ethicisation" of rebirth eschatology took place primarily in India.<sup>9</sup> These theories depended upon a transmigrating soul (Sanskrit: *ātman*), life monads (Sanskrit *jīva*) or variations on the idea of a "subtle body" to transmigrate and ensure continuity across lives. Even the fatalist, naturalistic rebirth doctrines of the Ājīvikas recognised the existence of karma,<sup>10</sup> although they denied the efficacy of ethical action. Only the Cārvakās denied both rebirth and karma.

The relation between the Buddhist conception of karma and the doctrine of rebecoming differs from other rebirth eschatologies due mainly to the doctrine of non-substantiality (*anatta*), or no-self /no-soul.<sup>11</sup> When we seriously consider the problem of karma, it is unsurprising that it has proven so difficult to examine philosophically, the main reason being that there is no single theory, let alone "law", of karma in Indian thought<sup>12</sup> generally, or in Buddhist thought in particular.

The difficulties brought about by the existence of multiple karmic theories and their relations to rebirth eschatologies have been recognised by many scholars. In response to the primacy of karma among many Buddhists, Melford Spiro goes as far as to postulate two distinct soteriological systems in Buddhism: the nibbanic

(primarily concerned with obtaining the release of *nibbāna*) and the kammatic<sup>13</sup> (primarily concerned with obtaining a desirable rebirth).<sup>14</sup> Gombrich also examines karma from multiple levels: the cognitive level (philosophical logic of karma), the affective level (the psychological and affective impact of karma)<sup>15</sup> and the behavioural level; or “between ‘typical’ karma, which is overt and has some effect on the external world, and ‘dogmatic’ karma which is “any morally charged physical, vocal or mental action, with the latter subsuming the former.”<sup>16</sup>

This method of analysing the various aspects of Indian karma theories led to Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty identifying three essential constituents of a karma theory:<sup>17</sup>

1. Causality (ethical or non-ethical, involving one or several lives and an explanation of present circumstances with reference to previous actions towards future ends, including [possibly] actions prior to birth);
2. Ethicisation (the belief that good or bad acts lead to certain results in one life or several lives and orientation of present actions towards future ends, including [possibly] those occurring after death as amoral basis on which action past and present is predicated);
3. Rebirth.

Wilhelm Halbfass uses a similar model, adding to rebirth a broader model of liberation in which karma acts as the “counterpart of and stepping-stone of final liberation;”<sup>18</sup> Gananatha Obeyesekere identifies four common features in all karmic rebirth eschatologies:<sup>19</sup>

1. A postulated cyclical theory of continuity;
2. A theory of karma that postulates that one’s present existence is determined for the most part by the ethical nature of one’s past actions;
3. A theory of the nature of existence known as *samsāra*, which includes all living things in the cycle of endless continuity;
4. A theory of salvation (*nibbāna*), the salient characteristic of which is the view that salvation must involve the cessation of rebirth, and must therefore occur outside of the whole cycle of continuity (*samsāra*).

Of these, he classifies three issues, karma, salvation and rebirth, as the most essential parts of the karmic eschatology, with rebirth as the most critical aspect. We intend to analyse the early Buddhist conception of karma by analysing it in three of its dimensions:

1. Karma as causality;
2. Karma as ethical theory;
3. Karma and rebecoming/ salvation from the cycle of rebecoming.

We contend that the main cause of misunderstanding regarding karma is a conflation of multiple karmic functions into one overarching and unwieldy karmic theory. This is probably due to the use of the vocabulary of karma and rebirth in a great variety of diverse religious and philosophical teachings.<sup>20</sup> In Buddhism, karma is primarily based on intention (*cetanā*) and produces conditions of existence rather than consequences in the form of “rewards and punishments”.<sup>21</sup> In some traditions,

such as *Advaita Vedānta*, karma is considered to be absolutistic and deterministic,<sup>22</sup> while among the Jains, karma was conceived of as a substance working in the physical realm; among the Ājīvikas, past karma was impossible to expiate and irrelevant to the escape from the rebirth process.<sup>23</sup> Just as there is a conflation of the Buddhist doctrine of rebecoming with reincarnation, Buddhist karma is often conflated with different Indic karma theories.

### **Karma as causality in early Buddhism**

In order to understand the Buddhist doctrine of karma we begin with an analysis of karma as causality, or “causal karma”. The bracketing of causal karma from the ethical aspects of karma theory is important for the purpose of analysis. Causal karma is viewed as part of the mechanism of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) in which it is a causal conditioning factor in the continuity of experience,<sup>24</sup> while the ethical aspects of karma and its effect on rebecoming may be better understood as a “metaphorical, instrumental, illustrative explanatory tool, or even as a ‘plot device’ / ‘*karma exmachina*’ [that] explains what cannot otherwise be justified.”<sup>25</sup> For this reason, we will bracket out the ethical dimensions of karma theory to bring into sharper focus the workings of karma as causality in early Buddhism. Causal karma is a descriptive concept that vividly illustrates principles of causality and continuity that are essential to Buddhist philosophy.

The philosophical basis for the Buddha’s “middle way” (*majjhimāpaṭipadā*) is dependent arising. According to Nāgārjuna<sup>26</sup> in the “Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way” (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*),<sup>27</sup> dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), emptiness / void (*śūnyatā*) and the middle way (*madhyamapratipadā*) are synonymous, not three different things:

“We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path.”<sup>28</sup>

When focus is placed on dependent arising, it is seen that the causal *kamma* stands in a conventional relation to *pratītyasamutpāda*, *śūnyatā* and *madhyamapratipadā* as one follows Nāgārjuna in refuting the inherent nature (*svabhāva*) of all things in order to better understand the core of the Buddha’s teaching. Even causal karma has no inherent nature of its own, but simply a conventional, instrumental truth value (*sammuti sacca*). Causal karma in *paṭiccasamuppāda* becomes part of “a relation between experiential processes rather than substances,” as Buddhism “recasts the whole concept of causation in line with its process-oriented epistemology.”<sup>29</sup> Even the terms “cause” and “effect” are conventional constructs “conditioned by the cognitive process through which we make sense of all the factors of our experience.”<sup>30</sup>

Causal karma cannot be analysed separately from this broader process metaphysics without being misinterpreted as a deterministic law of nature that renders human deliberation and effort inefficacious.<sup>31</sup> When causal karma is properly situated in the Buddha’s broader philosophy it affirms the efficacy of human activity in contrast to doctrines such as those of the Ājīvikas. The Buddha is explicitly opposed to the Ājīvika theory precisely because it is completely deterministic, with Makkhali

Gosāla denying the efficacy of all human action. The Buddha claims that the Ājīvikas do not provide a valid reason for living a moral life (D.I.47; A.I.286; M.I.517) and declares that Gosāla's doctrine is the worst of all doctrines because it denies "karma, deed and energy" (A.I.287). This is an adamant denial of strict determinism and the inefficacy of volitional action; The Buddha proclaims in (M.I.483) that no Ājīvika has made an end of suffering and the only *Ājīvika* who was reborn in heaven over 99 aeons was a believer in karma (*kammavādin*).

Of all the contemporaries of the Buddha, it is likely the Ājīvikas who made the strongest challenge to the Buddha's teachings, with A. L. Basham going as far as to contend that it was Makkhali Gosāla, rather than Mahavīra, who emerged as the Buddha's "chief opponent and most dangerous rival."<sup>32</sup> The reasons for this will become apparent when we consider the naturalistic doctrine of rebirth. The Ājīvika metaphysics was one of a supremely orderly universe<sup>33</sup> that appeals to the seeker of objective truth in a material universe determined by natural laws. In this appeal, there is a parallel with the modern scientific outlook. While both the Jains and Ājīvikas advocated inaction / immobility as the solution to the problem of karma,<sup>34</sup> the Ājīvika notion of karma was not ethicised like that of the Jains and the Buddhists. As Basham points out, the Ājīvika's "absolute determinism did not preclude a belief in karma, but for Makkhali Gosāla the doctrine had lost its moral force. Karma was unaffected by virtuous conduct, by vows, by penances, or by chastity, but it was not denied."<sup>35</sup>

Note that it is the "moral force", the ethical aspect of karma that is denied by the Ājīvikas, not karmic causality. Similarly, when we bracket out the ethical aspects of Buddhist karma theory, we are left with causation, exemplified by *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and the role of karma within that scheme. Buddhist causality recognises the role of non-intentional and external causes in our experience and comprehends the existence of limits on freedom of action, with karma as only one of many causal factors involved in the present and possible future states of the individual (S.IV.230). However, the Buddhist view of karma as a process rather than a substance allowed for a life of action, rather than one of inaction as advocated by the Ājīvikas and Jains. This was achieved by the Buddhist conception of karma as "neither random nor wholly determined... [thereby ensuring that] karma both provided a principle of individuation and asserted the individual's responsibility for his or her own destiny",<sup>36</sup> thus providing a space for volitional action and ethics. Just as it is thought that the Buddha redefined karma as intention in response to the Jainism,<sup>37</sup> it is likely that the Buddhist conception of causal karma creating a space for freedom of action was a direct response to the Ājīvikas.

While the Buddhist theory of causality accepts a certain amount of determinism in regard to non-intentional causes, causal karma is limited to intentional action. This does not mean that there is no room for the unintended consequences of intentional action or that the results of our intentional action will necessarily overcome other non-intentional causes or the results of past karma (possibly extending into former existences), but it does allow for the efficacy of intentional action within the larger process of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. This space for intentional action is used to emphasise

the ability of man to lead a moral life and the ethical dimension of Buddhist karma theory. However, we contend that this is not simply a pragmatic doctrine to justify moral effort, but a profound metaphysical conception of human action as it is presented to us in our experience of the world.

In Buddhism, as well as other Indic karma theories, karma functions as an organic metaphor for causation.<sup>38</sup> A karmic act is likened to the planting of a seed which needs many other conditions like rain, sun and appropriate temperature to bear fruit. In our present experiences, we often see the fruits (*phala*) of one's previous intentional actions as well as how circumstances (conditions) beyond one's direct control may hasten, delay or even halt the process of past acts coming to fruition in one's present life. One experiences the world as partially determined, fatalistic and beyond one's control while at the same time having experience of intentions producing mental states and intentional actions producing results, both pleasant and unpleasant. The appeal of karma theory is not solely in its function as a metaphor or as an ethical doctrine; it describes the reality of phenomenological experience.

Karl Potter describes his "Classical Karma Theory of India" as a theory that "would not have held any particular attraction for those whom it did attract were it not that they viewed karmic conditioning to be on the one hand strictly confined to certain features, but on the other hand conditioning which to a great extent permeates our understanding of what we are... If karma were everything or nothing to us, no one would be interested in it."<sup>39</sup>

The contention that no one could be interested in a theory in which karma was everything or nothing sounds plausible. However, it does not accord with lived experience. Even in a universe in which all actions were determined by karma alone or predominantly by karma in association with other factors, our inability to account for the countless effects of karma and / or these innumerable other factors would cause one to act in the world as if one were free with a potential for moral responsibility. This is an example of Spinoza's illusory free will as exemplified in *Ethics*, where he states, "Experience teaches us no less clearly than reason, that men believe themselves to be free, simply because they are conscious of their actions and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, as John Searle notes, "We are unable to act against the presumption of free will, as we experience freedom of the will whether we actually possess it or not."<sup>41</sup> This presupposition of free will indicates that people could still be very interested in a theory where karma is everything. On the other hand, a theory in which karma is nothing would be inconceivable except in the abstract and philosophically uninteresting. Nevertheless, Potter's statement is correct in reflecting the reality that no Indian philosophy that accepts karma assigns it an all or nothing position. Potter also demonstrates that an important aspect of evaluating any karmic theory is in locating the position of karma along the continuum from "everything to nothing".

Buddhist karma theory follows the Buddha's "middle way" (*majjhimāpaṭipadā*) in locating causal karma along this continuum. The Buddha acknowledges that there are many factors outside an individual's control that affect one's life without

necessarily being the result of karma and that karma has a role in conditioning that same individual's differences, tendencies and dispositions separately from others. What this means for an analysis of causal karma is that whether it plays a disproportionately large role or an infinitesimally small role in conditioning one's experience when compared to other factors, the role of causal karma is necessarily of the utmost interest to the Buddhist. This is because karma is the "field of action", the place in which the individual has control of and personal responsibility for one's own destiny. While an individual cannot control the innumerable external events that impact one's existence, even those which are said to have been the result of past karma such as circumstances and place of birth, that same individual does have a measure of control available to him if he chooses to change his intentions and his resulting actions. Using the metaphor from the *Bhava-sutta* (A.I.223), while a villager has little control over the seed or rain necessary for his crop, he does have a great, if ultimately limited, influence on the field in which the seed is planted. This is the field of causal karma.

An objection to the causal aspect of karma theory is that it is immoral and insufficiently sensitive to the human predicament because it precludes undeserved suffering or because it is a retributive theory that gives men "too much responsibility" for their state of existence.<sup>42</sup> The idea of causal karma as a retributive theory in Buddhism is shaky at best, as karma in the Buddhist tradition acts to set conditions of existence, rather than simply dispensing rewards and punishments (M.III.203). While these conditions may be painful or lead to the affliction of oneself, others or both, they are the impersonal products of a larger causal scheme and these conditions can be changed through personal effort (M.I.414). Only in a world in which there is no suffering, or in which there is a powerful deity or deities apportioning suffering, can the existence of suffering, disadvantage, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness be construed as retributive. The Buddha explicitly taught unsatisfactoriness and impermanence as marks of existence, not as a doctrine of retribution.

The objection to karma giving people too much responsibility for our conditions of existence mirrors Gombrich's assertion that karma entails a "strict normative doctrine that each man is solely responsible for his own fate could not survive in its full rigour at the behavioural level, because it is too oppressive."<sup>43</sup> However, this objection is untenable when one realises that the "strict normative doctrine" being objected to is a conflation of ethical notions of karma with causal notions of karma that leads to a shift of emphasis away from causal karma and other causal conditions working to determine one's present and future conditions and towards ethical responsibility for those conditions. At the behavioural level, karmic effects are usually invoked as an "ultimate explanation of suffering to explain events beyond human control".<sup>44</sup> Therefore, a non-abstract sense of immediate ethical responsibility is rarely attributed to events deemed to be caused by karmic forces, not only at the behavioural level, but also at the doctrinal level. While man is ultimately responsible for his actions, Buddhist doctrine is well aware of the limits of one's freedom in the world, and does not ascribe all of these limitations to karmic causes. Instead, doctrine also usually reserves karmic effects for the otherwise



inexplicable. Failure to recognise this leads to an overemphasis on the ethical aspects of karma, acting as the main, if not sole, conditioner of one's present experience and future rebecoming. We contend that this is an overstatement when one takes into account the role that non-karmic causation plays in conditioning experience. It is this equating of a larger causal process, including causal karma, with the ethical doctrine of karma to be analysed later that leads to objections that karma immorally or unfairly places the burden of *all* conditions in the life of an individual on the shoulders of the individual.

Owen Flanagan makes this mistake in his separation of karma into "tame" and "untame" varieties. Flanagan deems his tame interpretation of karmic causation, essentially what we refer to here as causal karma, as depicting "the causal intricacies of the lives of sentient beings, especially when they act intentionally, in the right way".<sup>45</sup> However, he interprets untame karmic causation as "an ontologically unique kind of causation that accounts for how the psyches of future beings are determined by a set of causal processes that involve more than the environmental cum psycho-social-political-economic effects of previous occupants of the earth".<sup>46</sup> This misinterpretation is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the metaphysics of *anatta*, evidenced by Flanagan's statements pertaining to an assumption that a person's consciousness survives the person's body (and presumably transmigrates or carries forward a personality of sorts), and that Buddhism attributes causal effects to "immaterial properties" of mind.<sup>47</sup> While a type of substance dualism may be accepted in the Tibetan Buddhism studied by Flanagan, it is not a component of early Buddhism.

It is true that Buddhism has always accepted that volitional action, or karma, conditions one's present and future existence. However, this should not be overstated to the point where one falls into an extreme of "ethical determinism" in which all conditions of life are caused primarily by an individual's ethical intentions and behaviours. A belief in limited ethical determinism may be a pragmatically useful metaphor for the ethical doctrine of karma underlying Buddhist morality; however, this ethical formulation cannot be elevated to the status of a deterministic causal principle without distorting the concept of karma. This tendency to overemphasise an ethically deterministic karma at the expense of the larger, interdependent causal processes of dependent arising is attested to in the *Devadaha-sutta* (M.II.214), where the Buddha refutes the theories of the followers of Nigantha Nāthaputta (Jains), who assigned a far more deterministic role to karma in their teachings. That the Buddha would address these questions in such a manner indicates that attributes of Jain karma theory were being conflated with the Buddha's doctrine even at this early date.

When the causal aspects of karma are put into perspective as one part of a larger process, critiques of it as an inaccurate, immoral or insensitive description of causality are invalidated. This is reinforced by the fact that to achieve enlightenment in Buddhism is to render karma irrelevant.<sup>48</sup> The Buddha does not preach immobility in the manner of the Ājīvikas or Jains who see no other way to render deterministic karma inoperable. Instead, the goal of the Buddha's teaching is

primarily an ethical one, to remove unskilful intentions (*akusala kamma*) and replace them with skilful intentions (*kusala kamma*) (M.I.414).

When we consider causal karma, we usually see it working as an explicatory factor for one's present circumstances. As Gombrich points out, "karma retains its interest mainly in relation to past lives rather than as a predictor of the results of present conduct". In this sense, causal karma is often employed as an *explanation* of disparities in fortune among human beings at the cognitive level;<sup>49</sup> while the ethical dimension of karma is often interpreted, or misinterpreted, as a *justification* for those disparities at the affective level. The idea that these are two ways of looking at a single set of facts applies not only to the Buddhist concept of two truths, but also to Spiro's nibbanic and kammatic types of Buddhism, Gombrich's analysis of the levels at which karma is seen to operate,<sup>50</sup> and also to the differentiation between the causal and ethical doctrines of karma found here.

The concept of two truths is important to the analysis of causal and ethical karma in early Buddhism because karma can be analysed practically at the level of conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*). While causal karma is an unverifiable theory based on authority if postulated as an objective truth or as part of an "ultimate reality", it moves from the realm of speculative to pragmatic when it is viewed as a relative and conventional truth derived from individual phenomenological experience. This shift from an emphasis on positivist verificationism to a pragmatic analysis allows causal karma to be examined critically while avoiding the creation of unfounded speculative opinions that are derived from outside the context of the classical Indian traditions.<sup>51</sup>

This pragmatic view, when applied to causal karma, answers the objection that karma theory is unrealistic and unverifiable by removing the speculations and metaphysical ideals of an objective reality, a type of Buddhist *noumena* or transcendence that slips into some interpretations of Buddhist karma; particularly those found in the Abhidhammic "dhamma theories".<sup>52</sup> Instead, causal karma can be seen as a realistic, if conventional, description of a process within the larger scheme of dependent arising and can be pragmatically verified by its effects in our experience. Rather than misperceiving causal karma as a mystical force, an underlying metaphysical order, general law or other type of noun, karma comes closer to its original meaning as a verb;<sup>53</sup> a verb signifying action within the process of dependent arising and possessing a function leading towards an ultimate end of karma by rendering karma inoperable (an ethical function, not a causal one) and attaining enlightenment. While the transference of karma from life to life may remain unverifiable except through inference for the unenlightened, the karmic explanation of one's present circumstances and ability to create wholesome (*kusala*) or unwholesome (*akusala*) karma can be accepted pragmatically within this lifetime by virtue of its results in bringing one closer to, or further from, the things that lead to the ultimate goal of liberation (A.IV.280).

Liberation is ultimately attained by seeing "reality as it is" (*yathābhūta*), the seeing of dependent arising. The process of dependent arising follows a method similar to contemporary science,<sup>54</sup> in pursuing a reductionist methodology to reveal the

underlying nature of phenomena. However, Buddhist empiricism limits its reductionism (by virtue of necessity as well as its chosen methodology, given the lack of technology at the time) to what can be directly perceived by the individual. This allows for a coherent and pragmatically useful explanation of a world increasingly revealed by physics to be mostly determined, but in which we must act with the presupposition of free will and in accordance with the open possibility that we can make some free choices and thereby causally influence our own well-being as well as the external world.

The subject of causality itself has been debated philosophically and scientifically for centuries with no clear result, but it is obvious that whether causality exists “objectively and necessarily” or not, humans think in terms of causation. All human rationality is based on notions of causality and the consequent ability to make predictions, and this includes contemporary science. However, it is precisely this cognitive bias towards essentialist ontology with inherent cause and effect relations that stops human beings from seeing the “reality as it is” and leads to the linguistic assignment of inherent nature and substance to processes that are inherently empty (*suñña*). While Buddhist doctrines, including those of karma and rebecoming, can be demonstrated to be in accord with contemporary science, or at least to not directly challenge science, doctrines like karma or dependent arising will not be proven scientifically, nor do they specifically pose scientific questions, precisely because Buddhism rejects the mechanistic notions that underlie substance metaphysics. Although dependent arising and karma do answer metaphysical questions, they are not merely metaphysical speculations, but instead are descriptions of phenomenological perceptions as experienced by Buddhists over millennia.

In the case of causal karma as a conditioning factor in the process of dependent arising and its effects in the external world, there is little that can be objected to by critics on scientific grounds. The theory of dependent arising is not meant as a definitive description of the physical processes of nature in the manner of the physical sciences. Instead it provides a limited reductionist psychological account and a pragmatically useful description of reality that is used to orient oneself to the fundamental problems of existence at the phenomenological level. In the same way that one does not need to lay out a mathematical proof of gravity to understand that it is dangerous to walk under a scaffold without a hard hat, one does not need to engage in reductionism beyond that provided by early Buddhism<sup>55</sup> to understand how to navigate the world of *dukkha*. Provided that one accepts the fundamental Buddhist teaching of non-substantiality (*anatta*) the descriptive processes of dependent arising and causal karma producing effects in external causal relations are logically and empirically supported without contradiction.

### **Karma as ethical theory**

Ethical karma is derived directly from dependent arising and the three characteristics of existence, impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anatta*). This framework posits a world in flux in which phenomena are interdependent processes in a continual state of arising and ceasing.

This continues without a discernible beginning or end. However, it is indisputable that human beings naturally perceive change as being something that is not “haphazard or accidental”,<sup>56</sup> which leads to the postulation of causal principles or at least Hume’s “constant conjunctions”. In keeping with the empirical nature of Buddhist thought, ethicised karma is based on individual perceptions of the world. In simplistic terms, one perceives that “wholesome/ skilful” behaviour in society tends to bring about wholesome or otherwise positive results for the individual in society and vice-versa. This perception validates both consequentialist and intuitive ideas of a necessarily metaphysical<sup>57</sup> moral order underlying society.

A common critique of the ethical theory of karma is that it is a retributive doctrine and therefore immoral and insensitive. The concept of causal karmic conditioning is undoubtedly a part of ethicised karma. However, in the same way that legal doctrine idealises “blind justice”, karmic conditions that could be classed as “retribution” are theorised to be products of impersonal causal relations and ethicised karmic conditions and therefore, these “consequences” cannot be held to be “unjust” or “immoral”.

Ethicised karma theory presupposes a type of metaphysical moral order in the world. In this supposition of an orderly moral universe, ethicised karma differs little from suppositions of “natural law” and the ethical systems derived from natural law theory, including human rights doctrine. Therefore, it is important to analyse ethicised karma, not as a metaphysical force working physically in an objective and mind-independent reality, but as a psychological and ethical theory that makes use of intuition, metaphor and conceptual/ legal fictions in order to guide human behaviour. It is a fundamental misinterpretation of this aspect of Buddhist karma theory to judge it as something other than a psychological and ethical theory with the aim of replacing unskilful/ unwholesome intentions with skilful/ wholesome intentions and having these intentions guide one’s acts. This is a moral exercise by any measure and therefore cannot logically be deemed immoral. The teaching that karmic conditions can be changed by anyone willing to make the moral effort also displays a great sensitivity to the human condition in direct contrast to the objections raised.

The misunderstanding of Buddhist karma theory as retributive or fatalistic occurs when ethical karma that appeals directly to the efficacy of human intentional action is de-emphasised while causal karma is overemphasised, given a retributive warrant or an overly deterministic role in human destiny. It is only when the balance is tilted away from other factors and towards an overly broad conception of karma that the interpretation of karma as fatalistic or deterministic can be raised as a viable objection. This is not sustainable when causal karma and ethical karma are bracketed in order to properly analyse these aspects of the theory.

This leads to an important point of distinction. Causal karma as found in Buddhist doctrine is related to the monastic practitioner of “nibbanic Buddhism” attempting to gain enlightenment and see “things as they are”, necessarily including the causal aspects of karma, in this lifetime. The monastic has no need of an ethicised karma. A “controlled, ethicised universe is the polar opposite of the solitary seeker for

salvation”,<sup>58</sup> embodied by the follower of nibbanic Buddhism, and it is this fact that results in the development of ethical karma for the use of the lay follower who is not seeking *nibbāna* in this lifetime and is not bound by the monastic discipline of the *Vinaya*. It is this ethical karma, or typical karma, rather than doctrinal or causal karma that is the basis for practical morality in Buddhist societies. This difference between two levels of Buddhist practice not only justifies the bracketing of karma as causality from karma as ethics, it makes this bracketing *necessary* in order to properly understand karma in early Buddhism.

The ultimate irrelevance of karma to the nibbanic practitioner leads to the objection that the Buddhist theory of karma is ultimately egoistic and causes one to turn inward without regard for their fellow man.<sup>59</sup> It is true that Buddhists are encouraged to turn inward in order to understand reality as it is, which includes the contemplation of karma and the process of dependent arising, but this cannot be rightly deemed egoistic or selfish as the inward turn is geared towards the elimination of the illusion of self. The objection that karma theory leads to a disregard of one’s fellow man can be countered by appealing to the very development of the ethical aspect of karma doctrine, which grew out of the need for a Buddhist social ethics for “kammatic” Buddhists living in lay society.

The objection that Buddhist karma precludes undeserved suffering is a meaningless objection. The Buddhist concept of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) [itself often translated as “suffering”], is considered as one of the three characteristics of existence in early Buddhist metaphysics along with impermanence (*anicca*) and non-substantiality (*anatta*). When suffering, subsumed in the larger sense of *dukkha*, is thought of as a characteristic of existence, one cannot apply judgements such as undeserved or deserved to it. While Buddhism’s ethicised karma theory can indeed be said to place great responsibility on individuals, in fact this emphasis on personal responsibility may be one of the theory’s great strengths; responsibility for the unsatisfactory nature of personal or collective existence cannot be laid at the feet of any individual. It is merely a truth (Sanskrit: *satya*) of existence or being (Sanskrit: *sat*). A theorist who accepts the three characteristics of existence cannot judge the effects of impersonal causal/ conditional relations as being deserved or undeserved, any more than Job can accuse God in the Old Testament of injustice. To judge existence itself, or a God who serves as the basis for one’s existence, is to illogically assume that existence or God somehow acquires a personal duty to the very individuals whose existence it sustains. This argument cannot be maintained.

The moral problem of “just deserts” has been analysed at the levels of conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*) as well. Sidertis addresses this matter, stating:<sup>60</sup>

But such claims as, "Infant and adult are the same person," and "Unless I mend my ways, I will be reborn as a starving peasant," are true only at the conventional level. At the ultimate level we can only describe the constituents of person-series and their causal interrelations. And herein lie the seeds of the illusion of no desert. Because it is ultimately true that there are no persons that endure through distinct life stages, we are

tempted to conclude that ultimately nothing deserves to be rewarded or punished for deeds performed earlier. But in fact it is ultimately false that nothing deserves to be rewarded or punished. It is ultimately false because the concept of desert as we are using it here applies only to persons, and persons are conceptual fictions. Such a claim could be true only at the conventional level of truth. But in fact it is false at that level as well: at least some persons do deserve to be rewarded or punished for their earlier deeds.

Care should be taken in understanding the two claims I have just stated. The Buddhists maintain that at the ultimate level of truth there are no persons and thus the question of desert does not arise. They also claim that at the conventional level of truth at least some judgments of desert are true, since there are persons at least some of whom are responsible for their earlier deeds. This is not to say that we live our lives at two distinct levels of reality, a level of impersonal entities and events devoid of moral significance and a level of enduring persons rich with moral meaning. There is just one set of facts here, which we can describe in either of two ways

Sidertis continues:

Nor should we be surprised that the concept of desert should be applicable only at that level at which we employ the term "person." In making judgments of desert we are interested in affecting the future behaviour of person-series. This aim is frustrated if we are unable to treat relatively long stretches of such series as enduring wholes. Again, the concept of desert is intimately connected with the concepts of agency and responsibility, and these too require us to think of certain causal series as persons. Desert seems to disappear when we speak the ultimate truth only because the illusion of a person disappears, to be replaced by a causal series. Without this illusion, our familiar concept of desert has no application. But the facts remain the same, only our way of describing them has changed.<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, we agree that the facts remain the same, but the way of describing these facts has changed depending on whether emphasis is placed on causal or ethical karma as well as conventional and ultimate truth. It is likely a simple cognitive tendency to assign a disproportionately large role to karmic processes (probably due to the fact that it is one area in which individuals exercise a large measure of control) while discounting other conditioning factors. It is this tendency, rather than an inherent weakness in Buddhist karma doctrine, that produces most objections.

As an ethical theory, karma is rather underdeveloped. This is likely due to the fact that the soteriology trumped philosophy<sup>62</sup> in the Buddha's teaching. In fact, karma is not a prominent teaching in early Buddhist canonical texts,<sup>63</sup> which is most likely due to the emphasis on soteriology and obtaining *nibbāna* in this life that was found in early Buddhism. The later emphasis on doctrines of karma (and rebecoming) in Buddhist Scholasticism can be seen as an attempt to provide more systematic explanations for these doctrines.

Unlike in other karmic theories where the emphasis is placed on deed and activities, Buddhist karmic theory ethicises karma by placing emphasis on desire and intention.<sup>64</sup> Bronkhorst points out that “Buddhism psychologised the notion of karmic retribution.”<sup>65</sup> It is this move from karma as action to karma as intention that is the key to Buddhist soteriology. The usual Indic view of karma as action and latent substance leads to theories of liberation through inaction and austerities to avoid making new karma and to annihilate existing karma. In contrast, the Buddhist theory of karma avoids inaction and focuses on the elimination of mental defilement (*kilesa*) through psychological practice rather than the elimination of karma via austerities.<sup>66</sup> This is the essence of the Buddha’s “middle way”. Bronkhorst details the difference in Buddhist karma and the continuing influence of non-Buddhist theories of karma that lead to much contemporary confusion:

Buddha's path to liberation was essentially different from that of his contemporaries, because his concept of karma was different from theirs. I do not know whether he was the only one in his time to think of karma in this way. It seems however certain that his followers kept having difficulties accepting this different concept of karma. This I conclude from the fact that practices and ideas related to the other concept of karma keep on popping up within the Buddhist tradition.<sup>67</sup>

This emphasis on intention as the basis of karma and the resulting ethical goal of cultivating wholesome intention should make it clear that the “law”<sup>68</sup> of karma is not a law of causality along the lines of those found in substance ontologies or the laws of the physical sciences. Instead, ethical karma in Buddhism is better thought of as similar to the “laws of Sri Lanka”, in that they are a manifestation of collective moral intentionality on the part of a community. In practice, an everyday citizen may only have a vague idea of the abstractions of law or the workings of the complex legal mechanisms in their state, while still knowing enough to avoid breaking the law. A jurist would be expected to have a more detailed knowledge of the law and its technical application. The understanding of ethicised karma also differs among different Buddhists, peasants and scholars, laymen and monastics, but it is at its base an agreed upon ethical theory among Buddhists that serves to ground their morality.

Ethical karma is a satisfactory, if underdeveloped, moral theory that provides a strong incentive to do what is good, but is less adequate for deciding what is good. This has resulted in vast differences in the type of social structures and acceptable behaviours tolerated or repressed on karmic grounds.<sup>69</sup> This weakness in ethical karma theory can also result in karma “being forged into a weapon against non-believers”<sup>70</sup> and to justify oppression. However, in this sense ethical karma is no worse than any other ethical school and could be considered to have a stronger social component than more individualised western ethical theories.

A point in favour of ethicised karma is that it encourages the person to consider the consequences not only of their actions, but to cultivate kind intentions towards others. It also cultivates humility and selflessness by encouraging one to contemplate the innumerable factors in the process of dependent arising and how

they necessarily produce consequences in the continual rising and cessation of all phenomena. It also takes away emphasis from abstract ethical thought experiments, instead focusing efforts on producing compassionate ethical actors through the cultivation of wholesome intentions that inform their actions as situations are presented to them.

It is when we analyse ethical karma in Buddhism as a system of hypothetical ethical imperatives that we can dispense with the objections put forth by critics. To throw out the ethicised Buddhist theory of karma is akin to advocating for anarchy because a state's legal system does not adjudicate every case perfectly. Ethicised karma in Buddhism is no different from Kant's Categorical Imperative or Bentham's Hedonic Calculus. Therefore, an idea that Buddhism must reject karma to "modernise" is untenable. It is true that, unlike the doctrine of rebecoming, ethicised karma is not necessarily essential to the practice of Buddhism. However, it does have the advantage of being the ethical theory that accords most closely with Buddhist practice.

### **Karma and rebecoming**

Obeyesekere points out that it is easy for Buddhists to deny the existence of supernatural beings, whether they exist or not, because they have little to do with Buddhist soteriology or ethics.<sup>71</sup> It is the position of some Buddhists, especially those raised in the western cultural metaphysics, to believe that the doctrines of karma and rebecoming are also easily denied because they too have little to do with Buddhist soteriology or ethics. This is clearly not true of the doctrine of rebecoming as it is essential to the concept of *samsāra*, but the case is often made against karma using the objection that karmic continuity is unrealistic and unverifiable and that "the theory can only hope to explain events by invoking God or fate since a simple connecting of actions with results cannot possibly succeed given the complexity of nature".<sup>72</sup>

In addition to the replies to the objection from fatalism found earlier in this article in the section on causal karma, another reply from the point of Buddhist karma theory is the great value placed on birth as a human being. Implicit in canonical references to the rarity of rebirth as a human being (S.V.456; S.II.263) is the idea that human beings "who regularly act selflessly are few in number".<sup>73</sup> At the practical level of ethical karma, this idea emphasises the importance of behaving ethically in order to gain another human birth, or even birth as a *deva* in the heavenly realms for practitioners of "kammatic Buddhism". Ethical incentives such as these, whether ultimately "real" or not, once again indicate that Buddhist karma doctrine cannot be considered fatalistic. Likewise, dependence on God is easily dispensed with in Buddhist tradition due to the lack of a creator God and the relative lack of power among supernatural beings in Buddhist cosmology. While the Buddha himself likely believed in gods, these beings neither serve as the ground of being nor as "karmic bookkeepers"<sup>74</sup> dispensing reward and punishment according to a karmic system that they are themselves bound to.<sup>75</sup>



The only aspect of karma that is difficult to pin down with any degree of certainty is karma as a mechanism of continuity between distinct existences, although even here the issue is not found in the ideas of causal or ethical karma but in the metaphysical question of what constitutes continuity. If continuity is simply a matter of “the succession of the last moment of consciousness in one life by the first moment of consciousness in the next”,<sup>76</sup> a concept that follows directly from non-substantiality (*anatta*), no objection to karma as continuity can be sustained.

It is *anatta* that allows Buddhist rebecoming to withstand scrutiny on empirical, inferential and phenomenological grounds. A logical and purely naturalistic account of rebecoming can be put forth provided that one accepts *anatta*. Accepting that one is not in possession of a permanent self or soul (M.I.138) is not an overly controversial stance from the contemporary point of view, and once this is accepted, the idea of rebecoming follows logically.

For the average unenlightened person, there is no memory of previous existence. Furthermore, there is no memory of our earliest childhood and surprisingly few specific memories of the years following. As Spinoza pointed out, we only know our date of birth and who our parents are because they are reported to us. In fact, one only knows they existed for the first few years of our lives because one is told that they existed. This validates the idea that self and personal identities are constructed entities in keeping with *anatta* and dependent origination. Phenomenologically, it is as if one came into existence from nothingness.

The physicalist would also accept this description as accurate, and is likely to add that one shall return to nothingness at the moment of death. On this we can agree, but the physicalist overstates his claim when he deems this nothingness to be eternal oblivion. If one’s “self” emerged and existed without his knowledge from apparent nothingness once without choice or explanation, there is no good reason to believe it cannot happen again. With that experience in mind, it is more likely that a succession of ultimately empty, constructed “selves” will emerge again and again from apparent nothingness rather than be consigned to eternal oblivion.

The naturalist objection to this is that the newly emergent “selves” are different from the “self” one is now. However, in making this objection, the naturalist is postulating the existence of a substantial self from what was already demonstrated to be a mere conventional description. The naturalist will usually make this move by equating “self” (implicitly or explicitly) with consciousness and consciousness with the brain that eventually dies. This objection ignores the fact that consciousness is explicitly stated not to cross over or transmigrate.<sup>77</sup> This use of consciousness as a “self” is essentially the same as a “person” (*puggala*) in the sense used by the Pudgalavādins (a heretical, personalist school of Buddhism). The Pudgalavādins were universally opposed by the other schools of Buddhism, and this indicates that early Buddhism held to *anatta* quite strongly. This objection also misunderstands the Buddhist conception of continuity in claiming that newly emergent selves are different from previous selves. In fact, it is famously declared in the *Milindapañha* that these selves are neither the same, nor different (*na ca so na ca añño*) than previous selves. As James McDermott points out, “it is sufficient

that the locus of points in the causal chain of existence maintains its identity for the possibility of *kamma* to be explained.”<sup>78</sup>

In early Buddhism and modern Theravāda, the causal chain of existence is continuous, as no intermediate state (*antarābhava*) between death and rebecoming is admitted. The final moment of consciousness of one existence is immediately followed by the first moment of consciousness of the next, just as one conscious state follows another in our present experience. The necessarily conventional, nominal identity of this causal chain is given by its karma. Karma does not “cause” the chain of existence. Karma merely names it and is one factor among many that condition the chain of existence which is without discernible beginning and without foreseeable end. This is *samsāra*.

It is easy to see why the Buddha would place such a high priority on escaping *samsāra*. While rebecoming is often taken by those raised in the western cultural metaphysics as a consoling belief, the Buddhist vision of potentially infinite existence in a continual cycle of birth and death over which we have very limited control (by way of our karma) is anything but comforting. The circumstances in which we find ourselves now are impermanent and there is no guarantee that the king in one life will not be a pauper in the next. Even the Buddha lived in animal states at various points according to the *Jātakas*.<sup>79</sup>

Even the physicalist accepts that actions in the present have effects in the future. The mistake the physicalist makes is in thinking *x* will not be there to experience those future effects, instead it will be *y* or *z*. What the physicalist fails to grasp is that the first-person perspective of *x* is not qualitatively different from the same phenomenological perspective as *y* or *z*. Since Joe Q. Person is simply a nominal designation for the continuity of experience that he thinks of as his “self”, when Joe dies today, the last moment of “Joe consciousness” is followed by the next moment of “Jane Doe consciousness”, potentially in vastly different circumstances. However, just as the previous consciousness known as Joe Q. Person, erroneously, but quite certainly, came to take the chain of conscious events/ states, with each event / state conditioning the next as his “self”, so too will Jane Doe. There is no difference in first-person perspective, only in the conventional description of it.

Given the doctrine of *anatta*, a cycle of becoming and rebecoming without beginning and potentially without end is the inference to the best explanation when compared to an eternal supernatural reward / punishment or eternal oblivion. The eternal existence of a substantial “self” or the annihilation of a substantial “self” are unlikely given the experience of existence in which the substantial self is illusory. Thus, a phenomenological and naturalised conception of rebecoming in early Buddhism can be put forth and supported strongly against modern theories of annihilationism when the doctrine of *anatta* is accepted. The last question to be addressed is how karma fits into this scheme.

The idea that actions, both intentional and non-intentional, produce effects is uncontroversial. Therefore, causal karma is quite secure. Control over actions we do intentionally, our karma, is likewise uncontroversial and by following the Buddha’s

path through focused attention one is able to make an ever-larger number of one's actions intentional, and presumably wholesome. In keeping with the Buddha's "psychologised" karma, these intentional and wholesome karmas will lead one to a wholesome state of mind and increase mental and physical well-being. A mentally and physically healthy, moral person is more likely to act in ways that better his surrounding environment and it is likely the person will reap some benefit from this.

However, there remains the question of the acts of others, and how their wholesome and unwholesome actions will impact on other beings. It is obvious that the actions of others impact on one's own life, but this does not make these impacts karmic. This is due to the aforementioned psychologising of karma whereby karmic effects are generally subjective.<sup>80</sup> Another response to this issue arose in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the idea of "collective" or "group" karma.<sup>81</sup> Collective karma is appealing in the sense that it implies that one should make the world a better place and encourage others to do so as well, as one will almost certainly inhabit it again. However, the idea of collective karma de-emphasises the ethical doctrine of personal responsibility and does not fit with the early Buddhist efforts directed at attaining *nibbāna* in this life. Instead, collective karma appears to be an innovation that may come to be accepted in Buddhism in the future, much like the transfer of merit.<sup>82</sup>

When considering the impacts of karma on future existences, it is also important to remember the three types of karmic result attributed to Potter's Classical Karma Theory of India: birth, length of life and type of experience.<sup>83</sup> If karmic results are limited in this manner, the time of one's death necessitates the time of one's rebecoming, which must occur without a break in continuity. In the same way that the child of a husband and wife is one of hundreds of millions of potential children (dependent on which sperm and egg meet and at precisely what moment), one's birth as a karmic result is necessarily conditioned by the moment of one's death. The time and circumstances of birth determine one's genetic make-up, abilities, dispositions, material circumstances and countless other factors, which in turn condition one's type of experiences in life; all of these factors then condition one's time of death and therefore one's time of rebecoming, as the cycle continues.

Causal and ethical karma as presented in this model of rebecoming are relatively uncontroversial, but in what other ways do these karmas carry over into the next life? The Buddha himself classified this as one of the four incomprehensibles (*acinteyya*) in the *Acintita-sutta* (A.II.80). Karmic continuity has been claimed by some, notably K.N. Jayatilleke,<sup>84</sup> to have been verified empirically on the basis of the extrasensory perception of the Buddha. However, this is not a satisfactory answer to the problem of karma from the perspective of modern philosophy or science.<sup>85</sup> While there may be few, if any, sources of wisdom on par with the Buddha, this argument is not philosophically satisfying because it is an appeal to authority disguised as an appeal to empirical verification. This attempted appeal to empirical verification is unsurprising given the prominence of logical positivism at the time Jayatilleke was writing.

The influence of the positivists was particularly strong in post-colonial South Asia and many prominent intellectuals, including Jayatilleke himself, were educated in the United Kingdom under prominent philosophers of the school. Although the influence of logical positivism waned by the 1970s and even Jayatilleke was forced to concede that Buddhism could not conform to the positivist ideal of dissolving all metaphysical questions,<sup>86</sup> his anti-metaphysical, verificationist account of karma still holds considerable sway in Theravāda Buddhist scholarship.<sup>87</sup> However, the scholars who have attempted to verify karma have failed to provide a wholly satisfactory answer. It should be recognised that there is a tradition in Indian philosophy of proofs being derived from the reliable authority (Sanskrit. *aptavacana*) of a person (Sanskrit. *aptapurusa*) “free from attachment to the world and beyond affection and hatred,”<sup>88</sup> but such proofs are not generally accepted in modern philosophy. Therefore, a comprehensive and coherent account of the Buddhist conception of karma here must depend on what we can infer from our present analysis.

We have established that sequential continuity of conscious experience is enough to establish a firm link between causal and ethical karma and rebecoming. However, there are other issues brought forth by our naturalisation of the rebecoming process, including that the extent of the contribution of karmic causation to rebecoming is ultimately unknowable and inexpressible. While we can demonstrate that some karmic contribution to rebecoming does exist and it is an area over which we have direct control and for which we have moral responsibility, the connection between karma and the escape from the cycle of rebecoming is uncertain. If the ultimate goal of Buddhism is *nibbāna*, fundamentally “all other births are void of value”.<sup>89</sup> However, the idea that attainment of *nibbāna* entails escape from the cycle of rebecoming must ultimately be taken on faith in the Buddha’s teaching, as it cannot be demonstrated.<sup>90</sup> This opens the door logically to the possibility of *samsāra* as potentially inescapable. This is a conclusion even the Ājīvikas found unpalatable, but it cannot be glossed over.

Interestingly, it is the Ājīvikas who seem to have grasped this possibility of a potentially unending cycle of birth and death in the days of the Buddha. Therefore, it is likely that the problem of there not being a demonstrable link between attainment of *nibbāna* and an ending of the cycle of birth and death was likely known to the earliest Buddhists. In fact, although the Ājīvikas had faith in eventual liberation, they also believed the emancipated soul could be brought back into *samsāra* for future rounds of determined existence.<sup>91</sup> The Ājīvika account of *samsāra* differs substantially from the Buddha’s in postulating the existence of souls, but this does not negate the logical clarity of their exposition of a potentially inescapable cycle of birth and death. Perhaps this is why the Ājīvikas were considered such dangerous rivals to the Buddhists that the Buddha himself is presented as declaring of Makkhali Gosāla that he knows of no other person acting more for the harm, ruin and suffering of both gods and men (A.I.33).

One potential answer to this possibility of an infinite and inescapable *samsāra* may have emerged from within Buddhism itself in the concept of the Bodhisattva. The

Bodhisattva is concerned with the liberation of all sentient beings and vows to continue in *samsāra* until this occurs.<sup>92</sup> Yet, since *samsāra* is necessarily without beginning and most likely without end, this means that by taking the Bodhisattva path, one is implicitly acknowledging the likelihood of never-ending existence in *samsāra*. The vow of the Bodhisattva could be interpreted as a volitional act (karma) of acknowledging the inescapable nature of the cycle of birth and death while at the same time taking some measure of control over it. Interestingly, many Mahāyāna tendencies arose concurrently with what McDermott calls “the move-away from the *arahant* as man perfected”<sup>93</sup> among many Buddhists. This movement away from the idealised *arahant* is not only an embodiment of the influence of an increasingly lay-oriented popular Buddhism; it also mirrors the Ājīvika conception that, potentially, even emancipated souls return to the cycle of existence. This Ājīvika idea that “liberation could not be forced”<sup>94</sup> and that liberation may not be a final liberation after all, suggests that the concept of the Bodhisattva could be a response to both the logical implications of the Buddhist theory of rebecoming and possibly the Ājīvika theory itself. It is difficult to demonstrate this due to the fact that the Ājīvikas left behind no records, but we contend that this potential connection should be explored further.

### Conclusion

It must be concluded that the functions of karma as causality, ethics and a conditioning factor in the process of rebecoming are strongly supported in our evaluation of the theory. There is no need to stretch the verification principle to “prove” the existence of karmic continuity. Instead, karma can be considered instrumentally as an ethical tool and empirically as part of a larger causal process verified through phenomenological means.

The Buddha’s revolutionary teaching of non-substantiality coupled with a naturalistic theory of rebecoming is more plausible than the annihilationist assertion of eternal oblivion put forth by modern critiques from the west. Furthermore, the method of bracketing the causal and ethical aspects of Buddhist karma theory allows one to examine karma without falling into linguistic traps or resorting to decontextualized speculations. This type of analysis focuses on the perspectives of early Buddhism and provides us with ways of better answering contemporary objections to Buddhist karmic theories.

*Paṭiccasamuppāda* and *anatta* are the key principles underlying Buddhist process metaphysics and both can be verified experientially. While these fundamental doctrines of Buddhism accord with scientific truth, it must be remembered that they are not, in and of themselves, scientific truths about an objective world outside us. Instead they are phenomenological descriptions that serve as soteriological tools with a goal of attaining enlightenment.

Ethicised karma is of fundamental importance to Buddhism in the modern world as a conceptual tool to encourage moral behaviour and as a foundation for a system of Buddhist ethics. It should not be understood as an actual physical or metaphysical force / moral order. Causal karma is best understood in relation to the process of

*paṭiccasamuppāda*. Karma's link with rebecoming becomes problematic only when there is an over-emphasis on ethical karma applied at the expense of the causal aspects of karma within the framework of *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

The ethical aspects of karma, such as the belief that one is in control of his karma and responsible for his actions, should be further developed, even though the effects of skilful karma on future lives are uncertain when other conditioning factors are added into the equation. In spite of this, we believe this analysis confirms the central importance of karma within Buddhist philosophical thought while providing more satisfying answers than are found in the antiquated perspectives of Buddhist modernism as influenced by logical positivism and the innovations in some strands of western Buddhism.

Having focused on specific aspects of Buddhist karma theory, we can use this model to address particular concerns as they arise instead of attempting to fit these concerns into an overly broad and unwieldy conception of karma. We have also situated karma in the realm of the practical and demystified it to better support the theory functionally in a modern context. This is especially important as most criticisms of the doctrine of karma are based on the imposition of western metaphysical concepts onto Buddhist thought in order to advance a view of an nihilationism that was condemned explicitly by the Buddha over 2500 years ago.

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## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Gombrich, Richard, *What the Buddha Thought*. (London: Equinox, 2009): 16.
- <sup>2</sup> Edgerton, Franklin. "Did the Buddha Have a System of Metaphysics?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 79. 2 (1959): 83.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 81.
- <sup>4</sup> Obeyesekere, Gananath. *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002): 14-18.
- <sup>5</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 34.
- <sup>6</sup> Krishan, Y. *The Doctrine of Karma: Its Origin and Development in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina Traditions*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1997): 17.
- <sup>7</sup> Potter, Karl. "Critical Response." In *Karma and Rebirth Post Classical Developments*, edited by Ronald W. Neufeldt, 110. (Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications with permission by State University of New York Press. 1995).
- <sup>8</sup> Bronkhorst, Johannes. "Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21.1(1998): 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Obeyesekere, Gananath. *Imagining Karma*, 1-71.
- <sup>10</sup> Kalupahana, David. *Karma and Rebirth: Foundations of the Buddha's Moral Philosophy*. (Colombo: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2009): 14.
- <sup>11</sup> Kalupahana, David. *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976): 45-47
- <sup>12</sup> Potter, Karl. "How many karma theories are there?" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29.1/2 (2001): 231-232.
- <sup>13</sup> In reality, it could be claimed that Buddhism as practiced in Asia today is completely kammatic, while western and other Buddhists with backgrounds based in non-Asian cultural metaphysics also appear to be practicing a kammatic version of Buddhism, even going so far as to completely discard the doctrines of karma and rebecoming in order to create a "therapeutic Buddhism". It is likely that only an infinitesimally small number of Buddhists are actually trying to obtain nibbāna in this life through the practice of "nibbanic Buddhism".
- <sup>14</sup> Spiro, Melford E. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982): 67
- <sup>15</sup> Gombrich, Richard. "Buddhist Karma and Social Control." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17.2 (1975): 216-217.
- <sup>16</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 52-55.
- <sup>17</sup> O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. "Introduction" In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, xi. Los Angeles. University of California Press. 1980.
- <sup>18</sup> Halbfass, Wilhelm. "Karma, Apurva, and "Natural" Causes: Observations on the Growth and Limits of the Theory of Samsara." In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 272. Los Angeles. University of California Press. 1980.

- <sup>19</sup> Obeyesekere, Gananath. “The Rebirth Eschatology and its Transformations: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Buddhism.” In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, 139 - 140. Los Angeles. University of California Press. 1980.
- <sup>20</sup> Potter, Karl. “Critical Response” In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, 117. Los Angeles. University of California Press. 1980
- <sup>21</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 19-20.
- <sup>22</sup> Creel, Austin B. “Contemporary Philosophical Treatments of Karma and Rebirth.” In *Karma and Rebirth Post Classical Developments*, edited by Ronald W. Neufeldt, 4. Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications with permission by State University of New York Press. 1995.
- <sup>23</sup> Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Karma*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011): 15 – 16, 54 – 55.
- <sup>24</sup> White, J.E. “Is Buddhist Karmic Theory False?” *Religious Studies* 19.2 (1983): 227-228
- <sup>25</sup> O’Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. “Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and Puranas” In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, 28. Los Angeles. University of California Press. 1980.
- <sup>26</sup> I follow Prof. Asanga Tilakaratne in extending the definition of early Buddhism to include Nāgārjuna for the same reasons as those given in *Nirvana and ineffability: A study of the Buddhist theory of reality and language.*( Kelaniya: Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993): 10
- <sup>27</sup> Kalupahana, David. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1999): 331. Nāgārjuna, “Examination of the Noble Truths,” 339.
- <sup>28</sup> *Yah patīyasamutpādaḥ sūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe, sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā”*  
Ibid., 339.
- <sup>29</sup> Ronkin, Noa. *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition*. Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 2005: 201-202.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 202.
- <sup>31</sup> Potter, Karl. “How many karma theories are there?”, 231
- <sup>32</sup> Basham, A.L. *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas: a Vanished Indian Religion*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002): 54-55.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>34</sup> Bronkhorst, Johannes. “Ājīvika Doctrine Reconsidered.” In *Essays in Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, edited by Piotr Balcerowicz, 153-178. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003.
- <sup>35</sup> Basham, A.L., *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, 225.
- <sup>36</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, vi.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51
- <sup>38</sup> Lichter, David. and Epstein, Lawrence. “Irony in Tibetan Notions of the Good Life.” In *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, edited by Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, 237. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.
- <sup>39</sup> Potter, *Karma and Rebirth Post Classical Developments*, 110.
- <sup>40</sup> Spinoza, Benedict De. “Ethics.” In *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Translated by R.H.M. Elwes. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2006.
- <sup>41</sup> Searle, John. *Mind: A Brief Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 219.
- <sup>42</sup> Potter, Karl. “How many karma theories are there?”, 231
- <sup>43</sup> Gombrich, “Buddhist Karma and Social Control,” 213.
- <sup>44</sup> Keyes, Charles F. “Introduction: The study of popular ideas of karma” In *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, edited by Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, 15. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.
- <sup>45</sup> Flanagan, Owen. *The Bodhisattva’s Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*. (Cambridge, Ma. MIT Press, 2011): 77-78.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>48</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 52 – 54.
- <sup>49</sup> Gombrich, “Buddhist Karma and Social Control,” 216

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- <sup>50</sup> Gombrich, "Buddhist Karma and Social Control," 216-217.  
Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 52 – 55.
- <sup>51</sup> Gaeffke, Peter. "Karma in North Indian Bhakti Traditions." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105.2 (1985): 265-275.
- <sup>52</sup> Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*, 210 - 215.
- <sup>53</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 131. Simile attributed to Paul Williams.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid. 207.
- <sup>55</sup> The reductions found in *Abhidhamma* and *dhamma* theory are also useful to the meditator in conceptualising the workings of dependent arising. However, the problem of language resulted in metaphysical ideas of "substance" being brought into Buddhism in spite of protestations of non-substantiality. It was this tendency that inspired Nāgārjuna's dialectic approach and orientation towards "emptiness" that is more in line with early Buddhist doctrine.
- <sup>56</sup> Kalupahana, David J. *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. (Honolulu. The University Press of Hawaii, 1986): 89.
- <sup>57</sup> Some would dispute the metaphysical nature of morality, but so long as it cannot be demonstrated that there is a naturalistic grounding for morality in the physical sciences I do not consider these objections to be convincing. Likewise, I see no move away from fundamentally metaphysical conceptions of morality in "humanistic" ethics, but a simple substitution of "humanity" for "God-given", "natural" or "rights-based" metaphysical moral orders.
- <sup>58</sup> Gombrich, "Buddhist Karma and Social Control," 217.
- <sup>59</sup> Potter, "How many karma theories are there?" 231.
- <sup>60</sup> Siderits, Mark. "Beyond Compatibilism: A Buddhist Approach to Freedom and Determinism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24.2 (1987): 151-152.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 153.
- <sup>62</sup> Gombrich, "Buddhist Karma and Social Control," 215 – 216.  
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Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience*, 139-141.
- <sup>63</sup> Gombrich, "Buddhist Karma and Social Control," 214-215.  
Bronkhorst, *Karma*, 20-21.
- <sup>64</sup> Parsons, Howard L. "Buddha and Buddhism: A New Appraisal." *Philosophy East and West* 1.3 (1951): 9  
Gombrich, "Buddhist Karma and Social Control," 213-214.  
Bronkhorst, *Karma*, 20-21.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>66</sup> Bronkhorst, "Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?" 9 – 10.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 13 - 14.
- <sup>68</sup> In spite of its relatively common use, I generally avoid the referring to a "law of karma" in order to emphasise the fact that karma is not a "law" and does not depend on a type of general law of moral causation regarding action and / or intention.
- <sup>69</sup> Bronkhorst, *Karma*, 118-119.  
Flanagan, Owen, *The Bodhisattva's Brain*, 159.
- <sup>70</sup> Gaeffke, Peter. "Karma in North Indian Bhakti Traditions," 275.
- <sup>71</sup> Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The Awakened Ones*, 155-156.
- <sup>72</sup> Potter, "How many karma theories are there?" 231.
- <sup>73</sup> McDermott, James Paul. *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma*. (New Delhi: Munshirm Manoharlal Pub Pvt Ltd, 1984): 22.
- <sup>74</sup> Bronkhorst, *Karma*, 114.
- <sup>75</sup> Obeyesekere, Gananath. *The Awakened Ones*, 152.
- <sup>76</sup> Kritzer, Robert. 2000. Rūpa and the "Antarābhava." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28.3 (2000): 235
- <sup>77</sup> McDermott, James P. "Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism" In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, edited by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 169. Los Angeles. University of California Press. 1980.
- <sup>78</sup> McDermott, James Paul. *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma*, 86.

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- <sup>79</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 87.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 151.
- Krishan, Y. "Collective Karmas" *East and West*, 39.1/4 (1989): 180-182
- <sup>82</sup> Potter, Karl. "Critical Response." In *Karma and Rebirth Post Classical Developments*, 110.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 110.
- <sup>84</sup> Jayatilleke, K.N. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963): 460.
- Kalupahana, *Karma and Rebirth*, 28.
- <sup>85</sup> Matthews, Bruce. "Post-Classical Developments in the Concepts of Karma and Rebirth," 131 - 132.
- <sup>86</sup> Jayatilleke, K. N. 1978. *The Wheel Publication 258: The Contemporary Relevance of Buddhist Philosophy: Buddha Jayanti Lecture, delivered in India, in 1969*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1978: 6
- <sup>87</sup> Kalupahana, *Karma and Rebirth*, 44-45.
- <sup>88</sup> Klostermaier, Klaus, K. "Contemporary Conceptions of Karma and Rebirth among North Indian Vaisnavas." In *Karma and Rebirth Post Classical Developments*, edited by Ronald W. Neufeldt, 88. Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications with permission by State University of New York Press. 1995.
- <sup>89</sup> McDermott, James Paul. *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/ Karma*, 55.
- <sup>90</sup> Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 52 – 55.
- <sup>91</sup> Basham, A.L. *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, 258-261.
- <sup>92</sup> Williams, Paul. *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Routledge, 2009): 55-56
- <sup>93</sup> McDermott, James Paul. *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma/Karma*, 117.
- <sup>94</sup> Bronkhorst, *Karma*, 15-16.