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# The Dharma of Social and Ecological Engagement

DAVID R. LOY

Lesson 3:  
Karma: Reconstructing the Self

Reading:  
*Money, Sex, War, Karma*  
“How to Drive Your Karma,” pages 53-63

# MONEY SEX WAR KARMA

NOTES FOR A BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

DAVID R. LOY



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## How to Drive Your Karma

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**W**hat are we going to do about karma? There's no point in pretending that karma hasn't become a problem for contemporary Buddhism. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us aren't sure how to understand it. Along with its twin, rebirth, karma has always been an essential Buddhist teaching, but we don't know how literally they should be interpreted. Karma is often taken as an impersonal and deterministic "moral law" of the universe, with a precise calculus of cause and effect comparable to Newton's laws of physics. This understanding, however, can lead to a severe case of "cognitive dissonance" for modern Buddhists, since the physical causality that modern science has discovered about the world seems to allow for no such mechanism.

Some important Buddhist teachings make more sense to us today than they did to people living at the time of the Buddha. What Buddhism has to say about *anatta* "not-self," for example, is consistent with what modern psychology has discovered about how the ego-self is constructed. Likewise, what Buddhist thinkers such as Nagarjuna have said about language—how it works, how it often misleads us—is consistent with what many linguists and philosophers have recently been emphasizing, and contemporary science agrees with Buddhist claims about interdependence (ecology) and insubstantiality (physics). In such ways Buddhism can fit quite nicely into modern ways of understanding. But not traditional views of karma. Of course, this by itself does not disprove

anything. It does, however, encourage us to think more deeply about karma.

There are at least two other problems with the ways that karma has traditionally been understood. One of them is its unfortunate implications for many Asian Buddhist societies, where a self-defeating split has developed between the Sangha and the laity. Although the Pali Canon makes it quite clear that laypeople too can attain liberation, the main spiritual responsibility of lay Buddhists, as popularly understood today, is not to follow the path themselves but to support the monastics. In this way lay men and women gain *punna*, “merit”—a concept that commodifies karma. By accumulating merit they hope to attain a favorable rebirth, which for some offers the opportunity to become a *bhikkhu* next time. More often, though, lots of merit means rebirth into a wealthy family, if not winning the lottery this lifetime. This approach makes Buddhism into a form of “spiritual materialism,” because Buddhist teachings are being used to gain material rewards.

Unavoidably, this has had a negative effect on the Sangha too. Visitors to Buddhist societies such as Thailand can be forgiven for concluding that the Sangha’s main social role is not to teach the Dharma, or even to set a good example, but to serve as a “field of merit” that provides opportunities for laypeople to gain merit. According to popular belief, the more spiritually developed a *bhikkhu* is, the more merit a donation deposits into one’s spiritual bank account. The most important thing for monastics, therefore, is to follow all the Vinaya rules and regulations strictly, and to be seen to do that, so that one is a worthy recipient of lay support. The result is that many Asian Sanghas and their lay supporters are locked into a co-dependent marriage where it’s difficult for either partner to change. This preoccupation with karma is similar to the preoccupation of many Christians with sin—in fact they are mirror-images of each other. Sin is something negative to be absolved, whereas positive karma/merit

is something to be sought and accumulated, yet psychologically they amount to the same thing: thus commodified, they are used to get a handle on our post-mortem destiny.

There is another issue that has important implications for how Buddhism will adapt to a more global role in the future. Karma has been used to rationalize racism, caste, economic oppression, birth handicaps, and everything else. Taken literally, karma justifies the authority of political elites, who therefore must deserve their wealth and power, and the subordination of those who have neither. It provides the perfect theodicy: if there is an infallible cause-and-effect relationship between one's actions and one's fate, there is no need to work toward social justice, because it's already built into the moral fabric of the universe. In fact, if there is no undeserved suffering, there is really no evil that we need to struggle against. It will all balance out in the end.

I remember a Buddhist teacher's reflections on the Holocaust in Nazi Germany during the World War II: "What terrible karma all those Jews must have had..." This kind of fundamentalism, which blames the victims and rationalizes their horrific fate, is something no longer to be tolerated quietly. It is time for modern Buddhists and modern Buddhism to outgrow it by accepting social responsibility and finding ways to address such injustices.

In the *Kalama Sutra*, sometimes called "the Buddhist charter of free inquiry," the Buddha emphasized the importance of intelligent, probing doubt. He said that we should not believe in something until we have established its truth for ourselves. This suggests that accepting karma and rebirth literally, without questioning what they really mean, may actually be unfaithful to the best of the tradition. This does not mean disparaging or dismissing Buddhist teachings about them. Rather, it highlights the need for modern Buddhism to *interrogate* those teachings. Given what is now known about human psychology, including the social construction of the

self, how might we today approach these teachings in a way that is consistent with our own sense of how the world works? Unless we can do so, their emancipatory power will for us remain unrealized.

One of the most basic principles of Buddhism is interdependence, but I wonder if we realize what that implies about the original teachings of the Buddha. Interdependence means that nothing has any “self-existence” because everything is dependent upon other things, which are themselves dependent on other things, and so forth. All things originate and pass away according to causes and conditions. Yet Buddhism, we believe, originated in the unmediated experience of Shakyamuni Buddha, who became an “awakened one” when he attained nirvana under the Bodhi tree. Different Buddhist scriptures describe that experience in different ways, but for all Buddhist traditions his enlightenment is the basic source of all Buddhist teachings, which unlike Hindu teachings do not rely upon anything else such as the ancient revealed texts of the Vedas.

Although we usually take the above account for granted, there is a problem with it. That enlightenment story, as usually told, amounts to a myth of self-origination—something Buddhism denies! If the interdependence of everything is true for everything, the truth of Buddhism could not have sprung up independently from all the other spiritual beliefs of the Buddha’s time and place (i.e., Iron-Age India), without any relationship to them. Instead, the teachings of Shakyamuni must be understood as a *response* to those other teachings, but a response that, inevitably, also *presupposed* many of the spiritual beliefs current in that culture—for example, popular Indian notions of karma and rebirth, which were becoming widespread at that time.

Consider the insightful comment that Erich Fromm made about another (although very different!) revolutionary, Sigmund Freud:

The attempt to understand Freud’s theoretical system, or that of any creative systematic thinker, cannot be successful unless

we recognize that, and why, every system as it is developed and presented by its author is necessarily erroneous.... The creative thinker must think in the terms of the logic, the thought patterns, the expressible concepts of his culture. That means he has not yet the proper words to express the creative, the new, the liberating idea. He is forced to solve an insoluble problem: to express the new thought in concepts and words that do not yet exist in his language.... The consequence is that the new thought as he formulates it is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends. The thinker, however, is not conscious of this contradiction.

Fromm's point is that even the most creative and revolutionary thinkers cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their cultural context, whether intellectual or spiritual—which is precisely what Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. Of course, there are important differences between Freud and Shakyamuni, but the parallel is nevertheless very revealing. The Buddha too expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, using the religious categories that his culture could understand. Inevitably, then, his Dharma (or his way of expressing the Dharma) was a blend of the truly new (for example, teachings about *anatta* “not-self” and *paticca-samuppada* “dependent origination”) and the conventional religious thought of his time (karma and rebirth). Although the new transcends the conventional, as Fromm puts it, the new cannot immediately and completely escape the conventional wisdom it surpasses.

By emphasizing the inevitable limitations of any cultural innovator, Fromm implies the impermanence—the dynamic, developing nature—of all spiritual teachings. In revolutionizing the spiritual path of his time the Buddha could not stand on his own shoulders, yet thanks to his profound insight those who followed could stand on



his. As Buddhists, we tend to assume that the Buddha understood everything, that his awakening and his way of expressing that awakening are unsurpassable—but is that fair to him? Given how little we actually know about the historical Buddha, perhaps our collective image of him reveals less about who he actually was and more about our own need to discover or project a completely perfect being to inspire our own spiritual practice.

Another basic teaching of Buddhism is impermanence, which in this context reminds us that Hindu and Buddhist doctrines about karma and rebirth have a history, that *they have evolved over time*. Earlier Brahmanical teachings tended to understand karma mechanically and ritualistically. To perform a sacrifice in the proper fashion would invariably lead to the desired consequences. If those consequences were not forthcoming, then either there had been an error in procedure or the causal effects were delayed, perhaps until your next lifetime (hence implying reincarnation). The Buddha's spiritual revolution transformed this ritualistic approach to getting what you want out of life into a moral principle by focusing on *cetana*, “motivations, intentions.” *Cetana* is the key to understanding how he ethicized karma. The *Dhammapada*, for example, begins by emphasizing the pre-eminent importance of our mental attitude:

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.

To understand the Buddha's innovation, it is helpful to distinguish a moral act into three aspects: the *results* that I seek; the *moral rule* or

*regulation* I am following (for example, a Buddhist precept or Christian commandment; also ritualistic procedures); and my mental attitude or *motivation* when I do something. Although these aspects cannot be separated from each other, we can emphasize one more than the others—in fact, that is what we usually do. By no coincidence, in modern moral philosophy there are also three main types of theories. *Utilitarian* theories focus on consequences, *deontological* theories focus on general principles such as the Ten Commandments, and *virtue theories* focus on one's character and motivations.

In the Buddha's time the Brahmanical understanding of karma emphasized the importance of following the detailed procedures (rules) regulating each ritual. Naturally, however, the people who paid for the rituals were more interested in the results. We have already noticed that, unfortunately, the situation in some Buddhist countries is not much different today. Monastics are preoccupied with following the complicated rules that regulate their lives, while laypeople are preoccupied with accumulating merit by giving gifts to them. Both of these attitudes miss the point of the Buddha's spiritual innovation, which emphasized the role of intention.

Nevertheless, some Pali Canon texts do support a largely deterministic view. (Is it a coincidence that most of these passages work to the material benefit of the Sangha that has preserved them?) For example, in the *Culakammavibhanga Sutra* (*Majjhima Nikaya* 135) karma is used to explain various differences between people, including physical appearance and economic inequality. However, there are other texts where the Buddha clearly denies moral determinism, for example the *Tittha Sutra* (*Anguttara Nikaya* 3.61) in which the Buddha argues that such a view denies the possibility of following a spiritual path:

There are priests and contemplatives who hold this teaching,  
hold this view: “Whatever a person experiences—pleasant,

painful, or neither pleasant nor painful—that is all caused by what was done in the past.”...Then I said to them, “Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief...unchaste...a liar...a divisive speaker...a harsh speaker...an idle chatterer...greedy...malicious...a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.” When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], “This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.” When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should and shouldn’t be done, one dwells bewildered and unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to one-self as a contemplative.

In another short sutra (*Sutta Nipata* 36.21), an ascetic named Shivaka asked the Buddha about the view that “‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action.’ Now, what does the revered Gotama [Buddha] say about this?” To which the Buddha replies:

Produced by (disorders of the) bile, there arise, Shivaka, certain kinds of feelings....Produced by (disorders of the) phlegm...of wind...of (the three) combined...by change of climate...by adverse behavior...by injuries...by the results of karma—(through all that), Shivaka, there arise certain kinds of feelings....Now when these ascetics and Brahmins have such a doctrine and view that “‘whatever a person experiences, be it pleasure, pain or neither-pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by previous action,’” then they go beyond what they know by themselves and what is accepted as true by the world. Therefore, I say that this is wrong on the part of these ascetics and Brahmins.

While we take the words of the Buddha seriously, we should not overlook the humor of this passage. I can even imagine the Buddha passing wind, and then asking Shivaka, “Was *that* produced by karma?” Perhaps the important point to be gleaned from comparing such passages is that the earliest Buddhist teachings about karma are somewhat ambiguous. If they are insufficient by themselves as a guide for understanding karma today, I think that we should return to the Buddha’s revolutionary emphasis on the motivations of our actions. How should we today appreciate the original insight of his approach?

The original Sanskrit term *karma* (*kamma* in Pali) literally means “action,” while *vipaka* is the karmic result of action (also known as its *phala*, “fruit”). As this suggests the basic point is that our actions have consequences—more precisely, that our morally relevant actions have morally relevant consequences that extend beyond their immediate effects. In most popular understandings, the law of karma and rebirth is a way to get a handle on how the world will treat us in the future, which also implies, more immediately, that we must accept our own responsibility for whatever is happening to us now, as a consequence of something we must have done earlier. “If I was born blind, well, it must be my own fault.” This misses the revolutionary significance of the Buddha’s reinterpretation.

Karma is better understood as the key to spiritual development: *how our life-situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of our actions right now*. When we add the Buddhist teaching about not-self—in modern terms, that one’s sense of self is a mental construct—we can see that karma is not something the self *has*, it is what the sense of self *is*, and what the sense of self is changes according to one’s conscious choices. “I” (re)construct myself by what “I” intentionally do, because “my” sense of self is a precipitate of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Just as my body is composed of the food eaten, so my character is composed of conscious

choices, for “I” am constructed by my consistent, repeated mental attitudes. People are “punished” or “rewarded” not for what they have done but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. An anonymous verse expresses this well:

Sow a thought and reap a deed  
Sow a deed and reap a habit  
Sow a habit and reap a character  
Sow a character and reap a destiny

What I do is motivated by what I think. Intentional actions, repeated over and over, become habits. Habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and reacting construct and compose my sense of self: the kind of person I am. The kind of person I am does not fully determine what occurs to me but strongly affects what happens and how I respond to it.

Confession and repentance are so important because they are our way of acknowledging, both to others and to ourselves, that we are striving to not allow something we have done to become (or remain) a habitual tendency that forms part of our sense of self.

Such an understanding of karma does not necessarily involve another life after physical death. As the philosopher Spinoza expressed it in the last proposition of his *Ethics*, happiness is not the reward for virtue; happiness is virtue itself. We are punished not for our “sins” but by them. We become the kind of person who does that sort of thing.

To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. When your mind changes, the world changes. And when we respond differently to the world, the world responds differently to us. Insofar as we are actually nondual with the world, our ways of acting in it tend to involve feedback systems that incorporate

other people. People not only notice what we do, they notice why we do it. I may fool people sometimes, yet over time my character becomes revealed as the intentions behind my deeds become obvious. The more I am motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, the more I must manipulate the world to get what I want, and consequently the more alienated I feel and the more alienated others feel when they see they have been manipulated. This mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other side, the more my actions are motivated by generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom of interdependence, the more I can relax and open up to the world. The more I feel part of the world and genuinely connected with others, the less I will be inclined to use others, and consequently the more inclined they will be to trust and open up to me. In such ways, transforming my own motivations not only transforms my own life; it also affects those around me, since what I am is not separate from what they are.

This more naturalistic understanding of karma does not mean we must necessarily exclude other, perhaps more mysterious possibilities regarding the consequences of our motivations for the world we live in. There may well be other aspects of karmic cause-and-effect that are not so readily understood. What is clear in either case, however, is that karma-as-how-to-transform-my-life-situation-by-transforming-my-motivations-right-now is not a fatalistic doctrine. Quite the contrary: it is difficult to imagine a more empowering spiritual teaching. We are not told to accept passively the problematic circumstances of our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to improve our spiritual lives and worldly situation by addressing those circumstances with generosity, loving-kindness, and nondual wisdom.