

Choosing Reality: Karma and Free Will

David Paul Boaz

What you are is what you have been.
What you will be is what you do now.
—Gautama Buddha

Karma is the heart of Buddhist ethics. Wise, skillful *bodhichitta* is the cause of 'good karma'. Relatively viewed, karma is discursively and semiotically complex. Buddhist monks and nuns study its conceptual and trans-conceptual subtlety for many years. In the ultimate view karma is more direct.

Let us once again visit Gautama the Buddha's love-wisdom mind foundation that grounds his entire teaching:

First, do no harm.
Practice what is skillful
in benefiting beings.
Train and purify your mind.
That is my teaching.

These 20 words enfold the Buddha's wisdom for the ages. The great teaching unfolds through the compassionate love and wisdom of the Path. [Boaz 2020]

Karma (*Pali, kamma*) is human thought, intention, and action, and its ethical/moral consequences. Karma is the interdependent connection between cause and effect—an action's cause, and it's result. In the context of Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Hebrew and Christian ethics, though there be differing precepts, karma connotes ethical causal *consequences* of human intention and action/conduct that includes the thought and intention of the agent/actor. Karma is moral causality, cause and effect. "That which you sow, thus shall you also reap." [Jesus] The Buddha speaks:

Intention I tell you is
karma. By intending
one does karma by way
of body, speech, and mind.
—*Anguttara Nikaya* (6.63)

The *Acintita Sutta* reveals that karma is one of the four incomprehensible subjects, beyond all logic, reason, concept, and belief. These karmic consequences or effects (*karmaphala*) may come to fruition in this present life, or in a future life. Thus is karma usually causally linked in our wisdom traditions to rebirth, or reincarnation, or transmigration. Karma-rebirth may be seen as essential in understanding karma; or it may

be seen as derivative and nonessential. It is nonessential to Hebrew and Christian soteriology (salvation, liberation). Karma-rebirth is most essential to Hindu and Buddhist soteriology—liberation from suffering, and full *bodhi* enlightenment, or buddhahood. All three Buddhist teaching vehicles (*yanas*) agree that karma involves rebirth. Just how it actually is that intentional karmic action causes the continuous cycle of birth in *samsara* must be integrated with the Buddhist doctrinal metaphysics of impermanence (*anitya*), and no-self (*anatman*). This has been a challenge for Buddhist dialectical philosophy for 25 centuries. There are several ideas on offer; all beyond the scope of this present discussion. [Boaz 2020 Ch. V]

For Buddhists the timeless endless cycle of rebirth in *samsara* is determined by karma, the negative actions of body, speech, and mind. Rebirth is an effect (*karmaphala*) of karma. *Karmaphala* is the result of the natural process of causality—objective causes and their effects. *Karmavipaka* is the 'ripening' or maturing of previous karmic actions, negative or positive. It is negative karma that causes continuous rebirth in *samsara*. It is karma that causes one to enter in and practice Gautama the Buddha's Two Truths, and his Four Noble Truths with its Eightfold Path that lights the way to liberation from the suffering of *samsara* with its continuous cycle of birth and death.

The Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhist view of karma is nonlinear, para-deterministic, fluent, and dynamic. Karma is not a fully determined, merely linear, mechanistic relation between a specific act and a specific result. The karmic causal effect of an act abides in relationship with the developmental spiritual level of the agent, the intention, and by the relevant circumstances surrounding the execution of the act.

Ethically 'good' beneficial actions sow karmic seeds that cause or result in positive consequences. Ethically 'bad' harmful actions sow karmic seeds that cause or result in negative consequences. 'Good karma' is generally seen as dharma and results in merit (*punya*); 'bad karma' is *adharma* and results in demerit (*pap, avidya, marigpa*).

Buddha's Four Noble Truths, and indeed all of the wisdom paths of our great Primordial Wisdom Tradition are dependent upon the objectively empirically unprovable metaphysical assumption that human beings have at least enough free will to *choose* some actions over other actions. Clearly, this is so. Notwithstanding the modernist Laplacian/Newtonian 'scientific' bias that all spacetime events/actions are entirely causally determined, human beings do have a bit of free will. We may *choose* at this moment to offer some benefit to a suffering living being. We may *choose* the Path to freedom from our own suffering. Ultimately it is our *actions* in the world that determine our cause and effect karma. Told Buddha, "*What you are is what you have been; what you will be is what you do now*". As good a definition of karma as ever there was.

For example, we can as a self-ego-I, in this very moment now choose altruistic compassionate thought, intention, and action to benefit living beings—our precious *bodhicitta*—kind thought and action that eases the suffering of sentient beings being here in time. We can *choose* to practice Buddha's Eightfold Path and his Six Perfections that cause the cessation of suffering of self and others, over against harmful egocentric conduct that is the primary cause of our suffering. We can choose, this moment now, to enter in our

primordial love-wisdom mind, our Buddha heart Buddha mind—always already present indwelling spontaneous Presence of That.

From the seminal Buddhist Middle Way Madhyamaka metaphysical principle of causal interdependence—'dependent origination' or 'dependent arising' (*pratitya samutpada*)—the very identity (*samatajnana*) of emptiness/*shunyata* itself, it follows that any human action/conduct results in a potential ethical causal consequence that has karmic significance. The view that pervades all the Buddhist teaching vehicles is that human action is the inexorable karmic result of prior thoughts, intentions, and actions. Cause and effect. Nothing mystical or metaphysical. Karma is all pervasive and inexorable in the causally interdependent dimension of human action here in sociocultural space and time.

The Mahayana 'Causal Vehicle' is deeply grounded in causality, dualistic cause and effect. Practice this now, and receive that benefit later. The Mahayana is completed in Buddhist *Dzogchen*, the Great Completion or Great Perfection—nondual acausal or noncausal 'fruitful' view wherein Buddha heart Buddha mind is always present and "Already accomplished from the very beginning." (Garab Dorje) Buddha mind Buddha nature is the luminous cognizance of the primordial awareness emptiness 'groundless ground' itself. Luminous Presence of That.

All enfolded appearing physical and mental *relative* phenomena arising and unfolding within the boundless whole of reality itself are the *ultimate* unity of emptiness and experience, of emptiness and the experienced appearance of phenomena—the prior and present primordial unity of Buddha's Two Truths—relative form and its ultimate emptiness ground.

Moreover, as it is already 'primordially present' now there is no need to seek it elsewhere. We may surrender our relative future-looking seeking strategies for happiness—along with 'hope and fear'—and awaken to this ultimate 'innermost secret' happiness always present here and now within us.

Karma accrues both individually, and because we are all inherently interdependent and interconnected, it accrues collectively or socioculturally as well. According to H.H. Dalai Lama, the law of karma is the ethical face of the scientific law of causality. Causes precede their effects; effects follow their causes.

Karma inexorably functions in the causal chain of any human action, namely, the *thought* or the desire (however brief) that causes the *intention* (conscious or not) to act, then the final execution of the act itself—*action*. Each link in the chain has karmic significance and consequences.

The 'principle of karma', or the 'law of karma' does not admit of either a 'consequentialist' (maximize the benefit to others of your actions), nor of a 'deontological' (obey the rules; actions are either right or wrong) calculus of excuses. Moral rules, duty, intentions, actions, and consequences are all subsumed in the law of karma as it is generally understood in our wisdom traditions. In Western philosophy we discover ethical theories that may emphasize any one of these. All are inherently conditioned by the law of karma.

For example, the personal karma resulting from the suffering caused by an international arms dealer is not undone by his/her compensatory philanthropy. The

specific personal karmic burden created by intentionally harming a child is not mitigated by *bodhicitta* activity expressed elsewhere in the life-world of the perpetrator.

Awakening to innermost awareness Presence of our innate clear light love-wisdom mind is inherently beyond concept and belief—beyond our 'global web of belief'. This love-wisdom Presence already fully understands the innermost functions of the law of karma. We continuously connect to that love and nondual wisdom through non-conceptual, quiescent mindfulness meditation, deity practice and mantra prayer, all expressed as skillful *bodhichitta* conduct.

Mindfulness and Karma

Good news! The human happiness and peace inherent in timeless, spacious 'mindfulness of breathing' is always rather more simple and profound than our prosaic concepts and beliefs *about* it.

Do we not limit ourselves most by grasping at, attachment to, and ego defense of our present scientific, or spiritual, or collective-cultural 'global web of belief'—our well defended uncomfortable cognitive comfort zones?

We grow beyond such limits by fluently, reflexively *choosing* concept-free, belief-free, judgment-free *shamatha*, mindful quiescent breathing. Such simple mind training practice frees the busy 'wild horse of the mind' from its adventitious, obsessive, destructive chattering white noise.

In luminous clarity of this peaceful, trans-rational, spacious nondual love-wisdom mind Presence there is no fear nor anger, no past nor future; no existence nor non-existence; no attachment nor aversion; no wisdom nor ignorance; no self nor other; no subject nor object. Indeed, ultimately viewed, there is no conceptual judgment here at all. But of course, we must relatively, conventionally make choices as to our intentions and actions, what to avoid and what to embrace. The Buddha's Two Truths—relative and ultimate—once again. It is this indwelling love-wisdom mind Presence that is our guiding light to harmless, karma free 'right' thought, intention, and action.

Karma is 'created' by our thoughts, intentions and action/conduct in the dualistic spacetime dimension of form, or Relative Truth as it continuously arises in the nondual perfectly subjective formless dimension of Ultimate Truth—primordial awareness ground that embraces and pervades it all. What is the mind? That is the mind. But mere concepts and beliefs about karma, without direct contemplative experience (*yogi pratyaksa*) of it is woefully incomplete.

We have seen that our past is history; but a present memory. Our future has not yet arrived; but an often fraught present anticipation of what is to come—always busy becoming the present, then almost immediately, gone beyond to the past. Everything happens now, in this present moment. But the present moment is to fleeting to grasp and hold. So, there is no *ultimate* reality in the "three times", past present and future. Time is, as Albert Einstein said, "An illusion, albeit a very persistent one."

Yet, as Dōgen Zenji and Padmasambhava have pointed out, we must learn from our past. We must learn not to fear our future. And we must learn not to dwell in either of

these times. We begin to abide in this present moment now. How shall we understand this?

Zen Master Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253) told that this eternal present moment now exists only relative to a past and a future. Being here in time (*Ugi*) is a simultaneous array of the "three times", always embraced by nondual *turiya*, the fourth time. [Appendix B]

So, what is the real? Throughout all our spacetime experience there is always this timeless rhythm of the breath—rising and falling in the belly. Our *relative* being here in space and time is *ultimately*, only that. That is the boundless empty and ultimate Nature of Mind (*cittata, sem nyid, Buddha mind, buddhajñana*) in whom arises all the perceptual and conceptual phenomenal stuff of reality. That is the ultimate reality of relatively appearing phenomena. Realizing that truth is Happiness Itself. Great joy! *Mahasukaho!*

So, don't take your narcissistic, relative-conventional, defensive self-ego-I too seriously. That is not who you actually ultimately are. Or is it?

Doesn't the answer to this fundamental human question—"Who am I"—depend upon the view, relative conventional, or nondual ultimate? And does not the ultimate dimension of the one nondual primordial emptiness 'groundless ground' embrace and subsume this relative spacetime dimension of form in a non-conceptual, post-empirical prior yet always present unity? The prior and present unity of form and emptiness?

Therefore, 'Keep the View'. Rest in the numinous 'clear light awareness' of the nondual view. As the Buddha told so long ago, "Let it be as it is and rest your weary mind; all things are perfect exactly as they are." In this perfectly subjective ultimate view there is no dilemma whatsoever. "No self; no time; no problem at all." (Suzuki Roshi) That is the ultimate view. We do have this choice; do we not?

Well then, what remains here and now in the cognitive wake of such heady nondual perennial wisdom philosophy? Just enough. What remains is only this unborn, uncreated indwelling primordial awareness spontaneous Presence of our nondual innate love-wisdom nature, always already present at the Heart (*hridayam*) upon each mindful mantra breath; then its spontaneous expression as engaged 'loving-kindness' *action*. And That as our precious *bodhichitta*, Gautama the Buddha's providential ethic of altruistic compassion—karmic cause of both relative conventional human flourishing, and the liberation/enlightenment that is ultimate Happiness Itself.

Good karma to you Dear Reader.