Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism

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Introduction

Now in this era the people without any second thought of moral shame and moral dread committing the unwholesome actions which is simply due to not understanding the proper function of kamma. Therefore, to make understand oneself and not violating others, it is very important to study on this topic, as one of the central theme in the study of Buddhist Philosophy. Since it is one of the most important subject to know in Buddhism, what is really by the term kamma and its philosophical theory? In Buddhism, kamma is one of the unique governing laws which encompasses towards all living beings irrespective of their size and place where they inhabit. Even the giant whale in the deep ocean is governing within its own result of kamma. The same animal living under same environment and even the twin of human beings are with different attitude. If a twin growing in the same environment, will there be any reason for beings in different behaviour and choice. Some human beings even do not have facility comparing to the dog of a rich people. Moreover, some people do not have enough food even for a day whereas others are spending millions of dollar within a day. All these different inequality is nothing more than the responsible of kamma result although there are other conditions as well.

In this article, it will refer the Buddhist Textual method and its commentarial interpretation of kamma and its function with the citation of competent Theravada Buddhist authors. This short article hopes to bring a new aspect studying the Kamma Theory, for the better understanding of individual’s action and others reaction due to one kamma.

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Discussion

It will become clear to explain *kamma* in Buddhism with an example taught by the Buddha, once a young man went to the Lord Buddha and asked on inequality of being. Then, the Lord Buddha explained to the young man it is nothing but due to *kamma*, a person is poor, rich, healthy, and beautiful and long life recorded in the teaching of the Lord Buddha. It is one of the Buddha’s discoveries into full-fledged doctrine, which He Himself has seen through his own wisdom. Indeed, the Lord Buddha got this universal governing law of *kamma* under the Bodhi Tree, thus, He saw with divine power of sight (*dibba-cakkhu*), which is extremely clear and surpassing the sight of human beings in the process of taking birth and passing away. Moreover, having the inferior or superior appearance of beings, beautiful or ugly beings, beings with good or bad destinations are all due to the result of *kamma*. He knows beings arising according to their own *kamma* action through His own wisdom.

Friends, these beings were full of evil conduct in deed, word and thought. They maligned the Ariyas, held wrong views. After death and dissolution of the body, they reappeared in the wretched destinations (duggati), miserable existences (apāya), states of ruin (vinipāta), realms of continuous suffering (niraya). But friends there were also those who were endowed with good conduct in deed, word and thought. They did not malign the Ariyas: they held right views and performed actions according to right views. After death and dissolution of the body, they reappeared in good destinations, the happy world of devas (Ko Lay 2005: 131-132).

In fact, the etymological meaning of *kamma* is rather important to explain before going to commence the topic. *Kamma* literally means an action or performance but from Buddhist doctrine, it has more than the action. Perhaps, it should not be understood whatever kind of actions when the action done without voluntarily. Thus, the Buddha’s *kamma* doctrine is unique due to intentional performance of action it constitutes as *kamma*. Therefore, the Buddha states, “volition, O Monks, is what I call action. Having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind.” (Aṅguttara Nikāya II: 363) It is only when the action is performed deliberately, constitutes either wholesome or unwholesome action. For instance, other monks criticised for killing a lot of living
insects when Venerable Cakkhupāla Thera stepped down unintentionally who was blind due to his past unwholesome action while pacing up and down (caṅkamana). Then, the Lord Buddha explained to the monks not to regard as unwholesome action. Since Venerable Cakkhupāla Thera attained Arhantship, who destroyed all the defilements. Through this example, it becomes clear how the volitional action is very important when a person performs any action either good or bad. Therefore, in Buddhism the intention (cetanā) is very important for accomplishing the kamma.

Moreover, how the kamma is possible to accomplish or in how many ways kamma can perform? According to Buddhism, kamma can be performed through three ways namely- bodily, verbally, and mentally. The mentioned word as “having willed” is important that represents the deliberate performance of the action. From Buddhist point of view, kamma is possible to do only by means of bodily, verbally and mentally.

Is that only by threefold way an action can be done? Why it is so? What is its invariability? It is important to analyse first for confirming whether there are only threefold means of way that can be performed the action or more than that (threefold way). To analyse threefold kamma (door, i.e. bodily, verbally and mentally), it is needed to categorise. Thus, for the mental door the Samaññaphala sutta explains on restraint of sense faculties:

He sees the visible object through eyes. He takes neither the sign nor the detailed analysis (of the visible object). Since, if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye, evil unwholesome states such as covetousness and grief might assail him, he practises restraint, guard the faculty of the eye, and achieves restraint over the faculty of the eye. Having heard a sound…. with the ear….having smelled an odour with the nose….having tasted a flavor with the tongue….having touched a tangible object with the body…..having cognized a mind-object with the mind, the bhikkhu does not grasp at the sigh or the details. (Bodhi 1989: 38)

Only the above three ways one can do the kamma, and there is no other way more than that. The above paragraph indicates all sense consciousness functions as mental activity (mano-kamma). Indeed, seeing with the eye does not mean the sensitive eye but rather inferring to the
eye-consciousness. Likewise, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind also should take as their respective consciousness (viññāṇa). How does it prove the other two doors namely body and verbal door? It is regarded as a kind of door since when a person talks, he has to speak through it, which depends on the kind of speech either good or bad. If the speech is good, the person accumulates the action (kamma) by means of speech. In the case of action, doing bodily (kāya-kamma) is the bodily exertion for performing the deed. Is there any other means that a person can other than doing, thinking, and speaking? Eating, killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct are the bodily actions. Attaching towards other property, pervading loving-kindness, ill will, and holding the wrong/right-view are the mental actions. Finally, speaking pleasant speech, harsh speech and boastful speech is the verbal action. In other words, the two intimations are the vocal intimation (vāci-viññāṭṭi) and body intimation (kaya-viññāṭṭi) are the two means of performing the action. On defining intimation (viññāṭṭi), the Atṭhasālinī states, “Because it is a capacity of communicating, it is called ‘intimation.’” (Pe Maung 1976: 111) Regarding the verbal intimation as, which is that which is called intimation by speech? That speech, voice, enunciation, utterance, noise, making noises, speech, articulation of one who has a moral, immoral, or unmoral thought is called speech. By this speech there is intimation information, communication; this quality is intimation by speech. (Pe Maung 1976: 114-115) Similarly, bodily intimation is the communication through bodily movement. The volition is very important while performing the action by means of bodily, verbally and mentally otherwise it does not regard as a kamma. Finally, if there is any other means to perform action, then it is a matter to consider for whether there are more than threefold means of doing an action. Thus, in any means action can be done but by means of bodily, verbally and mentally only.

Since kamma is possible to do by means of threefold way, who is responsible for doing either good or bad kamma? What makes the condition for the volition to perform it regardless of wholesome or unwholesome kamma? It states the three reasons in the Nidānasutta that there are three causes for the origination of kamma. They are greed, hatred, and delusion. (Bodhi & Nyanaponika 2000: 49) In fact, these three mental states are the roots of unwholesome action.

“An action done in greed, hatred, and delusion, born of greed, hatred, and delusion, caused by greed, hatred, and delusion, arisen from greed, hatred and
delusion, will ripen wherever the individual is reborn. And wherever the action ripens, there the individual experiences the fruit of that action, be it in this life, or in the next life, or in subsequent future lives.” (Aṅguttara Nikāya I: 133)

Thus, when a person commits an action deliberately out of greed, hatred and delusion, he is sure to reap either in this life or future existence until the attainment of arahantship. It is the unwholesome roots, which condition for the unwholesome actions either bodily, verbally, or mentally. How does it condition any unwholesome action rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion?

To explain it clearly, it will analyse a stealing example. A person must have greed towards others possession before he steals it. It is only when he gets interest on the particular object he could steal it. However, he can also steal due to intention to harm the owner. In this case, when a person thinks or nourishes greed by seeing the possession (thing) belong to others is due to the unwholesome root of greed stimulated by delusion. Only when that person gets enough unwholesome mental potency could commit the stealing action otherwise the mind is impossible to convince the body to commit it shamelessly. It is impossible to steal other properties without such kind of previous thought either greed or hatred driven by delusion. Thus, it states,

“It is not non-greed, O monks, that arises from greed; it is rather greed that arises again from greed. It is not non-hatred that arises from hatred; it is rather hatred that arises again from hatred. It is not non-delusion that arises from delusion; it is rather delusion that arises again form delusion.” (Bodhi & Nyanaponika 2000: 158-159)

Consequently, the three unwholesome roots arise, which condition to perform the unwholesome action by bodily, verbally and mentally without any hesitation.

As the unwholesome roots are essential to arise the unwholesome states, similarly to arise the wholesome action there must be needed the wholesome roots of non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and non-delusion (amoha). Thus, it is said, “There are three causes for the origination of kamma. They are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.” Bodhi& Nyanaponika 2000: 50) Perhaps it is the roots of wholesome kamma.

“If an action is done in non-greed, born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, arisen from non-greed……if an action is done in non-hatred……if an action is done in
non-delusion, born of non-delusion, caused by non-delusion, arisen from non-delusion, once greed, hatred and delusion have vanished that action is thus abandoned, cut of at the root, made barren like a palm-tree stump, obliterated so that it is no more subject to arise in the future.” (Anguttara Nikāya I: 134)

Unlike the unwholesome actions, the wholesome action does not only acquire merit (puñña) but also it has the potentiality to uproot all the defilements when one could able to develop in the mature level (arahatship). The Pāḷi Buddhism shows the underlying supporting condition of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) for doing the wholesome root. Some might ask how it will be possible the condition of unwholesome roots for performing the wholesome deed. In fact, someone does the donation for the hope of reborn in the wealthy family. Thus, wishing for wealthy life is due to the delusion because of thinking permanent, beautiful, self, and happiness life. Since, in reality the wealthy life also has to suffer from ageing, dying, and uncountable ways of suffering. As a worldly person, one is engulfed with defilement circle (kilesa-vatā). Therefore, in the mental stream they are always ready to provoke it. The Visuddhimagga-XXII-62 remarks that “for it is owing to their inveteracy that they are called inherent tendencies (anussaya) since they inhere (anusenti) as cause for the arising of greed for sense desires, etc., again and again.” (Ñāṇamoli 2009: 800) However, through the performance of donation, observance of morality and development of concentration and wisdom someone who is desirous to attain the highest bliss should continue to do wholesome deed until to be in the state of eradication of all defilement. Only after the attainment of Arahantship, doing any action will not bear result due to the absence of latent tendency/defilement (anussaya-kilesa).

*Kamma* is said that through the cessation of contact, there is the cessation of kamma. Indeed, this noble eightfold path is the way leading to the cessation of kamma namely right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. (Bodhi & Nyanaponika 2000:174) How contact can be the cessation of kamma? Concerning the craving, it explains how it arises is due to the condition of eye (sensitivity) and visible object, the eye-consciousness arises. Due to intersection of the three, there is contact. Contact conditions to feeling and feeling
conditions to craving. (Samyutta Nikāya I 2008, 300) Contact is said as the cessation of craving because only when a person could develop the noble eight-fold path, there is contact in him but does not arise the craving since, he eradicates the entire mental disposition. The two words contact and noble eightfold path alternatively said in the previous paragraph as the cessation of craving. It should be understood because contact is the main condition (dependent arising method) for the arising of craving but only with the development of noble eightfold path the complete eradication of defilements comes into being. Hence, the noble eightfold path is the only way to end all the sufferings out of birth and death.

Kamma concept has many possibilities to understand for a person who is beginner in Buddhism. However, it has some philosophical interpretation whether it is fatalist view or deterministic which the general reader usually understands regarding the kamma doctrine in Buddhism. Is it really fatalist and deterministic? Before coming to conclusion, it is rather important first to define their definition. Fatalism is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary 3rd Edition, the belief that people cannot change the way events will happen and that events. Moreover, The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Fifth Edition, determinism is the belief that what you do and what happens to you are caused by thing that you cannot control. Furthermore, it will pinpoint within the kamma perspective. For instance, Ajātasatthu commits one of the heinous deeds in his present life and his kamma designed him to suffer in the woeful planes after passing away. What is the Buddhist response on this account? Is not the kamma result a kind of determinism? Does it necessarily determine on king Bimbisāra who will die on his son Ajātasattu’s hand? Is there not any other possibility that king Bimbisāra could die apart from his son Ajātasattu?

Further, the Buddhist doctrine of kamma seems to be fatalism but it is different from it. According to Venerable Acharya Buddharakkhita comment, “fatalism is a disposition or a belief that accepts everything as predestined, ordained by providence. That is, as something that is unpreventable, unalterable and certain. It presupposes, a supernatural agency, a god etc. as the final arbiter, the supreme authority and paramount power.” (Buddharakkhita 2011: 32) To be more cleared it is important to illustrate through an example. Since Ajātatasatthu committed the heinous deed by murdering his noble father king Bimbisāra. Then he is destined to suffer in the woeful states. However, after listening the
Buddha’s teaching, he has done lots of service towards Buddhism such as supporting the monk orders, and conducting the first Buddhist council under his sponsorship. Even though Ajātasattu was destined to suffer in the worst woeful state but due to his wholesome deed, he is said to be suffered lesser woeful states. The first point to emphasis is that king Ajātasattu has the capacity to attain the path and fruition knowledge (Bodhi 1989: 51) but because of his heinous deed he deprived from it. If Buddhism would be a complete determinism, Ajātasattu ought not to commit the murder of his father. On the other hand, then the reason for murdering his father would definitely suffer in worst woeful state rather than less serious woeful state. Therefore, Acharya Buddhakrakhita comments that all our present kammass are ‘independent’ and ‘new’ actions, and not necessarily based on kammass of past lives, or their vipākas-results, though the results (of past actions) may have an alimental relation. (Buddharakkhita 2011: 31 ) Consequently, the present heinous deed of Ajātasattu prevented him for the attainment of path and fruition is not due to his past kamma but because of his evil deed of patricide in his present life.

If there is such kind of attitude in Buddhism that the present kamma is directed by the past kamma or pre-deterministic view, then it will fall under causeless view. In the same way, the Buddha should have agreed with Makkhaligosala’s causeless view that ‘there is no self-determination, no determination by others, no personal determination. There is no power, no energy, no personal strength, and no personal fortitude. (Bodhi 1989: 51) Since the past kamma designed about the future of a person, therefore, the practise of monk life, observing morality, developing concentration and wisdom has no value at all. Moreover, Acharya Buddhakrakhita remarks that there is no kamma-to-kamma relation, but there are kamma-vipāka, vipāka-kamma relations, determining the future course of existence. (Buddharakkhita 2011: 31) Partly it is true that kamma determines the future of a person but it is not the complete responsible of past kamma for happening the present result. Because the other responsible things can be due to either environment, time and place. Therefore, Acharya Buddhakrakhita furthermore comments, “Buddhism is truly optimistic, in that it sees the possibility of changing the future course by the efforts or impacts of the present kamma. And one need not worry about the effects of past kammass, because through a strong ‘counter-active’ kammass of the present life, one can certainly attenuate, even modify, the evil effects of past kammass. That is why Buddhists devote themselves to the active-present
and not the passive past.” (Bodhi 1989: 31-32) Thus, in Buddhism there is no complete past kamma condition for present performance of action (kamma).

Having discussed on some Pāli Buddhist attitude of kamma, it is going to be discussed on the relation of kamma and result (vipāka) according to Pāli literature perspective. Indeed, it is not an easy task to show it clearly between kamma and result, thus, it will be discussed within the accessible range. It may be easy to say; when a person does a wholesome deed eventually will beget the result. However, it is rather technical to explain how they really work in the mental stream. To explain the relation of kamma and vipāka, it is called technically the kamma potency (kamma-satti), thus, it will be analysed through the four kinds of potency or possession (samaṅgitā), namely, cetanā-samaṅgitā, kamma-samaṅgitā, upaṭṭhānasamaṅgitā and vipākasamaṅgitā.

I. Cetanā-samaṅgitā- possession of volition is said regarding the moment of accumulating profitable or unprofitable kamma.

II. Kamma-samaṅgitā- as long as they do not reach Arahantship, so long are beings “possessed of kamma” with reference to previously accumulated kamma which is good for ripening; this is “possession of kamma”.

III. Upaṭṭhāna-samaṅgitā – as long as the beings do not reach Arahantship, so long, after falling from this or that [existence] and firstly when reappearing in hell, hell appear to them as the apparition of flames of fire, the iron cauldrons and so on.

IV. Vipāka-samaṅgitā- “possession of [kamma] result” should be understood as the moment of [kamma] result itself. (Ñāṇamoli 1996: 186)

The structure of kamma and its result shows through the fourfold possessions (samaṅgitā). It will try to explain plainly, through example, when an act of kamma is performed, the kamma before it ceases, leaves behind a special force of asynchronous kamma (nānākhaṇika-kamma) condition which will, at some time in the future, produce an appropriate result when the conditions for its arising are satisfied. (Narada 1979: 52-53) It means when an action has done through bodily, verbally, or mentally with volition (cetanā-samaṅgitā), then the volition ceases but cause to remain some kind of seed as potency in the mental stream (kamma-samaṅgitā) of the beings’ mental stream. Nevertheless, the
remaining forces (satti) should not take as permanent entity but similar to latent defilement (anusaya) which has no arising, existent and dissolution moment. Since, the mind is changing from moment to moment, how the force will remain into permanent entity. Then, the force conditions to another moment of mind until it gets the chance to ripen. The action can be either this existence, next existence, or following existence until the attainment of Nibbāna and defunct the (kamma) result. The respective result (wholesome results in the blissful planes and unwholesome result in the woeful realms) gets the chance in blissful and woeful planes (upāṭṭhana-samaṅgitā). Finally, in the fruition part the (kamma) force manifests into result form. Therefore, Venerable Buddhakkhita explains, it is like a transmission circuit which starts from the generation point, where electricity is produced, and ends in the consumers tapping point, a light, fan, motor, etc. In between, the energy travels along hundreds of miles of the transmission line and through many relay or distribution stations. (Buddharakkhita 2011: 112)

However, it may try to explain the relation between kamma and its result plainly due to its subtlety, it is not going to undertake thoroughly. Because the Lord Buddha mentioned in the Acinteyyasutta, there are four unthinkable things, which should not be thought about, whoever should think he will become mad and vexation of mind. They are namely: the range of a Buddha, the absorption range, the result of kamma and the range of world. (Aṅguttara Nikāya I 2008: 391)

Having analysed the data in both doctrines on kammās, there are some inconsistencies from the serious readers viewpoint. It is due to Hindu scholars who imitated the kamma doctrine during the 10th century AD from Buddhism. They may say that is not so but the historical facts proved there is no such kamma doctrine in Hinduism as the action (kamma) and result (vipāka) in Buddhism into a philosophical structure. Thus, Neo-Hinduism thought that people readily accepted this kamma doctrine, thus, it is better to include such universal theory in our teaching as well. In such development, we could see the teaching in the Vedic to present Bhagavadgītā, and Vedanata. Such as the kamma doctrine in Vedic text meant the sacrificial performance but in the Neo-Hinduism, they are explaining the cause and effect theory as taught by the Lord Buddha in Buddhism.
One big gap between Buddhist *kamma* and Hindu *kamma*, is the relation. In Buddhism, the relation is there between *kamma* and its result but without holding any substance of immutability (soul) which transfers from one life to another. It cannot be explained in Hinduism without discussing on soul (*atman*) which transmigrates from former body to another in later existence.

After discussing on *kamma*, it is important to know about its result. Result comes due to action. In Buddhism Buddhist result are only the mental states not the material states. To make it clear, while a person does donation out of confidence, he will reap pleasure feeling such as by getting good food there will arise pleasant feeling while enjoying food. Thus, one should understand in Buddhism by the term resultant states refer to only mental states. It does not mean, that person will not gain any material things such as wealth, luxurious things and so forth. Since, by the term resultant state, it confines only to mental states (*nāma-dhamma*). How again those results give chance for giving their function. According to the one of the ten powers of Tathagata, one is about knowledge about *kamma*. How the *kamma* could able to give result. To give result there are certain condition requires for the *kamma* whether wholesome or unwholesome, otherwise it cannot give its result. They are: destination (*gati*), a substratum of being (*upadhi*), time (*kāla*), and effort (*payoga*). (Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā 2008: 328) While the unwholesome result is ready to reap the result, there should be the being born in bad destination such as hell (*niraya*), hungry ghost (*petavisaya*), animal (*tiracchana*), ugly appearance (*upadhi*), during bad reign of king (*kāla*), and no more effort (*payoga*), then only the unwholesome result will able to give result. On the other hand, if the being born in good destination such as human realm, (*gati*) beautiful appearance (*upadhi*), good time, during the appearance of the Buddha (*kāla*) and make right effort (*payoga*), then the unwholesome result will not have chance to produce its result.

Moreover, if the wholesome *kamma* is ready to produce the result, there should be right conditions, otherwise it cannot give it. If a person born in human realm (*gati*), beautiful appearance (*upadhi*), good time (*kāla*), and make right effort (*payoga*), then the wholesome result will definitely produce the results. If a being born in animal realm (*gati*), ugly appearance (*upadhi*), bad time (*kāla*) and make no effort (*payoga*), then the wholesome
result will not produce the good result. Therefore, to beget the *kamma* result, there should be fulfilled with complete condition, otherwise, there cannot produce the result.

**Conclusion**

With the above discussion, it becomes clear why Buddhists are so much concerned with the theory of kamma. Simply it is because of its total prediction of future having done with intention through bodily, verbal and mental actions. If one can understand proper about kamma, he can apply and gets the maximum result from the committed action. Therefore, it is essential to know for everybody about the kamma and the way it gives the result.

**References**

**Primary Texts**


**Secondary Texts**


