

***Kamma* in Buddhist Perspective**

Ven. Dapane Chandaratana

Generally *Kamma* (*Karma-Sanskrit*) means action or work. But in Buddhism *Kamma* means action based on intention or volition (*cētanā*).¹ Action that is not related with volition does not consider as *Kamma* in Buddhism. Ven. Nyanatiloka defines in his Buddhist dictionary *Kamma* as “action’ correctly speaking, denotes the wholesome and unwholesome volition (*kusala* and *akusala cētanā*) and their concomitant mental factors, causing rebirth and shaping the destiny of the being”.² Ven. Narada Maha Thera has defined *Kamma* as “any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal or physical” Ven. Walpola Rahula has described the word *kamma* as “*Kamma* literally means

action, doing but in the Buddhist theory of *Kamma*, it has specific meaning, it means only volition action, not all action”. Ven. Polwatte Buddhadatta connoted *Kamma* as action, work etc.³ The same definition has given in Sanskrit English Dictionary⁴. Considering all above definitions, it can be mentioned here that *Kamma* in accordance with Buddhism means “action with intention”.

Before study the theory of *Kamma* in Buddhism, it is essential to summarize the theory of *Kamma* in various philosophical schools in India. According to the history of Indian philosophy some philosophies and religions have taught the theory of *Kamma* and it’s result as well as some philosophers has denied the valid or result of action (*kamma*). Following philosophical schools, literatures and religions explained the theory of *Kamma*.

Vedic Period

It is possible to find out the seeds of karma theory in Vedic literature. Vedic literature has divided into four parts as *Rig-Vēda*, *Yajur Vēda*, *Sāma Vēda* and

Atarvan Vēda. Vedic ascetics believed that behind the nature forces there is a super natural being and also they believed that man and his karma(action) is controlled by such a super natural being (God). The pattern or law of the nature known as “*R̥ta*” as well as it is controlled by God known as *Varuna*. The individual who does good deeds is praised and blessed by *Varuan* while dispraising and punishing to person who does bad deeds. To satisfy the *Varuna*, it was essential to do sacrifices (*Yāga*). According to the *Rig-Vēda Yāga* which brings good result known as “*Is̥tāpūrta*”.⁵ *Rig Vēda* revealed that after the death of the individual he goes to the patriarch world with interfering of *Yama* and *Yamī*. In patriarch world, there does not judge the action of the individual and does not punish for anyone. Therefore, this place seems to be a heaven that kindly treats all the beings who go there.⁶ But Vedic people believed that the person who does sacrifices will be born in heaven and person who does bad deeds will be born in low states.

Brahman Period

Sacrifices became prominent aspect of karma theory in Brahmana period. Same time, in this period, *Yāga* became more powerful than the God who accepts that *Yāga*. Specially, karma depended on the *Yāga*. *Ṣatapatha Brāhmana* has used the words *Sukṛuta-Duṣkṛuta, Punya Pāpa, Sādu-Asādu*⁷ to denote the good and bad karma. According to the *Ṣatapatha Brāhmana*, a person who depatures from this world, has to go through a fire. The individual who has done bad deeds burns when he is going through the fire, while person who has done good deeds goes to heaven without any interruption through the fire.⁸ Thus, in Brahman period *Yāga* became pivotal in karma theory.

Upanishad Period

Upanishad ascetics rejected and vehemently criticized Brahman concept of the *Yāga* and God based Karma theory. In Upanishad karma theory, there are psychological and ethical values. According to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, “the action of individual

depends on individual himself. The person who does good deeds gets good result as well as person who does bad deeds receives bad result. The person becomes good or bad consequences of his good and bad activities.

“Yathākārī yathācārī tathā bhavati-Sādhukārī Sādhur bhavati Pāpakārī pāpo bhavati-Punyah punyena karmanā bhavati.”⁹ Chāndōgya Upanishad mentioned that the person who does good activities in this world will be born high casts (*Brāhmana, kshtriya, and vaiśya*) as well as bad doer will be born in low casts and low states (*śudra* and animals). Further, Upanishad ascetics mentioned the person becomes good or bad not due to the consequences of doing *Yāga* or not doing it but due to the result of one’s own restrain, purity and knowledge.¹⁰ Karmic theory of Upanishad is related with soul concept. Upanishad ascetics mentioned that as a leach catches one grass having given up previous one, just like soul enters into new body after death, having given up previous body.

Jain Concept of *Kamma*

According to Jainism, *Kamma* is a very subtle material atom (particle). The material atoms enters into the life of the individual and creates good and bad *Kamma*. The entering of subtle atoms was known as influxes (*Āśrava*). Influxes defile the life (spirit) of individual. For Jains *Kamma* is eightfold.

1. *Jñānavaranīya karma*- discards or removes the wisdom from Life.
2. *Darśanāvaranīya karma*-discards the right views from life.
3. *Vēdanīya karma*- creates pleasurable and painful feelings in the life.
4. *Mōhanīya karma* –discards the faith and morality of life.
5. *Āyuska karma* - decides the existence of being.
6. *Nāma karma* - decides qualities and origin of sense organs of being.
7. *Gōtra karma*- decides the race, cast social states etc. of Individual.

8. *Antarāya karma* – suppresses the spiritual development of individual.

The individual receives good and bad or neutral results consequences of his previous actions. This opinion of *Niganthanātaputta* known as “*Pubbekatahētuvāda*” in Buddhism. “*yañ kincāyañ purisa puggalō patisañvēdeti sukhañ vā dukkhañ vā adukkhamasukhañ vā sabbañ tañ pubbekatahētu... evañ vādinō bhikkhave niganthā*”¹¹. Karma theory of Jainism implies that to attain freedom (*kēvala jñāna*), it is necessary to destroy the previous kamma by practicing asceticism (*tapasa*) and should stop entering of new kamma into Life. “*Purānānañ kammanañ tapasā vyanatibhāvā ,nāvānañ kammāna akaranā..*”¹² *Pubbekatahētuvāda* of Jainism implied that individual is slave of karma because he has no free-will to act according to his will. According to the Jainism *kamma* is threefold.

1. *Kāya Danḍa*(physical action)
2. *Vaci Danḍa*(verbal action)
3. *Manō Danḍa*(mental action)¹³

Here, *Danḍa* mean action. According to the Jainism physical action is prominent for all other actions but in Buddhism volition or “*cētana*” is prominent for all other actions. Among the six philosophers *Pūrva Kassapa* taught *Akiriya vāda* (non action theory), *Makkali Gōsala*'s philosophy is *Niyati vāda*(determinism) *Ajita kēsakambili* was a *Ucchēdavādīn* (nihilist). *Pakuda Kaccāyana* was *Akiriya vādī* and *Sanjaya Bellaṭṭhi putta* was taught skeptic theory. Among six contemporary philosophers, besides *Niganthanātaputta*, all others believe to be *Akiriya vādīn* (non action) because they rejected kamma and it's result.

Kamma in Buddhism

Buddhism does not teach that every action happens in the world as result of *Kamma*. There are five kinds of Physical and mental laws or orders or process of nature (*niyāma*) that depends on cause and effect (*Hētu Phala*). Karma is one of them.

1. *Utu niyāma*-The natural law of physical objects or natural process of environment. Such as climate change (sun rising, raining, snowing, flood, earthquake etc.) natural phenomena

(flower bloom in the day and fold up night, arising of day and night).

2. *Bīja niyāma*-The natural law of heredity or as the seed, so the fruit. Such as rice produce from rise seeds.
3. *Citta niyāma*-The working or process of the mind, arising and perishing of consciousness.
4. *Kamma niyāma*-The law of *kamma* such as good action brings good result and bad action brings bad result.
5. *Dhamma niyāma*- The natural law and norms. All beings are subjected to birth, decay and death, the momentary of every conditioned things,

Buddhist *Kamma* theory is very different from that of other philosophies. It is related with dependant origination and non-soul theory. Specially, it has psychological, philosophical and ethical aspects. *Pali* discourses like *Cullakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta*, *Dēvadūta sutt*, *Nibbedaka Pariyaya Sutta*, *Ambalaṭṭhika Rahulōvāda Sutta*, *Mahākamma Vibhaga Sutta*, *Ābhisamaya Sanyutta* clearly explain *Kamma* theory of Buddhism.

Kamma as Intention (*cētanā*)

In Buddhism, intention is *kamma*. Intention, volition, wills, choice or mental energy directs all human actions. Volition is the agent that led the individual to do all kind of actions. Buddha said that “monks, volition, I say, is *kamma*, having thought or willed, it creates *kamma* through the body, speech and mind. “*Cētanāhaṃ bhikkhavē kammaṃ vadāmi ,cētayitvā kammaṃ karōti,kayena vācaya manasa.*”¹⁴ Here, *Kamma* and intention should be carefully understood. The intention is energy, feeling or power of the mind. This powerful process leads individual to do action. Intention would be good or bad, the good intention leads to good action while bad intention leads to bad action. When it paid attention to the ethical aspect of Buddhist *Kamma*, doing some actions as well as not doing, is considered as *Kamma*. For example, in *Cullakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta*, it has mentioned that not respecting, and not treating to person whom should respect and treat, is an unwholesome deed (*sakkātabbaṃ na sakkarōti ,garukatabbaṃ na garukarōti...so tēna kammēna apaya..nica kulinō hōti*)¹⁵

***Kamma Patha* (course of action)**

The completion of intentional action is known as *kamma Patha*. For example, person has intention to give something to a beggar, and then he gives something to him. This is a completed action. The course of action reasons to be reborn in heaven or hell in accordance with good and bad *Kamma*. But all intentional actions do not become *kamma patha*. For example, a person has intention to give something to a beggar. But he does not give anything to him. His action is not completed therefore, it does not become *kamma patha*. This kind of action does not bring result to rebirth (*paṭisaṅghi*) but reasons to continuity of life (*pravutti*) after rebirth.

However, according to the Buddhism the mental action (*manō kamma* either it is good or bad, is completed action. For example, trance (*Dhyāna*) gained by meditation is completed wholesome action as well as defilements arise in the mind are completed unwholesome actions. Buddhism has implied that action without intention is not a *Kamma*. As an example, *Dhammapada* mentioned that “if there is no wound in palm, the toxin does not sink to the body, though it

touch, same way the action without intention does not become *kamma patha*.” *Pānimhi ce vanō nassa – hareyya paninaṃ viṣaṃ Nābbanaṃ viṣamavēti—natti pāpaṃ akubbatō*¹⁶”. The story about *Cakkhupala thera*, and story of Hunter’s wife in commentary of *Dhammapada* clearly explains above fact.

Individual, *kamma* and it’s fruition

Some contemporary philosophers of the Buddha in India rejected the *Kamma* and it’s fruition. But Buddhism accepted *Kamma* and it’s result that related with cause and effect theory. *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* of *Sutta nipata* mentions that the world and the individual depend on the *kamma* “*Kammaṇa vattati lōkō kammanā vattati paṇa*”. The result of *kamma* depends on the action. The good action brings good result and bad action brings bad result. Once, Buddha stated that “as the seed, so the fruit. Who does good receives good, who does bad receives bad. “*Yādinsaṃ vapatē bījaṃ-tādisaṃ harate phalaṃ Kalyānakāri kalyānaṃ-papakarica Papakaṃ*”.¹⁷ *Cullakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta* explains the effect of *Kamma* which causes for the diversity among the people. There are rich and poor, high and low cast people,

beautiful and ugly people. Buddha stated that “owner of their *kamma* are the beings, heirs of their *Kamma*, the *Kamma* is their friend, and their refuge, the *Kamma* divides beings into high or low state. “*Kamassakā manava sattā kammadāyāda, kammayōni, kamma paṭisarana, kammaṇ sattē vibhajati yadidaṇ hinappanitatayati.*”¹⁸ Furthermore, Buddha explained in *Sutta* that the person who engages in killing has short life and person who has loving kindness lives long life and after death such a person will be born in heaven. In *Sāleyyaka Sutta*¹⁹ Buddha emphasized that the person who lives immoral life (doing ten unwholesome actions) will be born in hell and who has moral life (doing ten wholesome actions) will be born in heaven. According to the *Kukkuravati Sutta*²⁰ ascetic who behaves as dog or buffalo in this life to gain liberation (as an ascetics practice), such a person will be born as a buffalo or a dog in next life. In *Tēvijja sutta* mentions the person who practices four sublime abodes (*satara brahma viharana*) will be born Brahma word. *Dēvadūta Sutta* mentions that person who does immoral activities, physically, verbally and mentally will be born in hell and who refrains from such activities will be born in heaven. *Nibbedika*

pariyaya sutta mentions five kinds of courses of existence (*Gati*) that being will be born in order to the result of his *Kamma*. They are,

1. Hell (*niraya*)
2. Animal world (*tiracchāna*)
3. Ghost realm (*pēta*)
4. Human world (*manussalōka*)
5. Heaven (*dibbalōka*)²¹

In above category human world and heaven are happy courses (*sugati*) and all others are woeful course (*dugati*). According to the Buddhist theory of *Kamma* man is responsible for his own *Kamma*, it is not controlled by super natural being or God as well as he has free-will to choose either good or bad action. Buddha stated that when person did demerits he becomes impure, when he did merits becomes pure, the purity or impurity does not depend on others. But it depends on oneself. “*Attanāva kataṇ pāpaṇ attana saṅkilissati-attana akataṇ pāpaṇ attanāva visujjhati-Suddhi asuddhi paccattaṇ nañṇamañṇan visōdaye.*”²² In *Tika Nipata* of *Anguttara Nika (lōnaphala Vagga)* Buddha stated that

according to the *Kamma* of individual he gets it's result (*yathā yathayaṇ purisō kammaṇ karōti, tathā tathanaṇ vipakaṇ patisanvediyati*). But besides the very serious unwholesome deeds (*Ānantariya kamma*) many other unwholesome deeds would be possible to overcome by doing wholesome activities. The life of the *Aṅgulimāla* is example for above fact. In *Dhammapada* also it is mentioned that "the person who removes his past unwholesome deeds by doing wholesome deeds, he lights in this world just like the moon in the clear sky" "*Yassa kammaṇ kataṇ papaṇ –kusalēna pithiyati-So imaṇ lōkaṇ pabhasēti –abbha muttōva chandima*".²³

Kinds of *kamma*

Kamma basically twofold,

1. *Akusala Kamma* (unwholesome action) is rooted in greed (*lōbha*), hatred (*dōsa*) and illusion (*mōha*).
2. *Kusala Kamma* (wholesome action) is rooted in non-greed (*alōbha*) non - hatred (*adōsa*) and non-illusion (*amōha*).

Kamma can be divided into threefold category considering the way of occurring it:

1. *Kāya kamma* (bodily action)
2. *Vaci kamma* (verbal action)
3. *Manō kamma* (mental action)

According to the criteria of good and bad,

1. the action which is harmful to oneself and others is unwholesome
2. The action which is beneficial for oneself and others is wholesome²⁴

Kamma can be divided into four categories considering it's result

1. Black action with black result (*kammaṇ kanhaṇ, kanha vipakaṇ*)
2. White action with white result (*kammaṇ sukkaṇ sukka vipakaṇ*)
3. Action which is both black and white, gives result both black and white (*kammaṇ kanha sukkaṇ, kanha sukka vipakaṇ*)
4. Action which is neither black or white, result is neither black or white (*Kammaṇ akanhaṇ asukkaṇ, akanna asukka vipakaṇ*)—(*A, kamma vagga*)

With regard to the time of ripening of *kamma*-result (*vipaka*), it is fourfold,

1. *Kamma* ripening in the life time (*diṭṭha dhamma vēdanīya*)
2. *Kamma* ripening in the next life (*upapajja vēdanīya kamma*)
3. *Kamma* ripening in the later birth (*aparapariya vēdanīya kamma*)²⁵
4. *Kamma* which is unable to produce result (*ahōsikkamma*)²⁶

With regard to their function that one distinguishes *kamma*, is fourfold,

1. Regenerative or productive *kamma* (*janaka kamma*)
2. Supportive or consolidating *kamma* (*upatthambaka kamma*)
3. Counteractive or suppressive *kamma* (*upapīlaka kamma*)
4. Destructive or supplanting *kamma* (*upaghātaka or upacchēdaka kamma*)

With regard to the priority of their result that one distinguishes, is fourfold

1. Weighty *Kamma* (*garuka kamma*)
2. Habitual *Kamma* (*ācinna or bahula kamma*)
3. Death proximate *Kamma* (*maranāsanna kamma*)
4. Stored up *Kamma* (*Kaṭatta kamma*)

Causality, *Kamma* and Rebirth

The Buddhist *Kamma* and rebirth theories are directly related with the causal theory (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). With regard to above relation *Kamma* means the formations (*saṅkhāra*) of the mind. The formation of the mind effects to arise the consciousness (*viññāna*) and consciousness causes to originate the physical body (*nāmarūpa*) “*saṅkhāra paccayā viññānaṃ, viññāna paccaya nāmarūpaṃ.*” This is the causal theory of continuity of the being in *Samsara*. The process of re becoming (*patisadhi*) happens in order to power of *Kamma* of the being.

Conclusion

Buddhist theory of *Kamma* has very significant features among the Indian philosophies. Early history of Vedic literature, as it is mentioned above Vedic saints believed that the karma is result of a super natural being who control all the nature forces. In the Brahman period, Brahmins believed that *Kamma* is controlled by *Maha Brahma* who is omniscience and omnipotent. As a whole, theory of *Kamma* in Vedic literature seems to be directly related with concept of the God. But in Upanishad period, Upanishad philosophers rejected God centered karma theory. Instead of God centered karma theory they introduced soul centered *Kamma* theory. In Vedic period there was not free-will to the individual because of everything is controlled by eternal God. In Upanishad period free will of the man was restricted due to concept of eternal soul. Specially Karma theory of *Aranyaka* and *Upanishad* depended on universal soul (*jagadātma*) and individual soul (*pudgalatma*). However, when it paid careful attention to the above periods it is possible to understand that since early history of Indian philosophy there was criteria of good and bad which is based on *Kamma* theory. Among the six philosophers

besides *Nigantananta Putta* all other teachers rejected the *Kamma* and it result. Buddhist theory of *Kamma* depends on the causality. On the other hand according to Buddhism the responsibility of action depend on man himself. It means man has free-will to choose his action.

End Notes

1. A.VI.63, (P.T.S-Pali Text Society).
2. Buddhist Dictionary. Manual of Buddhist terms and Doctrine By Nyanatiloka, Kandy, 1970, p.77
3. English Pali Dictionary. Aggamahapandita Polwatte Buddhadatta Mahathera, The Pali Text Society, 1955, p.6
4. Sanskrit English Dictionary, Part I, Edited by P.K. Gode and C.G Korve, Poona, 1957, P.541.
5. Rg-veda, x, 14-8
6. Rg-veda, x, 149
7. Śathapatha Brāhmana, II-6,3-8
8. Ibid. I.9.3.2
9. Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, III,2-13
10. Praśna Upaniṣad, I.9
11. M II, 214(P.T.S)
12. Ibid

13. M.I, 371(P.T.S)
14. A.VI, 63(P.T.S)
15. M.III, 202(P.T.S)
16. Dhammapada Pāpavagga, Verse, 124 (P.T.S)
17. S.I, 227(P.T.S)
18. M.III, 202(P.T.S)
19. M.I, 284(P.T.S)
20. M.I, 387(P.T.S)
21. A.xi, 68(P.T.S)
22. Dhammapada, Attavagga Vese, 165, (P.T.S)
23. Dhammapada, Lōkavagga verse, 173(P.T.S)
24. M.I, 413(P.T.S)
25. A.VI, 63(P.T.S)
26. Commentary of A III., 98