

# What goes Around comes Around: a Study of Karma

## **LAURA PRINS, M.A.**

is a transpersonal psychotherapist with a private practice in London and Surrey, UK.

Website: [www.lauraprins.com](http://www.lauraprins.com)

### **ABSTRACT:**

Following the advent and influence of Eastern philosophies on the Western mind, karma is a well-known yet often misunderstood concept. In the West, karma is often associated with punishment, suffering, and fatalism. However, according to Buddhist thought, karma is not a retributive law but a non-linear, dynamic force that works in feedback loops to provide moment by moment opportunities for transformation. Karma's domain encompasses ethics, and can be understood as a force that initiates a struggle for health and wellbeing. One of karmic doctrine's true purposes is to situate awareness on the creative potential held within the present moment. As an empowering principle of self-transformation, karma can be defined as "intentional acts that enable psychological rebirth in life." Drawing upon the teachings and beliefs of early Buddhism, this article traces the historical origins, meaning, and function of karma in order to explore its current meaning, relationship and value to transpersonal psychology.

### **KEYWORDS:**

karma, Buddhism, transpersonal psychology, self-transformation, Eastern philosophy, rebirth, ethics.

## **Introduction**

Throughout its recorded history, karma has been variously described as doctrine, principle, concept, natural law, and teaching, and was developed in the three major religions originating in ancient India: Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Karma has long been associated with the moral and ethical aspects of humanity and used as framework for personal and spiritual development. Yet in the West karma remains enigmatic, a popular concept that is generally misrepresented and misunderstood. Over time its meaning has acquired a fatalistic streak that renders one powerless in the face of its retribution. Life events such as car accidents, health concerns, even natural disasters are felt as punitive, almost deserved. In actuality, any fatalistic belief about karma is a distortion of its true usage, meaning and functions, especially within Buddhism.

In this article I will briefly trace karma's historical origins to outline its doctrinal evolution and address how and why Western understanding of karma differs from an Eastern perspective. Next I will consider the purpose, dynamics and function of karma, drawing upon Buddhist philosophy and teachings. There are natural resonances and sympathies held between Buddhist karmic doctrine and transpersonal psychology; resonances which seem mutually informative and supportive of one another. I will focus on three specific aspects of karma that demonstrate this resonance: the present moment, the purifying mind, and rebirth. Finally I will examine how these aspects of karma serve to enhance understanding of the dynamics of creation and self-transformation within everyday life.

## **Historical Origins**

Karma translates as "act, action, deed" and is derived from the Sanskrit verb root *kr*, meaning "to do, to make"; in the Pali language it is written as *kamma* (Gombrich, 2006). In its earliest expressions in Vedic religion (Brahmanism) over three thousand years ago, karma was equated solely with prescribed religious rite or ritual (Krishan, 1997). Sacrificial acts such as oblations and charity offerings were undertaken as a way of storing up spiritual credit; recompense to be used in a future lifetime. With the creation and dissemination of the *Upanishads*, karma evolved within Hinduism from that of specified sacrificial ritual to any action made in everyday life that

carried ethical implications. Karma became conceptualised as an ethical law of reward and retribution according to good and evil deeds, where “according as one acts, according as one behaves, so does he become” (Krishan, 1997, p.18). Karma was likened to fruit or grain which ripens in its own time, eventually bearing consequences for that individual at some point in the future. Karma was intimately linked with the concept of transmigration of souls and rebirth, where an individual’s accumulated deeds of this lifetime determine the next life’s circumstances. This linear, ethical conception of karma not only provided an explanation for human suffering but helped maintain the hierarchical caste system.

It was with the genesis and development of Buddhism around 500BCE that the teaching of karma acquired a radical new formulation, when the Buddha stated “it is volition, monks, that I declare to be kamma. Having willed, one performs an action by body, speech or mind” (Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2008, Section 30, [67]). According to the Buddha it is *volition* that is karma; it is volition which precedes all action. By equating karma with volition, or intention, emphasis shifted from the external world (physical acts and deeds) to the inner world (mind oriented intention). Consequently, spiritual value, importance, and meaning are placed not on the outcome of an act, but on the force(s) that initiate it. The Buddha’s interpretation of karma served as a direct reaction to India’s caste-based religion of the time (Gombrich, 2006) and represented a paradigm shift where “one’s dignity is measured, not by one’s past, but by one’s present actions” (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2011, para. 6).

### **Karma and the West**

Karma’s first introduction to the Western world occurred around the late 1800’s, largely due to the writing and work of Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society. At this time, a cultural schism was occurring between religion and science, and the Society’s motives were to re-introduce universal wisdom traditions to instigate comparative study of ancient and modern systems of thought (Neufeldt, 1986). Karmic doctrine was filtered through Blavatsky as being a “universal” concept, thereby losing its Eastern origins, and the doctrine re-packaged to attract a Western, predominately Christian, “rational” audience. As Neufeldt (1986) observes, this filtering resulted in a certain amount of re-interpretation, where karmic doctrine

was presented as a causal system of Divine justice in which a monotheistic cosmic conscience ensures that you reap what you sow.

The main point of difference between a Western notion of karma and a Buddhist notion concerns focus on the fruits (*karma phala*), or results, of karma. In the West, this focus culminates in the idea that all life events, whether pleasant or painful, are interpreted as a debt paid for a past deed, which may be either reward or punishment. The Buddhist notion of karma differs, as it is underpinned by the principle of "dependent origination", an understanding that all things arise in dependence upon conditions. These conditions are comprised of five modes (*niyamas*) of force which interact and operate as an ever changing matrix in the world; karma represents one type of *niyama* which operates alongside four other *niyamas* in the world (Nagapriya, 2004). Karma's domain (*kamma-niyama*) is specifically that of human willed actions, or ethics, the others being physical (*utu-niyama*), biological (*bija-niyama*), mental (*mano-niyama*), and spiritual (*dhamma-niyama*).

According to the teaching of dependent origination, each life event is comprised of a mixture of these forces interacting with one another to create experience and therefore govern the state of existence of all life on Earth. Dependent origination is not a negation of the law of cause and effect, more a deepened understanding of its intricate nature. A crucial insight emerging from this understanding is that not everything that happens to an individual is down to karma. Generally, it is karma that is presented as the universal law of cause and effect, but an enhanced rendering might read that karma is the law of *humanity's ability to cause effect*. Karmic doctrine is an empowering principle, one that celebrates free will and offers continual potential for insight, healing, and self-transformation. What follows is a brief discussion of three aspects of karma that elucidate an individual's power to cause effect: the present moment, the purifying mind, and psychological rebirth.

### **Present Moment**

A Buddhist view of karma espouses that each individual is responsible for how they respond to each life event. This means that he or she is responsible for the intentions held behind any decision(s) made, either to take action

or abstain from it. One is responsible when one is aware of the feelings, thoughts and sensations preceding action; this can only occur within the present moment. Karmic doctrine is reliant upon the primacy of the present moment because when we act with volition we are acting with awareness. The Buddha encouraged focus not on the past, or the future, but on the present moment, to contact what is visible here-and-now<sup>1</sup>. Karma, being the human ability to cause effect, is based upon contact forged between an individual's awareness and the present moment. As the extensive teachings of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn iterate (1992, 1999, 2006), the present moment contains the seeds of all things, including awareness. Reality is in the present moment, life itself existing as a succession of present moments.

In a therapeutic setting, a client is often encouraged to engage with the present moment to encounter and experience thoughts, feelings, and sensations. One reason behind this is to establish contact with his or her "awareness of". The present moment becomes the point of power, the open window through which we can act with knowledge and awareness. Buddhist monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2011) observes that for the early Buddhists karma was thought to be non-linear. In their view the present moment is shaped both by past and present actions; present actions shape both the future *and* the present. Karma, and its attending effects, comes to us in waves, or feedback loops within the present moment, providing constant opening for further engagement and possible action. This process is what makes free will and personal transformation possible within a causal schema. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2011) notes that in Buddhism the image of flowing water is used to further elucidate this process. In any given moment, currents of force may run weak or strong, but an individual endeavours to step into the flow with awareness and agency. The present moment is the seat of free will, the space where the potency of human action is enacted.

### **Purifying Mind**

When the Buddha equated karma with volition, he shifted focus from physically completed acts to the intentions and force(s) originating them. The mind became the locus of karma, not the outside world. This is illustrated in the sacred text of the *Dhammapada*, an integral part of the Buddhist canon, where the Buddha states that "mind precedes all things; all things

have mind foremost, are mind-made" (Saddhatissa, 1997, p.11). But what is "mind"? The Dalai Lama (1991) depicts mind as a non-material entity that possesses a knowing nature; mind can observe itself, and is influenced and conditioned by emotions and thoughts. For example, we know where we are right now, and if we tune in, know what we are thinking, sensing, and feeling. The Dalai Lama notes that mind is coloured by different mental events and states, and shares an intimate connection with karma, where "state of mind" plays a critical role in an individual's experience of both happiness and suffering. Happiness and health is associated with a "clear" mind that is able to function with balance and lucidity. A clear mind is not a vacant mind, it is simply no longer held hostage by emotions and thoughts arising out of one's past.

When an individual actively engages with karma, he or she is led into a process of purification through engagement with personal ethics. In Buddhism, one's intentions and states of mind are deemed either skilful (*kusala*) or unskilful (*akusala*); skilful intentions lead to health and wellbeing, while unskilful intentions lead to suffering and dis-ease (Thera & Bhikku Bodhi, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Karma encourages examination of why we make certain decisions, and if the intentions driving any act serve to promote or prevent wellbeing. Karma instigates inquiry into the potential consequences of decisions and actions through focus on intentions: toward ourselves, toward others, and towards the world at large. Karma provides the insight that we have power and agency, and are given the option of choosing for skilfulness, health, and compassion at any given moment. When we engage with the force of karma we are in the act of purifying the mind, purifying what we identify as the "self". This process occurs through learning not to block what comes, learning to question, evaluate, and understand the inner world, learning to tolerate the seemingly intolerable. I would therefore position the purifying mind aspect of karma as *the struggle for health and wellbeing*; it remains a struggle because one does not always know or is able to choose for what is healthy. This explains why an engagement with karma is a long term, often laborious process: discernment of what is skilful and unskilful is in itself a skill to be learned over a lifetime.

### **Psychological Rebirth**

Karma has long been associated with the tenets of transmigration of souls

and rebirth. Initially karma was conceptualised in linear chronological terms - functioning as a kind of spiritual accounting system - where actions from a past life determine the conditions for this life, and actions in this life determine conditions in the next life (Krishan, 1997). A Buddhist conception of karma is non-linear, where focus is held on the creative potential of the present moment. Additionally, it is thought that the world, and all beings inhabiting it, is constantly in motion and flux; no one and no thing remains static (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2011). On a physical level, this principle of change is evidenced in research on neurogenesis and stem cells (Bergmann et al., 2009), where the body's tissues are seen to regenerate and replenish themselves through cellular turnover. As one cell dies, another is reborn to seamlessly take its place: this is the rebirth of the body. In Buddhist thought rebirth of the mind takes place every moment, over and over again, mirroring the concept that reality and life itself is comprised of a series of infinite present moments. Here I am reminded of the words of Heraclitus, where "you could not step into the same river twice, for fresh waters are flowing on" (Guthrie, 1979, p.450). We are reborn with each step into the present moment. No one moment is ever exactly the same. We are never exactly the same.

In the same vein, psychological rebirth occurs through karma, in the willed actions performed through body, speech, or mind. This is possible because of two fundamental assertions in Buddhist thought: one, that the human personality is malleable, and two, that willed human actions modify personality (Nagapriya, 2004, p.51). These assertions posit that with each enacted choice and decision, our character is modified and we are thus transformed. We are not who we were before this thought, this intention, even this moment. The 8<sup>th</sup> century Indian guru Padmasambhava said of karma "if you want to know your past life, look into your present condition. If you want to know your future life, look at your present actions" (Su, 2008, p. 229). Here karma is valued for its power to determine the next life's circumstances, but I argue that this power is even more beneficial in determining this life's circumstances. Rebirth is happening now, in this lifetime, over and over and over again.

## **Conclusion**

Transpersonal psychology is an inclusive paradigm incorporating numerous

strands and goals, one of which seeks to blend Eastern and Western philosophies for enhanced comprehension of the human potentials for growth and transformation. An understanding of the concept of karma therefore adds value and meaning to the field of transpersonal psychology by conceptualising a process of health and transformation that occurs throughout the life cycle. Karma is concerned with humanity's ability to cause effect, and can be viewed as a powerful force moving through the everyday, mundane world. This article focuses on three aspects: the present moment, the purifying mind, and psychological rebirth in order to position karma as the struggle for health and wellbeing. This struggle for health and wellbeing occurs through karma's power to facilitate intentional acts of mind, body and speech; acts that enable psychological rebirth in life. The concept of karma demonstrates that the potential for transformation is now, in every moment. This broadens the spectrum of human potential to include transformational insights gleaned from ordinary life moments, effectively marrying the sacred with the everyday. Furthermore, karma affirms that the way to health and wellbeing is non-linear and cannot be predicted or prescribed.

Given that transpersonal psychology is concerned with pluralism and inclusivity, it is surprising that karma has historically been given a wide berth. Perhaps this has something to do with karma's association with ethics and morality. Who is responsible for determining which life values should predominate, discerning between skilful and unskilful acts, or what constitutes a "good life"? Karmic doctrine asserts that each individual must decide this for themselves. If we can consider karma as the struggle for wholeness and wellness, and not a system of punitive judgment, this distils some ethical tension. Ethics, and karma, is ultimately about cultivating awareness and compassion for ourselves, for others, and for the world. Karma enables individuals to examine subjective experience, and provides continual opportunities to enact the necessary changes in the present moment; objectives which run parallel to the aims and goals of therapeutic treatment. Karma is fundamentally concerned with contact, engagement, and relationship, and helps explain how a participatory, co-creational attitude manifests in life. Thus, an understanding of karma helps facilitate the ability to make more informed choices, to alter or deepen one's life path, and ultimately to live a more fulfilled reality. It is a rich topic, worthy



of deeper consideration and research within transpersonal psychology.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1)</sup> For more information regarding the Buddha's teachings on the present moment, see Thanissaro Bhikkhu's (2010) translation of the *Arañña Sutta* (The Wilderness) and Ñanananda Bhikkhu's (2010) translation of the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (The Discourse on the Ideal Lover of Solitude).

<sup>2)</sup> In the Thera and Bhikku Bodhi (2008) translation of the Buddhist scripture *Anguttara Nikaya*, *kusala* and *akulsala* are additionally translated as wholesome and unwholesome.

## **REFERENCES**

- Bergmann, O., Bhardwaj, R.D., Bernard, S., Zdunek, S., Barnabé-Heider, F., Walsh, S.,...Frisén, J. (2009). Evidence for cardiomyocyte renewal in humans. *Science*, 324: 98-102.
- Dalai Lama XIV (1991). *MindScience: An East-West dialogue*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Gombrich, R.F. (2006). *Theravāda Buddhism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.).
- Guthrie, W.K.C. (1979). *A history of Greek philosophy: Volume 1, the earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat (1992). *Peace is every step*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat (1999). *The miracle of mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat (2006). *Understanding our mind*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Krishan, Y. (1997). *The doctrine of karma: Its origin and development in Brāhmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Nagapriya (2004). *Exploring karma and rebirth*. Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications.
- Ñānananda Bhikkhu (2010). *Bhaddekaratta Sutta: The discourse on the ideal lover of solitude*. Retrieved May 2013 from <http://www.access-toinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.131.nana.html>
- Neufeldt, R.W. (1986). In search of utopia: Karma and rebirth in the Theosophical movement. In R.W. Neufeldt (Ed.), *Karma and rebirth: Post classical developments*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Saddhatissa, H. (1997). *Buddhist ethics*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Su, C. (1997). Forgiveness and Buddhism. In Y.K. Greenberg (Ed.), *En-*

*cyclopedia of love in world religions: A-I, Vol. 1.* Oxford, UK: ABC-CLIO, Inc.

- Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2010). *Arañña Sutta: The wilderness*. Retrieved May 2013 from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn01/sn01.010.than.html>
- Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2011). *Karma*. Retrieved May, 2013 from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/karma.html>
- Thera, N. & Bodhi Bhikkhu (2008). *Anguttara Nikaya: An anthology, Part II*. Retrieved May 2013 from <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh208-p.html#30.APenetrativeExposition>