

Exploring the Law of Kamma's Twelve Factors in Theravāda Buddhism: A Systematic Study*

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Abstracts

The concept of Kamma is central to the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism, emphasizing the role of individual actions and intentions in shaping one's reality. This study aims to explore the practice of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism and to provide an in-depth understanding of the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism and to advance the understanding of Theravāda Buddhism's Kamma doctrine and contribute to the broader field of Buddhist studies. This research article provides an in-depth analysis of the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism. By employing a qualitative research methodology and utilizing primary and secondary sources, this study offers valuable insights into the complex relationships between intention, action, and consequence within the Theravāda tradition. By conducting a comprehensive literature review, this study examines key Buddhist texts, including the Pāli Canon, and contemporary scholarly works to provide an in-depth understanding of the Law of Kamma and its implications for human behavior and decision-making. Through this analysis, this paper can help the readers to elucidate the philosophical and practical significance of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism and contribute to a broader understanding of how intentionality and moral action shape the human experience.

Keywords : Law of Kamma; Theravāda Buddhism; Kamma

Introduction

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, as the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi once said (Laozi, ca. 6th century BCE). In the intricate world of Theravāda

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Buddhism, understanding the concept of Kamma (often referred to as Karma in popular discourse) provides a vital first step on the path towards unraveling the complex tapestry of Buddhist philosophy (Bodhi, B. 1999). 'Kamma' means action or deed, but in The Buddha's Teaching Kamma refers only to volitional action (MN 136). According to Ajahn Sucitto, 'Kamma' is the Pali language version of the Sanskrit term 'karma', which has slipped into colloquial English as meaning something like a person's fate or destiny (Sucitto, Ajahn. 2009). Theravāda Buddhism, one of the oldest and most prevalent schools of Buddhism, serves as a cornerstone for understanding the rich and diverse landscape of Buddhist thought. Central to its teachings are the intricate and interconnected principles governing the ethical and spiritual dimensions of existence. Among these principles, the concept of Kamma (or karma in Sanskrit) plays a pivotal role in elucidating the causal relationship between actions, consequences, and the ultimate goal of liberation. The Buddhist concept of "Paṭiccasamuppāda" illustrates the process of Kamma, emphasizing that individuals are accountable for their actions and that their present and future conditions are determined by past and present actions. Kamma generates effects that return to individuals, influencing their rebirths into different beings or life forms based on their accumulated actions. There are three types of Kamma: meritorious (Kusala Kamma), demeritorious (Akusala Kamma), and neutral (Kusala-Akusala Kamma). Meritorious acts, like generosity and morality, contribute to attaining Nirvana and liberation, while demeritorious acts, such as greed and hatred, lead to lower rebirths. Neutral acts are ethically insignificant. Rebirth occurs within the three realms (lokas) of the universe - Arupaloka, Rupaloka, and Kamaloka based on an individual's Kamma (Annabel Gallop. 2016). According to Buddhists' belief, every action we undertake, whether good or bad, carries consequences that will eventually come back to us. The idea of Kamma is not limited to the present life, but it also extends to future existences, according to the Buddhist worldview. Therefore, individuals are responsible for their actions, and they will be held accountable for them in this life and beyond.

The study of Kamma, or karma, has gained traction as an essential aspect of understanding the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. This research article aims to offer an analytical inquiry into the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism, a topic of significant importance that has been understudied in the contemporary academic landscape and also will delve into the nuances of each factor, elucidating their significance in the overall understanding of Kamma and its role in the doctrine of dependent origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda). By delving into the intricate connections between Kamma, causality,

and the process of rebirth, this paper will illuminate the multifaceted nature of this core concept within the Theravāda tradition. The twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism provide a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between intention, action, and consequence, ultimately revealing the transformative potential of human existence.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism. The primary data sources for this research are the Pāli Canon and its commentaries, which are critical to understanding the Theravāda tradition's foundational teachings. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and relevant academic publications that discuss Kamma, its factors, and its historical development within Theravāda Buddhism. By undertaking these additional steps, the research methodology aims to provide a holistic, well-rounded investigation of the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism. Through a combination of textual, thematic, comparative, and contextual analyses, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between intention, action, and consequence within the Theravāda tradition. Ultimately, this research aims to enhance scholarly knowledge, stimulate further academic inquiry, and offer valuable insights for both practitioners and individuals interested in the transformative potential of the Kamma doctrine in Theravāda Buddhism.

The exploration of these twelve factors will not only contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism but also serve as a foundation for comparative studies with other schools of Buddhism and religious traditions. By examining the subtle interactions and interdependence of these factors, this paper aims to highlight the intricate tapestry of ethical and spiritual dimensions that underpin the Theravāda Buddhist worldview. This article's significance lies in its ability to advance the understanding of Theravāda Buddhism's Kamma doctrine, while simultaneously offering a valuable contribution to the broader field of Buddhist studies. By dissecting the twelve factors of Kamma, this research article will not only enrich the academic discourse but also pique the interest of scholars, practitioners, and curious minds alike.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the practice of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism.

2. To provide an in-depth understanding of the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism.

3. To advance the understanding of Theravāda Buddhism's Kamma doctrine and contribute to the broader field of Buddhist studies.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, using textual, thematic, comparative, and contextual analyses. The primary data sources are the Pāli Canon and its commentaries, while secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and relevant academic publications. A qualitative approach offers several advantages for studying the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between intention, action, and consequence within the tradition. Additionally, it enables researchers to analyze the nuances of the factors and their significance within the broader context of the Theravāda Buddhist worldview.

Results

The practice of Kamma

Kamma, also known as karma in Sanskrit, is a fundamental concept in Theravāda Buddhism. It is often described as the law of moral causation or the principle of cause and effect (Bodhi, B. 2005). Kamma is the intentional action, whether physical, verbal, or mental, which determines one's experiences and circumstances in this life and future lives (Rahula, W. 1974).

The practice of Kamma is divided into three sections: (1) Ten Wholesome Causes of Action, (2) Meritorious Deeds, and (3) Threefold Training. This paper aims to provide an academic overview of the Ten Wholesome Causes of Action and their implications in cultivating good and bad Kamma.

Ten Wholesome Causes of Action: According to Mehm Tin Mon, the Ten Wholesome Causes of Action are rooted in non-greed (Alobha), non-anger (Adosa), and non-delusion (Amoha). These actions are further divided into those committed by the body, speech, and mind. The three bodily wholesome actions are: (1) abstaining from killing living beings (pānātipātā-virati), (2) abstaining from stealing (Adinnādānā-virati), and (3) abstaining from sexual misconduct (kāmesu micchācārā-virati). The four wholesome actions involving speech include: (4) abstaining from false speech (musāvādā-virati), (5) abstaining from

malicious speech (pisunavācā-virati), (6) abstaining from harsh speech (pharusavācā-virati), and (7) abstaining from gossip (samphappalāpa-virati). Lastly, the three wholesome actions committed by the mind are: (8) abstaining from coveting (anbhijjhā), (9) abstaining from ill-will (avyāpāda-virati), and (10) possessing Right Understanding of the Dhamma (sammādiṭṭhi).

Cultivating Good and Bad Kamma: Wholesome actions, speech, and thought contribute to the cultivation of good Kamma, while unwholesome actions, speech, and thought lead to the cultivation of bad Kamma. It is essential for individuals to engage in wholesome practices to generate positive consequences and avoid negative outcomes.

The understanding and practice of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism is vital for one's progress on the path to enlightenment. Central to the concept of Kamma is the idea that one's actions, thoughts, and speech have consequences. It is believed that wholesome actions, thoughts, and speech lead to positive consequences, while unwholesome actions, thoughts, and speech lead to negative consequences (Bhikkhu, B. 2012). The quality of an action depends on the intention behind it, as intentions are the primary driving force of Kamma (Thanissaro, B. 1999). One key aspect of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism is the belief in rebirth. It is believed that Kamma shapes the nature of one's rebirth in accordance with one's past actions (Bodhi, B. 2005). The goal of a practitioner is to develop wholesome Kamma by cultivating skillful actions, thoughts, and speech, which will result in a favorable rebirth and ultimately lead to the end of the cycle of rebirth, or Nirvana (Rahula, W. 1947). The practice of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism involves understanding the Four Noble Truths and following the Noble Eightfold Path (Bhikkhu, B. 2012). The Four Noble Truths outline the reality of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering (Rahula, W. 1947). By understanding these truths, a practitioner can gain insight into the importance of Kamma and the need to cultivate wholesome actions, thoughts, and speech.

The Noble Eightfold Path is a practical guide to cultivating wholesome Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism. It consists of eight factors: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Bodhi, B. 2005). Following this path leads to the cessation of suffering and the attainment of enlightenment. The practice of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism involves understanding the law of moral causation and diligently following the Noble Eightfold Path. Cultivating

wholesome actions, thoughts, and speech, while avoiding unwholesome ones, is essential for one's spiritual progress and ultimate liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Two Types of Kamma

Kamma, also known as Karma, is a concept in Buddhism that refers to intentional actions and their consequences. According to Buddhist teachings, every action, whether it is physical, verbal, or mental, has a karmic effect. These effects can be either wholesome or unwholesome, depending on the nature of the action. The two kinds of Kamma in Buddhism are Akusala Kamma and KusalaKamma.

Akusala Kamma refers to unwholesome or unskillful actions that result in negative consequences. These actions are motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion and lead to suffering for oneself and others. Examples of Akusala Kamma include killing, stealing, lying, and engaging in sexual misconduct. Unwholesome action leads to negative consequences for the individual, both in the present life and in future rebirths. According to the Buddhist teachings, unwholesome volition arises from the three "unwholesome roots" (Akusala-Mūla), which are greed (Lobha), hatred (Dosa), and delusion (Moha) (Bodhi, Bhikkhu. 2000). For example, a person acting out of greed might steal from someone else, leading to negative karmic consequences for the thief, such as suffering, unhappiness, or even a lower rebirth. It is important to note that the unwholesome nature of an action is determined by the volitional force behind it, not just the act itself.

On the other hand, KusalaKamma refers to wholesome or skillful actions that lead to positive consequences. These actions are motivated by generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom, and lead to happiness and well-being for oneself and others. Examples of KusalaKamma include acts of kindness, speaking truthfully, practicing mindfulness, and cultivating wisdom through meditation. Wholesome action leads to positive consequences for the individual, promoting happiness, spiritual growth, and favorable rebirths. Wholesome volition arises from the three "wholesome roots" (Kusala-Mūla), which are non-greed (Alobha), non-hatred (Adosa), and non-delusion (Amoha) (Bodhi, Bhikkhu. 2000). For instance, a person acting out of loving-kindness might give food to someone in need, generating positive karmic consequences for the giver, such as happiness, well-being, or even a higher rebirth. As with unwholesome volition, the wholesome nature of an action is determined by the volitional force behind it.

According to Buddhist teachings, the effects of Kamma are not limited to the current lifetime but extend into future lifetimes. The accumulated effects of one's Kamma determine the circumstances of one's rebirth and shape the conditions of one's life. In the Buddhist scripture, the Abhidhamma Pitaka, it is stated that "all volitional activities that lead to rebirth are called Kamma" (The Abhidhamma Pitaka. (1997). It further explains that Kamma can be either wholesome or unwholesome, and that the quality of one's Kamma determines the quality of one's rebirth. However, the intentions of Buddhas and other enlightened Arahants are neither negative nor positive; they are solely functional (Kiriya). These individuals do not create actions with karmic consequences because they have eliminated the roots of such actions: ignorance and desire. Yet, as long as their mental and physical existence continues, even Buddhas and other enlightened beings cannot escape the effects of their previous actions. These effects cease to arise only when they achieve Parinibbāna (ultimate liberation) (Aayadaw, P. A. T. 2012).

Twelve types of Kamma

Kamma can be classified in various ways, with three key classifications being based on function, order of ripening, and time of ripening. The twelve types of Kamma based on these classifications are:

1. Regenerative Kamma
2. Supportive Kamma
3. Counteractive Kamma
4. Destructive Kamma
5. Weighty Kamma
6. Proximate Kamma
7. Habitual Kamma
8. Residual Kamma
9. Immediately Effective Kamma
10. Subsequently Effective Kamma
11. Indefinitely Effective Kamma
12. Defunct Kamma

Each of these twelve types of Kamma plays a specific role in determining an individual's experiences and the conditions of their existence. The first four Kamma with respect to function will be discussed based on Ashin Silanandabhivamsa. According to Ashin

Silanandabhivamsa in "Volition: An Introduction to the law of Kamma," there are four types of Kamma with respect to function.

Four Kind of Kamma with Respect to Function

Regenerative (Janaka) Kamma

This type of Kamma is responsible for generating the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) that constitute a being's existence at the moment of conception. It is the Kamma that determines the realm of rebirth, as well as the specific conditions and characteristics of the new life. Regenerative Kamma is the result of wholesome or unwholesome actions performed in previous lives.

Supportive (Upatthambhaka) Kamma

Supportive Kamma is the Kamma that sustains and reinforces the results of the regenerative Kamma throughout one's life. It assists in the continuation of the rebirth process and helps maintain the various aspects of a being's existence, such as physical and mental health, relationships, and social status. Supportive Kamma can be either wholesome or unwholesome and can either strengthen or weaken the effects of regenerative Kamma.

Counteractive (Upapilaka) Kamma

This type of Kamma opposes or modifies the effects of regenerative Kamma. Counteractive Kamma can be wholesome or unwholesome, and it can lead to changes in a person's life circumstances, appearance, health, or mental state. For example, an individual who is born with certain disadvantages due to unwholesome regenerative Kamma might be able to overcome those challenges through the performance of wholesome actions, which create wholesome counteractive Kamma.

Destructive (Upaghataka) Kamma

Destructive Kamma is the Kamma that has the potential to completely nullify or override the effects of regenerative Kamma. It is the most powerful type of Kamma with respect to function and can lead to drastic changes in a being's life, such as sudden death, significant loss, or major transformations. Like the other types, destructive Kamma can be either wholesome or unwholesome, depending on the actions that led to its creation (Nandamālābhivamsa. 2013).

Four Kinds of Kamma by Order of Ripening

Weighty (Garuka) Kamma

This type of Kamma is produced by particularly significant or powerful actions, whether wholesome or unwholesome. Due to its strength, weighty Kamma usually takes precedence over other types of Kamma when determining the future experiences of an individual. Examples of weighty Kamma include deep meditative states, acts of great generosity, or severe transgressions like killing one's parents or causing schism within the Sangha.

Proximate (Asanna) Kamma

Proximate Kamma refers to actions performed close to the time of death. These actions, either wholesome or unwholesome, can have a strong influence on a person's rebirth and future experiences if no weighty Kamma is present to take precedence. In this context, the proximity to death makes these actions particularly potent in determining the outcome of one's next existence.

Habitual (Achirabhigata) Kamma

This type of Kamma is formed through actions that are performed repeatedly and become habitual over time. These actions, either wholesome or unwholesome, can shape an individual's character and influence their future experiences. Habitual Kamma is influential when neither weighty nor proximate Kamma is present to take precedence. For example, a person who regularly practices meditation or consistently engages in harmful behavior is likely to experience the effects of their habitual Kamma in future lives.

Residual (Katatta) Kamma

Residual Kamma refers to actions that have not yet produced their results and may ripen at any time when the conditions are appropriate. This type of Kamma is considered the "weakest" of the four and only comes into play when there is no weighty, proximate, or habitual Kamma to take precedence. Residual Kamma consists of various wholesome and unwholesome actions accumulated throughout one's life, which can influence future experiences when the right conditions arise (Mehm Tin Mon. 2007).

Four Kinds of Kamma by Time of Repening

Immediately Effective (Ditthadhammavedaniya) Kamma

This type of Kamma refers to actions that produce their results within the same lifetime as they are performed. The consequences of these actions, whether wholesome or unwholesome, are experienced by the individual in their present life. If the results of this

Kamma do not manifest within the same lifetime, they are considered void and will not ripen in future lives.

Subsequently Effective (Upapajjedaniya) Kamma

Subsequently Effective Kamma encompasses actions that ripen in the immediate next life of the individual. The consequences of these actions, either wholesome or unwholesome, are experienced in the subsequent existence after the current life. Like Immediately Effective Kamma, if the results of this Kamma do not manifest in the next life, they are considered void and will not ripen in future lives.

Indefinitely Effective (Aparapariyavedaniya) Kamma

Indefinitely Effective Kamma refers to actions that can ripen at any point in future lives, without a fixed time frame. These actions, either wholesome or unwholesome, can produce results in the second, third, or any subsequent existence beyond the current life. Unlike the first two types, Indefinitely Effective Kamma is not considered void if its results do not manifest within a specific time frame.

Defunct (Ahoṣi) Kamma

Defunct Kamma represents actions that have not produced results within the specified time frame for the first two types of Kamma (Immediately Effective and Subsequently Effective) or have been nullified by other stronger Kamma. These actions are considered void and will not produce any further results.

Understanding these twelve types of Kamma allows individuals to comprehend how their past, present, and future actions shape their experiences across multiple lifetimes. By being mindful of the impact of their actions, individuals can cultivate wholesome Kamma, minimize unwholesome Kamma, and progress on their spiritual path towards enlightenment (Pa Auk Tawya Sayadaw. 2009).

Conclusion

The Law of Kamma emphasizes that our present conditions and circumstances are, to a large extent, the products of our past actions, as well as the choices we make in the present. By asserting that individuals are responsible for the consequences of their actions, Kamma empowers them with the ability to shape their lives in meaningful ways. In essence, the Kamma doctrine teaches that we must accept the repercussions of our negative deeds, while also acknowledging and cherishing the positive outcomes that result from our virtuous actions. This principle of Kamma highlights the importance of personal

responsibility and ethical behavior in shaping one's destiny. By understanding the impact our choices have on our lives and the world around us, we can strive to live more mindfully and compassionately. The Buddha's teachings on Kamma provide not only a framework for understanding the nature of suffering and happiness but also a roadmap for cultivating a life of wisdom, compassion, and inner peace.

This research article provides an in-depth analysis of the twelve factors of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism. By employing a qualitative research methodology and utilizing primary and secondary sources, this study offers valuable insights into the complex relationships between intention, action, and consequence within the Theravāda tradition. The exploration of these twelve factors contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism and serves as a foundation for comparative studies with other schools of Buddhism and religious traditions. This research not only advances the understanding of Theravāda Buddhism's Kamma doctrine but also offers a valuable contribution to the broader field of Buddhist studies. By dissecting the twelve factors of Kamma, this research article enriches the academic discourse and piques the interest of scholars, practitioners, and curious minds alike.

Furthermore, this research highlights the transformative potential of the Kamma doctrine in Theravāda Buddhism. By understanding the intricate connections between Kamma, causality, and the process of rebirth, individuals can gain insight into the ethical and spiritual dimensions of existence. The practice of Kamma involves cultivating wholesome actions, thoughts, and speech while avoiding unwholesome ones. This leads to the development of positive consequences and the avoidance of negative outcomes. Ultimately, the understanding and practice of Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism is vital for one's progress on the path to enlightenment. This research article serves as a valuable resource for those seeking to deepen their understanding of this core concept within the Theravāda tradition.

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