Karma: The creative life-force of human beings

Nalin Swaris

Karma: The creative life-force of human beings

This article is an abridged version of Chapter 14 of Nalin Swaris' book Magga: The Buddha's Way to Human Liberation – A Socio-historical Approach, his Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Utrecht. A limited edition (500 copies) was published by the author in 1997. Nalin Swaris was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and was baptised into the Roman Catholic faith. He was ordained a Redemptorist Priest in 1962. After resigning from the ministry in 1969, he taught Social Philosophy and Methodology of Community Development for seventeen years at the Senior College for Social Work in De Horst, Dreibergen in the Netherlands. Back now in Sri Lanka, he works as a freelance journalist and lecturer.

A revised version of this article was published in 2011 through the International Network of Engaged Buddhists in their book Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice, edited by Jonathan S. Watts. That book also contains many other useful articles on the social doctrine of Buddhism.

The theory of *karma* in Hindu and Buddhist ethics is always explained in relationship to the doctrine of rebirth. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, rebirth is accepted as an essential component of the Buddha's teaching. The mainstream Theravāda Buddhist tradition has held fast to *anatta* as the corner stone of its doctrinal system. On the other hand Theravādins, like the Mahāyānists, consider rebirth theory as the pillar of their ethical system. According to Theravāda doctrine, it is not a soul principle, but "an identity consciousness" which enters a mother's womb at the moment of conception and determines the eventual personal identity of the fertilized ovum. Between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, in this as in many other aspects, the differences in practice are marginal.

Supporters of rebirth theory can muster enough textual evidence to prove that the Buddha actually taught a theory of individual rebirth after death. The Buddhist tradition, Mahāyāna as well as Theravāda, has used this theory of reward and punishment not only to instill morality, but also to explain social inequalities. According to popular explanations of the theory of *karma* a person's gender

and social position at birth is either a reward or punishment for good or evil deeds performed in a previous life. This doctrine of *karma* in its practical implication functions as a dominant ideology when it is deployed to explain social disparities as the manifestation of an immanent justice at work in the world. Myths which provide seemingly plausible explanations of social hierarchy, as Balandier points out, are aimed at justifying the position and privileges of the powers-that-be:

> They *explain* the existing order in historical terms and *justify* it by presenting it as a system based on right. Those myths that confirm the dominant position of a group are obviously most significant; they help to maintain a superior situation. (1972:118, emphasis his)

The spontaneously arising protest of people against their misery and against the injustice of oppressive conditions are channeled by reassuring them that there is an invisible justice at work in reality. The good will be rewarded and the evil punished in another life. At the theoretical level, scholars could argue that individual rebirth theory is compatible with logic and reason.[1] Its actual workings, however, are difficult to verify empirically, though periodically there are individuals who claim to have vivid memories of their lives in previous births. The theory of *karma* as generally taught raises several troubling issues. While seeming to explain the problem of suffering in the world, many *karma* expositors give a positive moral evaluation of high social status, material comforts, and sensual pleasure. These are depicted as rewards for good done in a previous birth. By the same token, poverty, starvation, social degradation, servitude, feudal service, birth into a "low" caste, or birth as a woman are explained as punishments for evil deeds committed in a previous birth. One needs to seriously question the

[1] David J. Kalupahana, for example, argues via the Logical Positivist A. J. Ayer that re-birth theory as presented in the early Buddhist texts is a logical possibility (1976:53). But, the Buddha held that views "hammered out on the anvil of logic" (D.i. 1) are of little practical use when it comes to the urgent task of eradicating suffering in the world. Logic may help to explain social (dis)order. The important thing however is to eradicate the conditions which engender suffering.

crudely materialist evaluations of "good" and "evil" underlying such interpretations.[2]

How can the cornerstone of the Buddha's ethic, *anatta* (no-self, no substance), be reconciled with the theory of individual rebirths – however one may call it – transmigrations of souls, or rebirth of identity-consciousness? The Buddha insisted that there is action, but no actor and that there is no consciousness that runs on from the past through the present into the future. There are numerous passages in Pāli scriptures where the Buddha asks his disciples to end restless speculation as to what they might have been in a previous life and what they might become in a future birth. He called this "attending to things which one should not attend to" Sabbāsavā Sutta (M.i.6).

---

[2] For the type of tortuous arguments used to justify this theory which explains birth into a wealthy and aristocratic family as a reward and birth into a lowly and wretched family as a punishment, see the essays by Francis Story and Nina van Gorkom in Kamma and its Fruit, ed., Nyanaponika Thera. It is within living memory that hundreds and thousands of Sri Lankan peasants lost their lands due to unjust, draconian legislature enacted by the British colonial government. Entire villages were torched to appropriate lands for the plantation of cash crops like coffee and tea. By what stretch of imagination can one suggest that these peasants and their miserable descendents deserved this lot? Story goes so far as to argue that children who are born into families who have plundered the wealth of others could enjoy their luxuries without any qualms of conscience. They are reaping the fruit of their good personal *karma* in a previous birth! He cites the descendents of the Nazis to illustrate the mysterious ways of *karma*. According to his logic, the millions of Jews gassed to death were obviously reaping the fruit of their bad *karma*. Story describes *karma* as an iron law and draws an analogy between it and *kismet*-fate as cynically depicted by Omar Khayyam: "The moving finger writes; and having writ, Moves on: Nor will all thy piety nor wit, shall lure it back to cancel half a line - Nor all your tears wash out a word of it" (Nyanaponika 1990:8). The compassionate Buddha could hardly have promulgated a law of ruthless retribution. He would have regarded such views as, at best, imaginative "story-telling."

I. Collective *Karma*

Is there a way of understanding Buddha's teaching on *karma* not as a variant of an existing view but as a radical restatement of it, which is consistent with *anicca*, *paṭicca samuppāda* and *anatta*? J.G. Jennings (1947) has argued persuasively that the Buddha diagnosed craving (*taṇhā*) as a compulsion to reproduce itself, not the individual:

> If the epithet *pono-bbhavika* be applied to *taṇhā* (thirst), and translated as "tending to arise again and again, repeating itself, recurring" (that is causing the rebirth of itself, not of the individual), it is fully in accord with the doctrine of altruistic responsibility. (xxxvii)

This understanding of *taṇhā* as a proclivity to repetition provides illuminating insight into the birthing and rebirthing of ego consciousness as a function of desire. The ideology of individualism portrays the real conditions of existence as accidental to (identity) consciousness, which "runs on and fares on" impelled by its own momentum. But, we find the Buddha insisting again and again that "consciousness is generated by conditions; apart from conditions there is no origin of consciousness" (see for example Horner, M.i.258). A consciousness that, as it were, floats above conditions is a transcendental or metaphysical entity.

The linkage of ethics to reward and punishment treats the human being as an animal that can be goaded into morality only by conditioned reflexes of desire and fear. It engenders a mercantilist mentality which evaluates everything in terms of cost and benefit. The selfish individual asks him/her self, "What visible or invisible profit will this bring for me now and in the hereafter?" This self-centered evaluation of actions and the results of action has in fact become the dominant ethic of society. Governments work towards winning the next election; big companies are concerned with their annual financial report; trade unions become fixed on their next labor contract. Parents strive to provide the best for their own children and hope that their offspring will do well in life and make a good marriage. How can people be helped to look beyond these

narrow horizons and see actuality from a wider and longer-term perspective?

Once a transcendental ego is assumed, the morality of an act is assessed in terms of the intentions of the "agent in the body." The Buddha reversed this metaphysical premise. He urged people to reflect on the long-term effects of their actions and to purify their intentions, their thoughts, words, and deeds. Social events are not just quantitative additions of the acts of separate individuals. Both at the individual and collective level, human action has unintended effects. Thus good intentions alone do not determine the effect of an action. Through experience individuals can become aware that when certain actions are done certain actions follow "as the cart wheel follows the ox," as the Buddha put it (Dhp. 1). Understanding this, wise and compassionate human beings can learn to regulate their conduct bearing in mind the long term effects of their actions. The first principle of the noble Eightfold Path is Right View. With this as the point of departure, the disciple is trained to cultivate Right Intention. What is foremost in this ethical attitude is not self-interest but the "welfare and happiness" of beings in their manifold manifestations.

According to Jennings, if one relinquishes the perspective of the separate individual and comprehends the Buddha's teaching on *karma* as collective *karma* without transcendental subjects, we have:

> [an] ethical ideal of complete altruism of such beauty that it would be worth presenting in a concrete form even if that form were not strictly historical. Of its historical truth, however, in the life of Gotama Buddha, there appears to be sufficient proof. (xxii)

If we take the Buddha's radical insistence that there are only actions and the results of actions, the world of humans and gods can be seen as "constructs" – the result of collective flows of action. Jennings suggests that we should understand the Buddha's teaching on *karma* as a theory of collective *karma* (xxxvii). According to him, the individualistic theory of *karma* is the work of "after-men" trying to reconcile *anatta* with the dominant value system:

> This reconciliation savors more of his metaphysical successors than of Gotama himself who declared he did not deal in metaphysical questions but with the Eightfold Path of Conduct. Gotama calls for self-dependence and eager activity in the present, not however on behalf of the self, since such grasping, whether for immediate or ultimate reward, is the source of all sorrow, therefore necessarily on behalf of others. (xxxvii; xlvi)

Jennings regards the reconciliation of *anatta* with individual rebirth a key element in the Hinduization of Buddhism (lviii):

> In the Hindu view the same individual acts and suffers in different lives; the usual modern Buddhist view is the same; but the strict original Buddhist view is altruistic, the actor being one, and the ultimate sufferer or beneficiary another, individual. Allowing that the reconciliation is later, it may be assumed that Buddha, teaching the doctrines of no-permanent soul, moral responsibility and altruism, taught a doctrine of altruistic responsibility or collective *karma*, according to which every action, word and thought of the individual, transient though he may be, brings forth inevitable consequences to be suffered or enjoyed by others in endless succeeding generations. The sanctions of such a doctrine of altruism appear to be as impressive as those based upon the individualistic doctrine of personal immortality. (xxxvii)

II. The *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*

The *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (M.ii.196, Sn 3.9) is a masterly discourse on the biological unity of the human race and a deconstruction of pseudo explanations of gender and class roles as biological functions. It is a brilliant application of the basic law of *paṭicca samuppāda* and the doctrine of *anatta* to radical social criticism. The Buddha develops his argument step by step and concludes with a masterly exposition of human action as social praxis. Let us follow step by step this gradual method of instruction. The entire discourse is based not on an *a priori* assumption about human nature "as such," but on wholly verifiable empirical premises. It exemplifies the Buddha's non-metaphysical method of explanation: human "realities" are not reflections of concepts immanent in the mind; concepts are abstracted from perceptible practices.

This discourse was given in response to a question put to the Buddha by two young brahmin students of theology, Bhāradvāja and Vāseṭṭha. They asked the Buddha whether there was any truth in the doctrine they had been taught that an individual is a *brāhmaṇa* by birth and another a non-*brāhmaṇa* by birth. The Buddha pierced this bubble of fantasy and unravelled the mystery of social differentiation and hierarchy step by step or "gradually" (*anupubbaṃ*).

I will explain to you in gradual and very truth, the differentiation by kind *jāti* (birth) of living things, for there is species-differentiation (*jātivibhaṅgaṃ pāṇānaṃ*) according to "other-other" species (*aññamaññā hi jātiyo*). (600)

A Morphological Classification of Living Beings

The Buddha begins with a general morphological classification of the various forms of life in the world according to habitat and behavior:

- There is variety of plant life from grasses to trees.
- There is a variety of animals that live in the earth and dust, like worms and ants.
- There is a variety of four-footed beasts.
- There is a variety of long-backed creatures, like reptiles.
- There is a variety of fishes.
- There is a variety of winged animals, who fly through the air. (601-606)

After each of these classifications the Buddha observes that among these life forms there are distinct species-constituting marks (*liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ*). These species-constituting marks signify other-other species (*liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ tesaṃ, aññamaññā hi jātiyo*). There are several noteworthy features in this system of classification. First,

life forms or *rūpas* are generically classified according to the modality of their life-activities and habitats: moving in water, air, on the earth, or rooted to one place (plant-life), and common observable external features: all birds have beaks, feathers, claws, etc., fish have scales and gills, etc. But within each genus, significant differences could be noted in the common marks. On the basis of these different marks, one could distinguish different sub-species among plants, reptiles, insects, fish, birds and quadrupeds. Unlike Aristotle, the Buddha does not conclude that distinguishable behavior patterns and external features are signs of hidden essences or substantial forms. Neither does he hierarchize life-forms according to a Great Ladder of Being. The discourse is not propelled by a human will to power over the universe. At the end, as we shall see, hierarchy is demolished.

The Human Form (*rūpa*) as an Unmarked and Unsigned Unity

After dispassionately examining the diversity of life-forms and recognizing species differences among them, the Buddha turns to the human form or *rūpa*.

> *Yathā etāsu jātīsu, liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ puthu;*
> *Evaṃ n' atthi manussesu, liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ puthu.*
>
> Whereas in these species there are distinct species-making marks,
> In humans there is no species-making separate (or distinguishable) marks. (607)

To substantiate this general conclusion, the Buddha proceeds to a detailed examination of the external features or "marks" of the human form. There is no mark that could be singled out as a sign or signifier of essential differences among human beings which could be attributed to their own distinctive natures (*svadhamma*):

> Not in the hairs, nor in the head
> Nor in the ears, nor in the eyes
> Nor in the mouth, nor in the nose
> Nor in the lips, nor in the brows

Nor in the shoulders or the neck
Nor in the belly or the back
Not in the buttocks or the breast
Nor in the anus or genitals
Nor in the hands nor in the feet
Nor in the fingers nor the nails
Nor in the knees nor in the thighs
Nor in their color or in voice (607)

This item by item listing of the parts of the human form, without calling it male or female, is a *tour de force* of de-signification. The mind is focused and concentrated on the perceived form without letting it be biased by pre-"conceptions" and without delusion, desire, or revulsion. One sees that there are no "marks" which are signifiers of species difference; there is only a differentiated organism.

On the basis of this empirical-clinical examination of the human form, the Buddha formulates a general principle:

Liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ n' eva, yathā aññāsu jātisu.
'Paccattaṃ sasarīresu, manussesv-etaṃ na vijjati;
Vokārañ ca manussesu, samaññāya pavuccati.

Here, there are no species-constituting marks as among other species.
Humans are indeed corporeally conditioned, but what applies to other species does not apply here.
The differences one speaks of among human beings are purely conventional. (610-611)

The Buddha affirms the corporeality of human beings, but does not make the body the sign or the dwelling place of a hidden essence. Differences in physical features are not denied, but no single feature of the human form – the genitals, pigmentation, the timbre of the voice, the shape of nose, the color or texture of the hair – is singled out as a "mark" (*liṅga*) to construct significant or ontological sexual and racial differences in the human (*manussa*) species (*jāti*). Significant differences within the human species, the

Buddha insists, are constituted by naming. But these are not "essential" differences, but conventionally spoken of differences.

This radical denial of essential differences between human beings opens up an exciting new perspective for understanding the phenomenon of difference itself. Hierarchizations of human beings according to race and sex are founded or grounded on what Foucault in The Order of Things uncovers as the play of "sameness in differences and difference in sameness" (Foucault, 1970). Men and women share a perceptibly similar form: a woman is not an inferior being because of separate nature. Similarly, people belonging to various ethnic (cultural-linguistic) groups share an undeniably similar external form and common physiology. The best proof of this, the Buddha pointed out in another exchange with brahmin scholars, is that men and women belonging to different classes and ethnic groups do have intercourse and produce human offspring, not some hybrid creature. Whereas, when a mare is mated with a donkey the offspring is a mule. "Now should the foal be named after the mare or the donkey?" the Buddha asked (M.ii.153).

The Buddha understood that once difference is substantialized, hierarchy can be provoked. When discussing the marks which constitute *jāti* difference among other living forms, the Buddha used the term *aññamaññaṃ*: *añña* means "the opposite", "the contrary", "the different". The term *aññamaññaṃ hi jātiyo* is used by the Buddha to distinguish between different species – they are "other-others". The word *samañña* on the other hand, is compounded from *san* (con) "with," + *añña*. It denotes: "with the other" (PED, 13). In other words, the Buddha uses this term for precepts or *rūpa*s sharing common features. The differences among humans are differences among likes (*samaññāya*), not differences between un-likes. The Buddha does not concede sameness and then emphasize differences in order to separate, classify, or hierarchize beings sharing a common form (*rūpa*). All humans belong to the one and same *jāti*. There is no teleological dynamic, biological or "spiritual," which stratifies the human species in terms of "high" and "low." As R. Chalmers observed:

> Herein Gotama was in accord with the conclusion of modern biologists, that *Anthropidae* are represented by the single genus and species, man. (1894: 396)

The affirmation by the Buddha of the biological unity of the human race is not a platitude – an *égalisation sub specie aeterni* – or in some celestial kingdom after death. This unqualified insistence of the equality of all human beings, irrespective of perceived gender, class, and ethnic differences, was part of a social campaign against the hierarchization of society and against man's inhumanity to man. As the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar O.H. de A.L. Wijesekere points out:

> The Buddha was the first thinker of India, not to say of the whole world, to give up the theological approach and adopt a rational attitude in such matters... If one believes that he revolutionized the theological and metaphysical standpoint of Brahmanist religion and philosophy, it would be absurd to hold that the Buddha failed to condemn their sociological implications. (1951:4)

Human Differentiation as Differentiated Practices

Having established the biological unity of the human race the Buddha proceeds to answer the inevitable question. If all human beings are members of the same species (*jāti*) how is it that humans seem to be dispersed from birth to death into different classes and occupational groups? The question continues to be asked to this day, and the Buddha's answer is as relevant today as when it was first given 2,500 years ago. In the Buddha's day, an historical development in the social division of labor had taken on the appearance of a natural phenomenon, because it was reproduced from generation to generation. People had come to believe, and brahmin ideology reinforced this view, that some individuals are predestined by birth to labor, to serve and to provide pleasure; others to bless and to curse; and some others to conquer and to rule. The Buddha unravelled this bitter-sweet mystery of life to the two young brahmins who prided themselves on being *brāhmaṇa* – the most excellent of beings by birth:

> [He] who makes his living by agriculture
> is called a farmer. He is not a *brāhmaṇa*
>
> He who makes his living by varied crafts is called a craftsman
> not a *brāhmaṇa*.
>
> He who makes his living by merchandise is called a merchant
> not a *brāhmaṇa*.
>
> He who makes a living by serving
> is called a servant, not a *brāhmaṇa*.
>
> Who makes a living by stealing
> is called a robber, not a *brāhmaṇa*.
>
> He who makes a living by archery
> is called a soldier, not a *brāhmaṇa*
>
> He who makes a living by priestly craft
> is called a ritualist, not a *brāhmaṇa*. (119-120)

The Buddha did not exclude the "blue-bloods" of the period from this general law:

> He who governs the city and realm
> is called a ruler, not a *brāhmaṇa*.

The brahmins had constituted themselves the normative speaking subjects on the order of things and humans. The Buddha exposes the strategy behind this will to power. The brahmins had established themselves as a substantially different category of human beings by way of negation – they are not peasants, artisans, thieves, mercenaries, merchants, or rulers. Thereafter, they had occulted the trace of this process in order to present themselves as *sui generis* creatures born out of the mouth of Brahma. They had appropriated the term *brāhmaṇa* as a designation for themselves as the ritually pure and most excellent of status groups. As the Buddha discloses, the Brahmins did this by reifying perceived differences in language: the phoneme *brāhmaṇa* is not the same as the phonemes *vessa*,

dāsa, or *rājāa*. They then argued that there was an intrinsic identity between the sound-image *brāhmaṇa* and the concept "excellent." They claimed that they were skilled philologists (595) because the fixed, intrinsic relationship between a sound and its signification had been revealed to them. This knowledge was not acquired but was the privilege of birth. They were the mouth-born sons of Brahma, the ultimate source of all signification in heaven and on earth. The Buddha exposed the spurious character of the Brahmin claim:

> He who makes a living by priestly craft
> is called a ritualist, not a *brāhmaṇa*.

The Buddha then added :

> I do not call anyone a *brāhmaṇa* because of his birth from a particular mother, even if he may be addressed as "Sir" and may be wealthy.

This last statement would have touched the raw nerve of brahmin pride. The brahmins traced their origin to a Heavenly Father. The Buddha sticks close to more certifiable facts. A person's paternity could be dubious, but never the maternity. The Buddha drives home his point unrelentingly. Even if the brahmins founded their claim on the surer ground of being born of a brahmin mother, he still saw no reason why this should be a basis for pride and for demanding respect and subservience. In a radical reversal of values, the Buddha redeploys the term *brāhmaṇa* as a designation for those who lead morally unimpeachable lives:

> Who has cut off all fetters
> And is no more by anguish shaken,
> Who has overcome all ties, detached:
> He is the one I call a *brāhmaṇa*,
>
> Who has cut each strap and thong,
> The reins and bridle as well,
> Whose shaft is lifted, the awakened one,
> He is the one I call a *brāhmaṇa*.

> Who does not flare up with anger,
> Dutiful, virtuous, and humble...
>
> Who has laid aside the rod
> Against all beings frail or bold...
> Who does not kill or have killed,
> Who leaves behind all human bonds
> And bonds of heaven...
>
> Whose destination is unknown
> To gods, to spirits, and to humans,
> An *arahant* with taints destroyed
> He is the one I call a *brāhmaṇa*....

The Buddha sweeps aside all claims to holiness based on ritual activities or esoteric knowledge. What matters is not what a person thinks or says he/she is, or is believed to be, by undiscerning people. What is important is the moral quality of a person's life. The rites performed by a priest are just as much routinized and ritualized practices as the activities of a "herdsman," a "soldier," or a "trader." It is just another way of earning a living! Any one who lives by stealing is a robber, no matter by what name society may think fit to call him – "priest," "king," or "merchant." If social convention does not prevent it, any person, male or female, could learn the bag of tricks and practice priest-craft. The Buddha did not spare his own renouncer disciples. The shaven head and yellow robes may signify "mendicant" (*bhikkhu*) but this does not necessarily imply that he is a man of excellent moral character:

> There are many ill-natured, unrestrained imposters who wear yellow robes. (Dh. 307)

The Buddha explains that the social division of labor is the result of a division of practices (*kamma vibhaṅga*) within the same species. It is a falsification of observable facts to claim that this division of labor is due to a diversity of natures (*jāti vibhaṅga*).[3] This truth is

[3] For an 'historical' explanation of the genesis of social differentiation and hierarchy, see the Aggañña Sutta D.iii.27.

hidden to make people ignorant of their own creative potential. By their own ingenuity people had learnt to master the forces of nature before which they once fell down in adoration. As the social division of labor (*kamma*) became complex and the chains of interdependence lengthened, the actual dynamics of society became increasingly opaque. The fixation of activity into ever recurring sets of relationships within a more or less unchanging system made society appear as an alien force existing outside human beings. Ideologists used this ignorance of the true beginnings of things to tell people that their lowly social condition is the product of their inherent natures or a punishment by a law of natural justice – *karma*. The brahmin theory of social order reversed the historical order of events. Repeated social practices did not produce concepts. These practices are the exteriorization of ideas conceived by the divine mind of Brahma. The concepts of *brāhmaṇa*, *khattiya*, *vessa*, and *sudda* were made anterior to the historically evolved life-practices of these social classes.

Brahmin lawgivers (like Manu) used their social power to impose a fixed hierarchized order on society: Thou shalt read thine own experience as commanded by the Law and submit thine own understanding of what you do in life to it. The Buddha disturbs the holy innocence which surrounds this discourse. A social identity is not an idea or an inner essence which enters the mother's womb at the moment of maternal conception: "I do not call anyone by any name, because he/she is born from the womb of a particular mother". A person is called a servant (*dāsa-dāsī*) because the circumstances of life have forced him/her to practice subservience to another. A person is called a master because he is able to exercise power over another. The practices of two individuals relate them to each other in a servant-master relationship. A servant is not a master and a master is not a servant due to their respective practices, not because two concepts have entered their beings and fixed their inner essences or natures. The Buddha ended this section of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* by summing up his incisive diagnosis into social practices. The conceptual order is a reflex of human practice. Significations do not descend to the earth from a Transcendental Signifier. They are social constructs:

For name and clan are assigned
As mere designations in the world.
Originating in conventions,
They are assigned here and there. (122)

Names are conventional designations for modes of activity, not modes of ontologically determined modes of existence. People act out social roles by following conventionally laid down rules of procedure for performing certain functions. Forms of dress, uniforms and modes of "ad-dress" like "Sir," "Your Honor," are ways in which we "dress up" people and invest their roles and ranks with authority and power. Behind the veil of appearances, everyone is the same. Male, female, prince, priest, and pauper alike are subject to the same law of impermanence – change, decay and dissolution.

A Flow of Interweaving Actions

In the final section of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (649-652), the Buddha moves from the examination of particular practices to formulate a general theory about the character of human action in the world. The so-called fixed biological order, on examination, turns out be a mental abstraction from the relatively stable social practices of individuals sharing the same species nature:

For those who do not know this fact [the naming process]
Wrong views have long underlain their hearts
Not knowing, they declare to us:
"One is a brahmin by birth."

[But] one is not a brahmin by birth,
Nor by birth is one a non-brahmin
By action (*kamma*) is one a brahmin.
By action is one a non-brahmin.

For men are farmers by their acts
And by their acts are craftsmen too.
And men are merchants by their acts
And by their acts are servants too.

And men are priests by their acts
And by their acts are rulers too. (650f.)

The last two verses of this section sum up this grand and panoramic view of human agency in a precise and succinct formula:

Evam etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ
Kammaṃ passanti paṇḍitā,
Paṭiccasamuppādadasā,
Kammavipākakovidā.

So that is how the truly wise
See action as it really is,
Seers of dependent origination [and]
Skilled in action and its results. (653)

The Buddha does not say things that are what they are, "thus being" (*yathattha*), the ontological view. That would have implied a hidden "essence," an inherent nature, "meaning," "significance" caught up in the vicissitudes of material processes. It would also have implied that all beings have an innate, predetermined goal in life, since the word *attha* (Sk. *artha*) has a dual connotation of "meaning" as well as "goal." To avoid any such misconceptions the Buddha states without ambiguity "thus-become-action" (*yathābhūtaṃ kammaṃ*). Precepts, whether internal or external, have conditionally co-originated (*paṭiccasamuppādadasā*). The death knell of onto-logics is sounded with the declaration "the result of actions" (*kammavipākakovidā*). Egocentric individuals imagine that the world revolves around their petty selves. The Buddha shakes people awake from this delusion: the world is eternally reproduced through action and action alone:

Kammanā vattatī loko,
Kammanā vattatī pajā;
Kammanibandhanā sattā,
Rathassāṇīva yāyato.

> Action makes the world[4] go round
> Action makes this generation turn
> Living beings are bound by action
> Like the chariot wheel by the linchpin. (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 654)

On another occasion the Buddha hammered home the centrality and the all-encompassing character of human action by emphatic repetition:

> Beings are action (*kamma*) accompanied,
> Action is their heritage,
> They originate through action,
> They are bonded through action.
> Action differentiates beings into high and low. (M.iii.203)

The use of the plural "beings" underscores the fact that *karma* is first and foremost the collective action of beings sharing the same species potential. This provides a basis for the formulation of a general theory of social practice: all beings are bound, linked, and related to each other through action. The social division of labor and the stratification of people into "high" and "low" is neither a divine design nor a manifestation of the intrinsic nature of beings. There is no mechanical cyclicity which holds human destiny in its grip. Human beings reproduce relationships (social structures and institutions) by repeating social practices under specific conditions. Social practices alone continue to produce and reproduce people as masculine/feminine, priest, aristocrat, peasant, landless laborer, trader, professional soldier, etc. The brahmins claimed that it is performance of their rituals (Sk. *saṃskāras*) which ensures the proper maintenance of social order and prevents it from regressing into a primeval chaos. The Buddha transvalued this term; the name remained the same but its meaning was new. The Buddha's exposition discloses the earthly trace of a word that brahmin philologists had celestialised. Saṅkhāra in the Buddha's

[4] "World" has to be understood in the Buddha's own terms. The world of humans is their world, their construct. It is not the "cosmos" of ontological philosophies – a physical reality existing independent of human perception and practice.

transvaluation is not the rituals of the priests (*saṃskāras*) or the action of a heavenly or earthly cosmocrat (Brahma or a Wheel-Turning Monarch), but the everyday practices of ordinary men and women. It is they who produce (birth) and reproduce (rebirth) social order. The woman at the potter's wheel or the weaving-wheel, the carter, the charioteer, the smith, the sweeper, the priest, repeat specific life-practices and together turn the *saṃsāric* wheel by their actions (*kamma*). Masters and slaves, priests and devotees, kings and subjects are not separate individuals. Their identities are mutually conditioned-conditioning relationships, and they reproduce each other by their respective practices. Not by birth nor divine blessing is one a king, and not by birth nor a divine curse is one a slave. Human perfection or human degeneration is ultimately a human responsibility. The key to the Buddha's revolutionary ethical practice is his penetrating insight into the "nature" of "things":

> *yathābhūtaṃ kammaṃ – paṭiccasamuppādadasā,*
> *kammavipākakovidā.*
>
> Thus-become action, conditionally co-arisen, results of action.

By situating *karma* within the law of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the Buddha ended the false dilemma created by the binary opposition of freedom and necessity. Ideologists had blinded the people by presenting their oppressive conditions as the product of cosmic or meta-cosmic necessity, whereas the Buddha pointed out that these were humanly produced "necessities" and as such eradicable. Every human is a wheel-turner. His/her actions can produce either a world of woe or a world of happiness. The Buddha unfolds the vision of a new possibility:

> Sharing, kind words and benevolence,
> And treating all alike as each deserves
> These bonds of sympathy, are in the world,
> Just as the linchpin of a moving chariot. (a.ii.32)

All the skills the Buddha mentions in this verse are social skills. This is not a vision seen from the narrow perspective of the separate ego and its preoccupation with personal reward and

punishment. The Buddha is speaking of the historical possibility of living in peace and harmony in a reconciled world. To do this, humans have to reverse the motions of the Wheel of *Saṃsāra* by turning the Wheel of Dhamma together.

III. *Karma* as Praxis

The Buddha often insisted that he was a teacher of action (*kammavādin*), a teacher of effective action (*kiriyavādin*), and one who speaks of summoning up energies for self-overcoming (*viriyavādin*). We could, following Ñāṇajīvako Thera, understand *karma* in early Buddhist usage as:

> a designation for the whole range of problems concerning the organic connectedness of vital processes whose ripening results in creative activity. (1990: 122)

Karma is creative vital process or *saṅkhāra*. The word *saṅkhāra* is derived from *sam*-s, plus the root √*kṛ*. Its indeclinable Sanskrit participle, *saṃskṛtya*, corresponds to the Pāli *saṅkhata*. *Sam -s- kṛ* has the meaning of "to put together, forming well, join together, compose;" thus *saṃskāra* refers to "putting together, forming well, making perfect, accomplishment, embellishment." *Kāra* is derived from the same root as the word *kamma* and signifies "to do, make, perform, accomplish, cause, effect, prepare, undertake" (SED, 301). The root √*kṛ* has the same connotation as the Latin *creare*. *Kata* (past participle) is "what has been done," "accomplished" (SED, 1120-1121). *Saṅkhāra*, as the Buddha uses the term, is the co-ordination of synergies in practical activity. Even thinking alone, for the Buddha, is *karma* – practical action. Physical, discursive, and mental activities are *saṅkhāra*s – "constructurations."

Saṅ-khata, the past participle of *saṅkhāra* refers to the product; what has been done by the coordination of the mind and the other senses – in other words what has been "con-structured" by practical action. What humans perceive and conceptualize are not the simple products of nature. They are human constructs. Humans are also capable of exteriorizing their ideas through speech, actions, and artifacts. Rice growing in a paddy field is qualitatively different to

grasses growing in the wild. It is a cultural product and expresses a changed relationship between human beings and nature and between themselves. Humans, however, do not create out of nothing. They combine their capacities and the resources available to them in their environment to produce effects that fulfill their needs. In the Mahāsudassana Sutta (D.ii.169), the Buddha describes not only "natural" phenomena like elephants and horses, but also artifacts like cities, royal treasures, palaces, and carriages as *saṅkhatas*. All human products, from the most elementary forms of language and the simple tools of labor to imaginative and symbolic representations of the world of gods and humans, works of art, irrigation works, temples and palaces, are *saṅkhatas* or crystallisations of human energy and the forces of nature. Human ingenuity brings these together and rearticulates them in a creatively new fashion.

Human beings have historically "gone forth" (*pabbaja*) from the conditions, cultural as well as environmental, in which they have found themselves. Instead of being totally determined by pre-given conditions they have reshaped these life-conditions through innovative action. It is the ability of humans to create new realities by "putting together, to form, to make" (in thought, imagination and exteriorized works) which makes the world in which they live, their own "accomplishment" and "embellishment" or their *saṃ-s-kṛtya*.[5] The term *saṅkhāra-saṅkhata* can therefore be understood as cultural practices and cultural products. Culture understood here not in the elitist sense of the "fine" arts or as "high culture," but in the fundamental sense of what all human beings produce in and through nature. The peasant is as much a cultural being as the intellectual and the artist. In fact the accomplishments of the latter are very much dependent on the farmer's agri-"culture". *Saṅkhāra-saṅkhata* cuts through the conventional and taken for granted division between "nature" and "culture"; between "human nature" and "external nature"; between "nature" and "super-nature." The Buddha sees these as "constructions" (*saṅkhāra*s). In his epistemology, nature and super-nature are human constructs. One

[5] The word in usage for "culture" in Sinhala is *sanskrutiya*. Etymologically it has the same meaning as *saṁ-s-kṛtya*.

cannot speak of the "natural law" or "The Law of *Karma*" as if they exist independent of the people who perceive recurring patterns of relationship between events (not things). Humans have conceived "nature" in a variety of ways according to the level of their mastery of external forces, as "gods," as exteriorizations of a divine mind, or of a rational logos, or as the workings of objective scientific laws. In each case, an imaginative construct of the mind is projected on to nature. Nature is culturized as the preliminary step for the naturalization of culture. On critical examination, it will become apparent that the decision as to what is really natural has been conditioned by factors such as gender, class, and racial interests. The naturalization of culture has been an ideological strategy of dominant groups to reproduce their privileges from generation to generation as if these were as recursive as the cycles of natures.

From the time that humans began to produce their own means of subsistence, no child has been born into an abstract cosmos or a social vacuum. Every child finds itself in a world conditioned by the actions of the generations that preceded it. It is the ripening of human action into effects which gives moral content. The Buddha understood the momentous responsibility humans carry for the world and for themselves because of the effects of their actions, which are independent of their subjective intentions. They can overcome themselves or live like herd animals mutely reproducing the world as they find it or degenerate into a condition lower than that of beasts by turning against their own kind. The Buddha shifted the perspective from transcendence to a metaphysical realm to concrete and practical transcendence of limiting conditions in this very life. The Buddha believed that all human beings can achieve nobility of conduct.

There were four main theories of causality debated by the philosophers of the Buddha's day and indeed in our own times: Are suffering and happiness in this world the result of a) an accidental conjuncture of events (*adhiccasamuppanna*)?, b) the free, yet arbitrary act of a transcendental agent (*paraṃkataṃ*), c) the mysterious concurrence of our actions and that of an external agent (*paraṃkataṃ-sayaṃkataṃ*)?, or d) the free determination of sovereign, unconditioned individuals (*sayaṃkataṃ*)? When these

various theories of causality were put to the Buddha, he answered that none of them provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of human suffering. He then presented his own explanation: happiness and suffering co-arise under specific and determinate conditions (*paṭicca samuppanna sukha-dukkha*) (S.ii.17-19).

Siddhartha Gotama realized that the solutions to the problem of suffering offered by conventional religions and philosophies lead literally to a dead end. They cannot ultimately satisfy those who probe beneath the surface of things and see clearly that there is only perpetual flux and mindless repetition of things as they are. Knowing that we must all die one day, how should we live? The answer lies in the comprehension of the conditioned co-genesis of happiness and sorrow. Human beings, as a species, are not the pure products of conditions; neither are they sovereign agents who are totally independent of conditions. Events have conditionally co-arisen – thus become through action. The processes that produce suffering in the world can be reversed. What has been constructed can be unconstructed, if through proper investigation one tracks down the conditions which give birth to it. This is the basis of the Buddha's optimism. To understand *karma* as collective action is to understand the necessity of collective action for freedom.

IV. *Karma* as Liberative Praxis

The truth of *karma* as creative potential was understood and put into practice by the Buddha's first disciples, men and women. Perhaps the most remarkable example of self-transformation and self-perfection is the case of Aṅgulimāla a notorious brigand "who was murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings" (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, M.ii.97). He had unleashed a reign of terror across villages and entire districts. To strike fear into the hearts of the populace, he wore a necklace of fingers chopped off from his murdered victims' hands, hence his name Aṅgulimāla – "The Finger-Garlanded". The life of Aṅgulimāla after his conversion exemplifies the personal and social dimension of the Buddha's teaching. Under the Buddha's guidance, the former terrorist became an extraordinarily kind and gentle person, so that he came to be known as Ahiṃsaka – "the Harmless

One". Before his conversion Aṅgulimāla had been a brahmin and old prejudices die hard even if the master is a buddha. Once, when returning from his begging round, Aṅgulimāla saw on the wayside a poor woman in protracted and difficult labor. He was filled with disgust because he still nursed the belief that birth from woman was in itself foul. Self-complacent about the disgust he felt, he reported the sense of revulsion he felt to the Buddha. Much to his surprise, the Buddha reminded him that his own conversion proved that birth in itself does not make a human sublime or mean. He asked Aṅgulimāla to go back and assist the woman.

Aṅgulimāla reached the goal of moral perfection and was venerated as an arahat. He did not retire to the wilderness to enjoy the bliss of solitude. He returned to the people he had once terrorized to share with them the Dhamma of non-injuriousness:

> Hear the Dhamma of those who preach forbearance
> Of those who speak in praise of kindness
> And let them follow up that Dhamma with kind deeds...
> Nor would they think of harming other beings
>
> So those who would protect all, frail and strong,
> Let them attain the all-surpassing peace. (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 104)

From around the 8th century BC, intrepid pioneers had transformed the marshes and forests of the Majjhimadesa into arable and habitable lands by collective action. The transition to agriculture and sedentarism enabled the development of a host of ancillary technologies that increased and diversified the productive capacity of human beings. The mighty elephant and the wild buffalo had been tamed to do man's bidding and serve his material well-being. Metal like iron, silver, and gold extracted from the earth was turned into plough heads and beautiful ornaments. Tragically, these developments grew apace with infinite wants and desires, driving people belonging to the same society into two ways of life – one leading to unbridled pleasure for a few, and the other to misery for the many. Humans had mastered the powerful forces of external nature, but had become the slaves of their inner impulses. However,

in the very capacity to develop technologies for regulating the forces of nature towards envisaged ends, the Buddha discovered the key to resolve the problem of suffering. He developed a "*tekhne*," an art,[6] for human beings to understand the workings of their impulses and to gain mastery over them. With consummate patience, he trained Aṅgulimāla in the art of self mastery. What human beings lack is not the capacity or the Way, but the wisdom and the will to realize this truth. What the Buddha taught needs to be heeded with urgency today if we and the very conditions of the existence of all living beings are to be saved from extinction:

> Canal diggers divert the waters,
> Smiths hammer arrows into shape,
> Carpenters fashion the wood,
> The wise tame themselves. (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 104)

References

Balandier, G. (1972). Political Anthropology. New York: Pelican.

Chalmers, R. (1894). "The Madhura Sutta Concerning Caste" in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. London: The Royal Asiatic Society.

Foucault, M. (1970) The Order of Things. London: Tavistock.

The Book of Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara Nikāya) (1932-36). (F.L. Woodward & E.M. Hare, Trans.) London: Pāli Text Society.

---

[6] The term "meditation" is an inept translation of the term *bhāvanā* used by the Buddha. It is derived from the root *bhū* – "to make grow" or "to cultivate". He taught a method or art not for the repression of the senses but for the proper cultivation of the senses so that they will become truly skilful (*kusalāni*), capable of true enjoyment, freed from the craving to possess what produces delight or to destroy what is experienced as a threat to ego-existence. See for example Indriyabhāvanā (Development of the Faculties) Sutta (M.iii.298). The Buddha did not speak of good and evil, but of skillful and unskillful responses to life's challenges.

Jennings, I.G. (1947) The Vedantic Buddhism of the Buddha London: Oxford University Press.

Kalupahana. (1976) Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism Hawaii: University Hawaii Press.

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (1995) (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, Trans.). Boston: Wisdom Publications.

The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya) (1954-56). (I.B. Horner, Trans.) London: Pali Text Society.

Nyanaponika (ed.) (1990). Kamma and its Fruit. Wheel Publications No. 221/224. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Pali English Dictionary [PED] (1925). (T.W. Rhys Davids & W. Steede, Eds.). London: Pali Text Society.

Sanskrit English Dictionary [SED] (1899/1960). (M. M. Williams, Ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wijesekera, O.H. (1951). Buddhism and Society. Colombo: M.D. Gunasena.

* Where not noted, the Pāli translations have been done by the author himself.