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Are There Ethical Implications of Karma?

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Though Americans have been exposed to Asian philosophical traditions since the nineteenth century – with much recent help from the Beat writers of the 1950s and 1960s – too little attention has been paid to the texts and ideas of these traditions and to their implementation in daily life. This is especially true with regard to Buddhist ideas of ethics and karma. Compounding the problem is the commercial exploitation of Asian philosophical terms like Dharma, karma, tantra and reincarnation, which tends to impede deeper understanding of these important concepts. In America, ethics are once more on the lips of many in academia, business, and government; we must therefore make a careful examination of these ideas so that we can develop practices that will help mitigate world suffering.

As globalization intensifies and the world becomes increasingly interconnected, it behooves us to understand how Asians tend to understand themselves, others, and the world they inhabit. Inquiring into Asian cultural orientations in general and into Buddhism in particular offers us the opportunity to deepen our understanding of our own worldview by questioning our philosophical presuppositions. Furthermore, looking into Asian conceptions of ethics and karma will help us facilitate not only relations with Asian people – who account for roughly one third of the world's people – but also help us attenuate conflict before it reaches a critical stage.

Dealing strictly in general tendencies, as particular strains of thought are too profuse to accommodate in this presentation, I will suggest that recent work in Ch'an Buddhism by Buddhist scholar Peter D. Hershock offers a compelling view of karma that takes ethical training into account without reducing karma to a function of morality and without necessarily tying karma and ethical training to reincarnation or any other appeal that remains outside the scope of our ordinary experience. As a heterodox philosophical practice emerging in Northern India, Buddhism not only disavows the external authority of the Vedas and Brahmanic ritualism but also insists upon our investigation of and trust in our own experience. That is to say, the Buddha relocates authority in the individual person.

Buddhist philosophy, especially ethics, is based upon the Four Noble Truths. Just as the first three truths (the Truth of Craving, the Truth of the Origins of Craving, and the Truth of the Cessation of Craving) inform the Eightfold Path, so the trainings of concentration (mindfulness, effort, concentration) and wisdom (view and thought) inform ethical training (speech, action, and livelihood). In general, Buddhism suggests that the suffering we experience stems from our ignorance of the way things are: impermanent, empty of intrinsic essence, interdependent, and irreducibly karmic. Furthermore, ignorance of the way things are leaves one vulnerable to the three poisons: hatred, delusion, and anger. The combination of ignorance and affliction has deleterious effects on our thoughts and actions, creating impressions upon the mind that cause suffering. In Vedanta and some forms of Buddhism, these impressions have a direct effect upon rebirth.

Ethics & Ethical Training

There are at least two obstacles to understanding the working relationship between ethics and karma: (1) we tend to reduce ethics to either restraint or obedience; and (2) we tend to take the full significance of ethical training for granted. What Brannigan has called “the tyrannies of space and time” suggest that we confuse or limit our view of ethical training by an uncritical attachment to the local order of things, believing “that only the local is real” and “that only the moment matters” (2005, 7). The latter belief is especially troublesome for Westerners and for many Buddhists because “the moment” is usually construed as a past, present, or future moment, thereby implying that there is a discrete self-existence unimplicated in change. Freeing ourselves from these limiting views, according to Brannigan, allows us to grasp the fuller significance of ethical training and living an ethical life.

Some Buddhist points of view maintain that ethical principles are derived from an awareness of the desire on the part of singular, sentient beings to experience happiness and avoid suffering by adopting a deeply penetrating equanimity, and not the other way around. With meditative and careful attentiveness, I am able to notice the awareness of equanimity arising in my own mind. Acknowledging and acting upon such awareness of suffering generates compassion, allowing space for my own happiness and the extension of good will to others and contributing to the welfare of all sentient beings (Tsering 2005, 26). This stands in stark contrast to dominant Western ethical views, which generally insist that our awareness of a moral obligation to others is based on a rational or pararational¹ experience of the Good, mediation by a deity, the formal operations of rationality, following rules, or experiencing feelings of sentiment or sympathy.²

Generally speaking, ethical training in Mahayana, pre-Mahayana, and Theravada Buddhism is a foundation for the higher order operations of concentration and wisdom. In Buddhism, the Eightfold Noble Path is practiced as the three trainings: ethics (right speech, action, and livelihood), concentration (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration), and wisdom (right view and thought) (Tsering 2005, 125). All three trainings are, like all phenomena, interdependent. Thus, ethical training serves concentration and wisdom by allowing one to view things as they are rather than how we desire them to be. All trainings are mutually implicated, ongoing, and contextually provisional. The question of the relation between ethical training and karma still remains, however. Does ethical training simply function as a tactic of restraint, that is to say, function negatively? In the classical Indian traditions, especially Samkhya and Yoga, this is especially true. Buddhism depends on an important change in view about ethical training and its relation to karma.

Ethics & Karma

We are all aware of the historical fact that not only do the Vedic traditions precede Buddhism, but also that Buddhism adopts many of the concepts and practices from the Vedic traditions. Regarding ethical training and karma, however, Buddhism makes important substantive changes. In this section, I'll sketch a view of ethics and karma from the Vedic background to Buddhist thought and then I will consider two Buddhist traditions. In doing so, however, I am going to bracket two aspects of karma that appear in several Buddhist traditions (probably adopted from the Vedic world) and Action Karma Daoism: (1) karmic connection, either in kinship relations or with an ascetic/saint, and (2) ritualistic or other-powered practices that help the dying focus their minds and erase karmic obstacles to a salutary rebirth.

In the Vedic traditions³ ethical training functions primarily to help students gain control of their senses. Ethical training is the practice of restraining the senses through negative restraints or *yamas* ("non-violence, non-lying, non-stealing, non-craving for sexual pleasure and non-possessiveness"), in order to stabilize the mind (Malhotra 2001, 38). Recall the second aphorism of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*: "Yoga is the stilling of all mental fluctuations" (25). Ethical training in yogic traditions attempts to guide the psychophysical self's shift from an evolutional entanglement with nature to an involutational disentanglement from nature. Once the mind is calm, concentration deepens and wisdom emerges. Thus, ethical training serves a limited function, albeit a necessary one.

In the works of Vedantists, the place of ethics is strictly tied to karma and reincarnation. Yet, Vedantists from Shankara forward developed the idea of karma beyond the individual moral benefits of controlling the

senses. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan writes that “all acts [or karma] produce their effects which are recorded both in the organism and the environment” (1932, 218). Thus, karma, in the Vedantist account, is both natural and unnatural. Natural karma is sedimented into the evolutionary history of the organism and environment while unnatural or moral effects, *sanskara*, “are worked into the character of the self” (218). *Sanskara* are “impressions [or] deposits of previous experiences and become the most important factors in determining the course of present and future experience. The mind is constantly creating and gathering such impressions in the course of its experiences” (Baba 1987, 32). Ethical training, then, serves the practice of renunciation:

Renunciation may be external or internal. External, or physical, renunciation consists in giving up everything to which the mind is attached — home, parents, marriage, children, friends, wealth, comforts, and gross enjoyments. Internal, or mental, renunciation consists in giving up all cravings, particularly the craving for sensual objects. (42)

Ethical training and its relation to karma, therefore, “is not so much a principle of retribution as one of continuity” (Radhakrishnan 1932, 218). Rejecting a simplistic position, the Vedantists neither accept a doctrine of predestination nor suggest that karma is deterministic. They insist on “continuity with the past and creative freedom of the self” (219). While unnatural karma can be erased by ethical training, natural karma is near impossible for human beings to erase. Natural karma must either fade through evolutionary development or by the compassionate intervention on the part of a *sadguru* or “perfect master.”

As the Buddhist traditions that developed after the Buddha’s passing converge into what I call the Classical Theravada tradition, some elements of the Vedic view of ethics and karma persisted in somewhat altered form. Perhaps the most significant emendation of Vedic theories of ethical training and its relation to karma is the elimination of the distinction between natural and unnatural karma. Instead, karma falls under the *skandhas* and specifically the aggregate of mental formations. As Walpola Rahula points out, the group of mental formations, encompassing “52 such mental activities,” includes “all volitional activities *both good and bad*” [my emphasis] (1974, 22–23). This last phrase is especially important given popular accounts of karma. While a limited and highly qualifiable distinction can be made between “good” and “bad” karma, all karma leads to eventualities or outcomes that continue to bind the individual to suffering. Furthermore, Rahula is insistent that karma is not an effect; rather, actions that are *akusala* (“bad”) produce bad effects and actions that are *kusala* (“good”) produce good effects. This is to say that karma is the *binding* and not the *effects*. At our peril and in our ignorance, we judge the effects “good” or “bad.” In

the habitual and habituating pattern of suffering, we cannot control the effects and so it can only be a matter of chance that things turn out well. The goal of karmic ethical training is to generate outcomes that escape the samasara continuity of ironic consequences.

Buddhism construes ethics or morality (*sila*) as founded on loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings — another difference from the Vedic traditions, especially Brahmanic ritualism, which slaughtered animals in order to bring about beneficial relations with a particular deity or deities. Ethical training, Rahula writes, “aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society. This moral conduct is considered as the indispensable foundation for all higher spiritual attainments. No spiritual development is possible without this moral basis” (1974, 47). Key to such spiritual development in the Buddhist traditions is the doctrine of *anatman* or non-essentiality. From a Buddhist point of view, ideational, sensual, perceptual, and corporeal constructions of self, the self of the five aggregates, is the ultimate hindrance to liberation.

With the development of the Mahayana traditions, the emphasis of ethical training shifted from the individual and society (the emphasis on the social dimension of Classical Theravada thought as enunciated in the Pali canon focuses heavily on the workings of statecraft and the appropriate orientation of rulership) to an ideal of personhood, entailing actions that benefit all sentient beings; hence, the figure of the bodhisattva takes center stage in much of the Mahayana traditions’ discourse on ethics and karma.⁴ To develop the capacity of a bodhisattva, however, one must penetrate to the deepest levels of awareness in order to understand the “complete equality among all sentient beings” (Tsering 2005, 26). Furthermore, what distinguishes the bodhisattva⁵ from the *arhat* of Classical Theravada is the bodhisattva’s penetration of the emptiness of all things. It is the bodhisattva’s grasp of emptiness that generates compassion. Ethical training is not an end in itself, i.e. nirvana, but a means of developing a one-pointed mind. This leads to wisdom on which the individual may act without ironic consequences, thereby benefiting all sentient beings. Geshe Tashi Tsering observes, “Living ethically by practicing [right speech, right action, and right livelihood] definitely gives us the foundation to do the other practices, whereas living without them, in an undisciplined way, causes all sorts of obstacles to developing concentration or wisdom” (130). Ethical training, then, is tied in the Madhyamaka tradition to higher practices that will eventually lead to one’s birth as a bodhisattva. From the perspective of the Madhyamaka tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism, such training takes place across *kalpas* of countless rebirths.

Among the profusion of Buddhist perspectives, the Vajrayana Traditions go farthest in offering a phenomenology of the aggregate of mental formations by which mind grasps phenomena and establishes itself in igno-

rance. Gen Lamrimpa explains that conceptualizing and then forgetting we have done so leads to reification. It is “an erroneous mental process” in which “the object itself appears in a mistaken way” (1999, 49). He writes, “that mind that mistakenly grasps onto phenomena is called ignorance. Ignorance always entails reification. In this way we grasp onto the true existence of ourselves, and similarly, when focusing on an adversary, we grasp onto that person as truly existent. This is how attachment and aversion arise automatically” (49). Phenomena grasped in ignorance lead to suffering if mental actions are agitated by mental afflictions, which are forms of conceptualization:

Mental afflictions are primary, for in their absence, karma does not ensue. There are a variety of mental afflictions – including pride, attachment, anger, competitiveness, and jealousy – but the one root for all of them is ignorance. If we eliminate this ignorance, the other mental afflictions will vanish.

In order to cut ignorance, or ‘non-awareness,’ at its very root, the Three Higher Trainings are taught, namely, ethical discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom. (1999, 108)

Hershock’s Ch’an View of Ethical Training & Karma

Since the 1990s, Peter Hershock, coordinator of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East–West Center in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, has been developing a Ch’an Buddhist response to important elements of contemporary life in an increasingly interdependent world. In works such as *Liberating Intimacy* (1996), *Reinventing the Wheel* (1999), his edited volume *Changing Education* (2008), and various essays published in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* and *Philosophy East and West*, Hershock, true to both his Buddhist and Western philosophical trainings, has addressed the pressing issues of technology, education, ecology, globalization, and authority. His primary purpose has been not only to engage in creative and interpretative cross-cultural philosophizing but also to show how we can respond to suffering by availing ourselves of the ancient teachings of Buddhism. Hershock shows how the Buddhist themes of interdependence, critical engagement, complex relationality, virtuosic performativity, and impermanence are directly relevant today. Complex interdependence, however, calls for complex treatment. Hershock’s approach is to “clarify the values, intentions, and practices animating prevailing ways of thinking about and responding to these emergent realities, and reflecting on what it would mean to engender a value coordinating redirection of the interdependencies constitutive of both the public sphere and of our lived experiences within it” (2006, 1).

In one sense, Hershock’s work represents the patterns of accommodation and advocacy that typically occur when a thought pattern recurs in a new setting. His understanding is both consistent with traditional Thera-

vaden and Mahayana views of ethical training and karma and inconsistent with classical texts and meanings insofar as the time and place of his work is different. In his most recent work, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere*, Hershock is careful to note that the global challenges facing us today also pose challenges to Buddhist practitioners. Hershock observes that there are “no traditional Buddhist discourses on environmental protection, institutional health care, technological change, media ethics, global economics, human rights, or the privatization and commoditization of education” (2006, 2). His task, then, is a hermeneutic one: improvisational and creative interpretation of ancient Buddhist texts in light of contemporary situations. By creatively inventing concepts in a Buddhist key such as improvisational virtuosity, effective relationality, live engagement, and dramatic maturity, Hershock interprets urgent questions in national and international public life and proposes a Ch’an point of view given Ch’an’s emphasis on impermanence, emptiness, and interdependence. An important element of his project is rethinking karma.

Instead of simply reducing karma to a pattern of causality obtained in mind–body activity, Hershock shows how karma is a complex interaction among our values, intentions, and actions. He notes that “most Western Buddhists (and many contemporary Buddhists outside the West) do not take karma with the seriousness it deserves” (2006, 9). The focus on karma as a mechanism of change is the strength of this work. Whether he is writing about the environment, trade, development, governance, or education, Hershock shows that subtle shifts in our karma can make an enormous difference in the way we relate to others and the world. On this basis, we can conclude that interdependence is both a coordinated and coordinating relationality based not on sameness but on difference. By contrast, Enlightenment virtues of tolerance and cooperation, insist – however inadvertently or ironically – on a degree of homogeneity.

“In a karmically ordered world,” Hershock explains, “importantly and fundamentally shaped by values and intentions, no situation – regardless of appearances to the contrary – is finally intractable. A world and a life shaped by karma are continuously open to meaningful revision. Indeed, in such a world, it is the *differences* in our karma that enable us each to *make a difference*” (2006, 9). Such a view of karma is both empowering and challenging. It encourages each of us to make a difference that truly makes a difference. What is notable in Hershock’s conception of karma is the insistence upon individual values, intentions, and actions as well as the interplay with the socio-political settings in which we inevitably find ourselves. Hershock extends the concept of karma into both the private and public domains. He observes:

We live in a karmic world in which our interdependence is irreducibly meaningful and in which responding effectively to experienced troubles or dif-

faculties – whether in the realm of the private or the public – ultimately entails recognizing their roots in competing or conflicting values, intentions, and practices. Succinctly stated: seeing our world as karmic is seeing that all experienced eventualities arise as outcomes/opportunities that are meticulously consonant with patterns of our own values-intentions-actions. (2006, 9)

Karmic liberation, then, need not be the Vedic *moksa* or *kaivalya* or the pre-Mahayana *arhat's* attainment of nirvana or tantric reincarnation. It can be considered an attainable eventuality in which no situation is intractable.

While he does not eschew the traditional role of ethics as a coordinating practice foundational to higher order awareness, Hershock emphasizes the importance of developing skillful means (*upaya*) of carrying out our lives. On Hershock's account, our world and our life is "a world and a life shaped by karma [that is] continuously open to meaningful revision" (9). To add value to one's life and the world takes skill, nuance, and flexibility that conventional ethics training is not designed to foster. Hershock comments from a Ch'an viewpoint on general tendencies in both Western and Eastern ethics when he observes that "ethics is not a matter of realizing predetermined ends but rather one of creatively revising the quality and meaning (direction) of our situation as it has come to be. It is not grounded on the exercise of duty or appeals to fixed standards but rather on liberating appreciation" (23).

Hershock effectively conflates ethics and karma when he notes that "karmic opportunity" includes refraining "from conduct in accord with the values-intentions-actions that led to the occurrence of the present," intensifying "existing karma or pattern[s] of values-intentions-actions," and developing or improvising "karma that will lead to new kinds of relationship" (24). In this sense, then, ethics become part of karma as "karmic opportunity" and not simply a foundation or ancillary component of a wider path. If one is to both appreciate and contribute to others and the world we live in, one must not only be good, one must create opportunities without ironic consequences.

Notes

¹I borrow this term from David Sterritt (1998) who explains that pararationality retains a sense of fidelity to reason but also makes room for mystical and other ways of knowing. Pararationality avoids the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality.

²Virtue ethics is in some ways an important exception to these, but that is a topic for another paper.

³This will change with Sri Aurobindo's development of Integral Yoga in the twentieth century.

⁴"In the Vedas, karma also refers to ritual worship and philanthropic actions" (Shuhmacher 1994, 175).

⁵With the development of Bodhisattva personhood, the conception of ethics as socially binding rules of conduct insistent upon a kind of predictability and control within the realms of samsara becomes untenable.

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