

Title: "Can American Buddhism Accommodate Karma?"

By Jim Deitrick

Department of Philosophy and Religion

University of Central Arkansas

[deitrick@uca.edu](mailto:deitrick@uca.edu)

## Introduction

The theme of this conference, "revisioning karma," points to one of the most important problems facing Buddhism as it struggles to adapt to the late-modern culture of the contemporary United States<sup>1</sup>—viz., that of "visioning" karma in ways that are simultaneously (1) meaningful to "modern" American Buddhist practitioners and sympathizers and (2) sufficiently consonant or continuous with traditional formulations of the doctrine to be regarded as "genuinely" Buddhist. The obvious problem is one of adapting a pre-modern, Asian belief to a post-enlightenment, American context. As Roger Badham observes with respect to Christianity, "in the light of modernity, many traditional Christian beliefs have become deeply problematic for Christians, whose worldviews are at least partially, if not mostly, formed according to scientifically oriented naturalistic patterns of reasoning."<sup>2</sup> If it is true that Christians have a hard time accepting religious ideas that conflict with contemporary scientific ways of thinking, it is certainly more true of American converts to Buddhism who are typically "liberal" in their thinking and thus drawn to the religion precisely because of its reputation (well-earned or not) for being rational, non-metaphysical, and scientific. It is not surprising, then, that, as Charles Prebish first reported in 1986,<sup>3</sup> American Buddhists have been slow to embrace the idea of karma, an idea that is so obviously hard to reconcile with "scientifically oriented naturalistic patterns of reasoning."

As Prebish notes, however, it is not so much that Americans have rejected karma as ignored it, refusing to take seriously this historically important Buddhist doctrine and its implications for their lives. I doubt that American Buddhists can or will ignore karma for much longer, however;<sup>4</sup> the idea simply plays too important a role in historical Buddhism to be so easily dismissed. If American Buddhists are to get along without karma, they will have to reject the idea forthrightly and defend the legitimacy of doing so against a 2,500-year-old tradition that regards it as central or even foundational. Some will no doubt follow this path of rejecting karma (or, at least, of remaining agnostic toward it, as Stephen Bachelor commends). It seems more likely, however, that

---

<sup>1</sup> and to modern cultures throughout the world.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Badham, *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Prebish, "Karma and Rebirth in the Land of the Earth-Eaters" In *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, edited by Ronald W. Neufeldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this conference no doubt signals a growing interest in karma among American scholars and practitioners.

American Buddhists, by-and-large, will try to find ways to invest this foreign idea with meaning (i.e., “to believe in karma”) and incorporate it into the uniquely American forms of Buddhism they are in the process of creating. I say this for two reasons. First, the influence of tradition in religion is strong and the idea of karma has accumulated a tremendous inertial (might we say, “karmic”?) force within Buddhism over the centuries. Attempting to stop such a force by expunging it from the tradition strikes me as nothing short of quixotic. The second and more essential reason that American Buddhists will work to accommodate the idea of karma is that it truly is of central importance for Buddhism. I agree with Paul Griffiths that “its functions are many and its links to other areas of Buddhist doctrine proliferate to such an extent that a full consideration of all the ramifications of Buddhist karmic theory would amount to a complete analysis of Buddhism *per se*.”<sup>5</sup> Given the centrality of karma, it is hard to see how Buddhism could survive long without it. It is not only that Buddhism loses its intellectual integrity without karma, but more importantly that, as we will see below, without karma several of its most basic religious functions are irreparably compromised. This is problematic for Buddhism, first, because it is thus transformed in to something that is hardly recognizable as Buddhist, but more importantly, because it thereby loses its ability to function religiously for its followers. Recognition of this fact will no doubt drive American Buddhists to find a place for karma in the “new Buddhism” they are working to create. The problem, of course, is how to do this, if, indeed, it is even possible.

The discussion so far suggests that the problem of rendering the Buddhist idea of karma meaningful for American Buddhists is threefold. First, it must be, in William James’ words, a “live option” for Americans—i.e., it must be something they are disposed to believe. This entails, in most cases, that it be in some way accommodated to their modern, scientific modes of reasoning, although as we will see below, it might suffice if it conforms to other culturally entrenched (e.g., Christian) ideas and systems of thought. Second, it must be recognizably Buddhist, which means that it must function viz. a viz. Buddhism in ways that recognizably preserve the historical essence of the tradition. And third, it must be capable of satisfying the religious longings of people who are likely to be drawn to Buddhism in the first place. I suggest each of these criteria must be met if the idea of karma, and perhaps also Buddhism along with it, is to grow successfully in American soil.

My goal in this paper is to consider some possible responses to this problem, and their likelihood of success given the criteria just outlined.

### The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis

The first option facing Americans Buddhists as they struggle to come to terms with the idea of karma has already been pursued extensively by Kapila Jayatilleke and his students David Kalupahana and Gunapala Dharmasiri.<sup>6</sup> Their tactics are similar to those

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, “Notes towards a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory,” *Religious Studies* 18, p 279.

<sup>6</sup> See Kapila Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964); David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu:

who espouse “intelligent design theory” in Christianity—viz., to deny that there is any need for struggle at all. This is so, on their account, because karma as traditionally understood is an empirical concept, subject to empirical verification, and thus not only compatible, but identical with science. Buddhism is, in other words, (the world’s only) scientifically verifiable religion. Following Frank Hoffman, who has subjected this “Buddhist empiricism thesis” to philosophical critique,<sup>7</sup> I quote Jayatilleke at length to give a sense of this position:

(793) We have tried to show that perception (normal and paranormal) and inductive inference are considered the means of knowledge in the Pali Nikayas. The emphasis that “knowing” (janam) must be based on “seeing” (passam) or direct perceptive experience, makes Buddhism a form of Empiricism. We have, however, to modify the use of the term somewhat to mean not only that all our knowledge is derived from sense-experience but from extrasensory experience as well. This extension we believe is justified in the light of the reasons that we gave earlier (*v. supra*, 735 [viz., that early Buddhist thinkers “considered it possible to misinterpret . . . {intuitive} experience and draw erroneous inferences from it (*v. infra*, 790). We thus find that Buddhism does not make the claim of the mystic that this knowledge was derived from a supernatural source in an unaccountable manner but that it is a product of the natural development of the mind, and due to the operation of causal processes. . . . It would be misleading to call this mystical or intuitive knowledge in the context of Buddhism in view of the utterly different attitude to and evaluation of it.”]. The definition of the term in Runes’ Dictionary of Philosophy also allows us to use the term “empiricism” to include the entire conscious content of the mind and not merely the data of the senses: “That the sole source of knowledge is experience . . . . Experience may be understood as either all conscious content, data of the senses only or other designated content” (*s.v.*).

As Hoffman observes,

At the heart of Jayatilleke’s conception of “Buddhist empiricism” and that of his former students, Kalupahana and Dharmasiri, is the notion that it is a justifiable extension of the word “empiricism” to have it cover the mind as a sixth sense where this concept of mind includes *abhinna*. The *abhinna* are variously translated as “psychic powers” and (less grammatically but more frequently as) “higher knowledges,” to indicate a range of abilities acquired through years of meditation. Some of these abilities, such as retrocognition of past lives, are thought to provide a basis for knowledge claims concerning *kamma* and rebirth (152-153).

---

University of Hawaii Press, 1975); and Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Colombo: Lake House, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Frank J. Hoffman, “The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis.” *Religious Studies* 18, 151-158.

The pertinent question, of course, is whether such an extension of the concept of “empiricism” is really warranted. Hoffman argues convincingly that it is not:

“[E]mpiricism cannot be understood in this way [i.e., as including all conscious content], for then it would include e.g., mathematical truths and would not distinguish conceptual truths from empirical ones. The definition in terms of “all conscious content” [following Runes’ Dictionary] thus includes too much. It includes so much, that it would even be tautologous to say, on this view, of any datum at all that it is an empirical one. Nor [sic] can one accept the vague phrase “or other designated content” in a definition of empiricism. Hence, the phrase “data of the senses” remains, and taken in a very broad manner, according to this conception early Buddhism would be a sort of empiricism based on six “senses”—the last of which being the mind (153)!

The problem with this is that these “sensations” of mind acquired through meditational practice are not subject to verification or falsification and are thus not empirical. As Hoffman explains,

The anti-metaphysical thrust of the verifiability principle as formulated by Ayer, say, seems to require the assumption that our experience cannot be radically different from what it ordinarily is. A proponent of the Buddhist empiricism thesis may argue that, if a Buddhist is confronted with Ayer’s contention that one cannot verify the meditator’s claims, but only the claims that meditators have reported certain experiences, then the Buddhist can reply that Ayer is refusing to carry out the requisite meditational practice in order to verify the claim (155).

Hoffman responds to this objection with a parable reminiscent of Antony Flew’s (in)famous parable of the invisible gardener (155 ff.). The parable is about a skeptical *bhikku* who fails “to see” those things he has been promised by the Buddhist tradition. After 25 years of disciplined practice, he asks his teacher, “I have heard that this is a ‘come and see doctrine,’ but although I came I have not yet acquired knowledge and vision. Is not the doctrine falsified?” To this his teacher replies “with a great resounding laugh and the words: ‘Fool, go and meditate some more!’” Hoffman concludes his parable by drawing out its implications:

After the teacher’s pronouncement it became clear that the issue is not an experimental one, although . . . [the *bhikku*] takes his experience as the basis of interpretation. The sceptical *bhikku* thinks: I have had many experiences of meditating without acquiring knowledge and vision of rebirth, for example. So, if the teacher will not allow that any of my experience counts *against* the rebirth doctrine, then I do not see how anything could count *for* it either. If you can’t falsify it, then you can’t verify it either (156).

Hoffman rightly concludes, therefore, that “the early Buddhist path is not at all like scientific hypothesis and test for . . . the reason that . . . [t]he doctrines of early Buddhism [e.g., karma and rebirth] are not falsifiable by any experience, as . . . [the] parable of the *bhikku* illustrates” (157). Karma thus remains for Jayetilleke and his students a trans-empirical or metaphysical concept. As such, the Buddhist empiricism thesis fails to satisfy the first of our criteria, that it render the idea of karma sufficiently plausible for scientifically-minded Americans to believe. Given the limits of space, I will therefore break off the critique here and move to the next option.

### Fi-Karmism

The second option I wish briefly to consider is the conservative or “evangelical” one of “choosing” to believe an idea that is admittedly hard to reconcile with science. This option explicitly accepts the metaphysical character of karma and “believes in it” despite the lack of evidence for its being true, or even empirically meaningful. Rather than calling this option fideism (which would be misleading since no god is involved), we might call it “fi-karmism,” instead.

The obvious problem with this option, of course, is that it fails even to attempt to reconcile the idea of karma with our scientific knowledge of the world. Instead, it understands it as a metaphysical concept to be accepted on faith—e.g., faith in the testimony of the Buddha and other enlightened beings. To the extent that it is true that the idea of karma must be accommodated to science if it is to be accepted by American Buddhists, this option is unlikely to attract many. At the same time, it should be noted that I hold this as a requirement mainly because, as already mentioned, Americans who are attracted to Buddhism tend already to be liberal-minded people who are in search of non-metaphysical religion. They are not, in other words, the sort of people who are inclined to believe things on faith.

Nevertheless, that such an option is at least hypothetically available to Americans is evidenced by the enormous success of evangelical Christianity in this country. While Badham is no doubt right that modernity makes it difficult for contemporary Americans to accept unscientific ideas, it obviously has not prevented it outright. Quite the contrary, Americans seem overwhelmingly willing to believe things that go contrary to science—e.g., that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead—despite the difficulty of doing so. Given Americans’ willingness to believe unscientific things, the suggestion might be made that Buddhism’s true hope for success in the United States lies in its willingness to promote, rather than reject, the metaphysical character of its doctrines. The problem with this suggestion is that belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus remains a live option for Americans because it is so deeply ingrained in their cultural traditions and habits of thinking as to be taken for granted. Karma, on the other hand, claims no such pedigree here, and so tends to fall on deaf ears when presented as a metaphysical concept. In short, then, a metaphysical concept of karma is not a live option for most Americans and is thus not likely to be widely accepted, at least in the short run.

Again, since the fi-karmic option fails even to attempt to reconcile the concept of karma with science, there is little reason to continue our critique of it. I thus turn to the third and final option I will discuss here.

## Buddhist Liberalism

The third option is the “liberal” one of reinterpreting (or “revisioning”) traditional beliefs in ways compatible with modern science. This is a difficult path to follow, as it constantly faces (sometimes legitimately, no doubt) charges of innovation and heresy. Nevertheless, it is the path most likely to be pursued by liberal-minded American Buddhists who have thus far, at any rate, shown little reluctance about transforming Buddhism to suit their particular needs. This option would attempt to “naturalize” or “de-mythologize” the concept by abstracting its “essence” or “core meaning” and reformulating it in ways that are compatible with science. Such an approach strips the concept of its metaphysical content and confines it to making empirically verifiable or other non-metaphysical (e.g., ethical, phenomenological, or psychological) statements. This is the path followed by existentialist Christians who, for example, interpret the resurrection of Jesus in terms of early Christians’ experiences of his being in their midst and the crisis that such experiences provoked in them. While doctrines admittedly lose much of their traditional meaning in this way, liberals nevertheless regard this as necessary if the tradition is to have any meaning at all for those of us living in the contemporary world. Moreover, among Buddhists, it even appears to confirm one of their central doctrines, i.e., *anitya* or impermanence, as it is recognized that not even the teachings of Buddhism are immune from change.

As a “naturalized” concept of karma would be, by definition, compatible with natural science, we may accept that it would satisfy the first of our criteria (i.e., that it be accommodated to science), and turn immediately to consideration of the other two (that it be recognizably Buddhist and religiously satisfying). Fortunately for us, Dale Wright has already worked to construct a naturalized concept of karma, and we may use his concept as a basis for our critique.<sup>8</sup> His goal is to articulate a naturalized concept of karma, “to begin to hone the concept, to separate it from elements of supernatural thinking, and to work toward locating those elements that might be most effective today in the domain of ethics” (79-80). To do this, he applies “critical thinking” to the concept of karma as traditionally understood, a process which appears to involve (among other things) sifting out those aspects of the concept that are the product of “supernatural thinking” and keeping those that are consonant with scientific, “non-metaphysical,” or “naturalistic” thinking. In the end, Wright suggests that

---

<sup>8</sup> Dale S. Wright, “Critical Questions towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11, pp. 78-93. In fairness to Wright, it must be stressed that he comes at the idea of karma with other purposes than those outlined here, and there is clearly no reason why his concept must satisfy our criteria of acceptability. At the same time, it is easy to see how contemporary American Buddhists may be tempted to appropriate his naturalized karma for their own purposes, as it appears ready-made to address their concerns. The question I ask here is whether such a concept, if so appropriated, would be capable of functioning in the ways it must if it is to be regarded as genuinely Buddhist and religiously satisfying.

a naturalistic theory of karma would treat choice and character as mutually determining—each arising dependent on the other. It would show how the choices you make, one by one, shape your character, and how the character that you have constructed, choice by choice, sets limits on the range of possibilities that you will be able to consider in each future decision. Karma implies that once you have made a choice and acted on it, it will always be with you, and you will always be the one who at that moment and under those conditions embraced that path of action. The past, on this view, is never something that once happened to you and is now over; instead, it is the network of causes and conditions that has already shaped you and that is right now setting conditions for every choice and move you make. From the very moment of an act on, you are that choice, which has been appropriated into your character along with countless others. In this light human freedom becomes highly visible, and awesome in its gravity, but is noticeable only to one who has realized the far-reaching and irreversible impact on oneself and others of choices made, of karma (89-90).

At the same time, however, Wright points out that, from a naturalistic perspective, “this freedom . . . operates under strict and always fluctuating conditions. A mature concept of karma would encourage people to recognize the finitude of freedom and choice, and all the ways we are shaped by forces beyond our control. . . . [Indeed,] failure simultaneously to recognize the encompassing forces of nature, society, and history places us in a precarious position, and renders our choices naïve” (90).

Wright thus presents his reader with, at least the rudiments of, a scientifically plausible and ethically useful concept of karma. The question we are concerned with here is whether such a concept of karma could serve Buddhism as it struggles to accommodate karma to the American context, i.e., whether a Buddhism predicated upon such a concept would be recognizably Buddhist and religiously satisfying. As it turns out, these questions are closely related and can be treated together. This is so because meaning is reducible to function<sup>9</sup> and the primary functions of karma viz. a viz. Buddhism have traditionally been religious in nature. Thus, if a naturalized concept of karma cannot function religiously, it will likely also differ from traditional meanings of the doctrine to a degree that would make it difficult to recognize as Buddhist. Our basic question, then, is whether a naturalized concept of karma can fulfill the religious functions that karma has traditionally served in Buddhism.

Paul Griffiths, in his critique of the traditional doctrine of karma, identifies three major functions that karma serves in historical Buddhism. They are all religious. First, karma serves as an “explanatory cosmogonic hypothesis”; it explains the origins of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, is not this the primary insight of the karma doctrine, that identity is inseparable from actions? In this case, we are concerned with the identity of the Buddhist tradition, which is thus understood in terms of its functions or activities. Buddhism is what Buddhism does. When its functions change, so does its identity, its meaning. When they change drastically, it is not surprising that some have a hard time recognizing it as part of the same tradition. Perhaps it would be more analogous to a rebirth of the tradition.

material universe by identifying its (metaphysical) cause, i.e., karma or the volitional acts of non-material sentient beings.<sup>10</sup> Second, it functions as an “explanatory hypothesis for the varied states and conditions of sentient beings”; it explains “why you are neither a worm nor a Buddha,” as well as why some humans “are born prosperous, healthy, intelligent, and creative, and why others are born deformed, crippled, and full of hatred, destined to die in a variety of painful ways before they reach maturity.” In other words, it serves as a “theodicy,” although the term is a bit misleading since, again, no god is involved. The third, and “perhaps the most important for Buddhists in practice, is that of acting as a means of social control in Buddhist societies.” By this, Griffiths means that “it explains why the layman ought to support the monk and why he ought to live a moral life; it explains why the monk should keep the manifold precepts of the *vinaya* . . . , and why he ought to meditate and perform acts of selfless generosity towards other beings.”<sup>11</sup> It thus provides much more than simply a means of social control, but the very rationale for the practice of Buddhism. It is why Buddhist practice works and what allows Buddhism to guarantee salvation to its adherents. Because karma is true, i.e., because the cosmos is just and people inevitably reap the rewards of their actions (as karma has traditionally said), it is also true that those who practice the Buddhist path will inevitably attain nirvana. Karma, then, provides the Buddhist practitioner with assurance of salvation. Perhaps not in this lifetime, or in the next, but eventually the one who cultivates positive karma will arrive at the goal of release from suffering and rebirth.

It thus appears that Buddhism needs karma. Without it, Buddhism loses its very rationale, as well as its ability to provide assurance to its followers that their positive, intentional acts will inevitably culminate in higher rebirth and nirvana. Without this ability, it is unlikely to attract many followers, as religious seekers tend to want assurance of salvation from their religion. The question we must ask here is whether a naturalized concept of karma can provide this any better than no karma concept at all. Taking Wright’s concept of karma as our test case, we must conclude that it cannot.

As Wright explains, “the first dimension of the Buddhist doctrine of karma that warrants reflective scrutiny [when considered from the perspective of naturalism] is its assertion of ultimate cosmic justice.” He points out that our empirical observations of the world often contradict this claim, and sees this as reason “to conclude, at least provisionally, that the cosmos is largely indifferent to the sphere of human merit as well as to our expectations of justice” (80). If this is so, then the ability of Buddhism to explain the origins of the world and justify evil, and more importantly, its ability to motivate religious practice and assure its practitioners of the inevitability of their salvation is catastrophically undercut. Rather than being able to promise its followers salvation, the most a Buddhism predicated upon a naturalized karma could offer would be the ability to improve one’s character, and, if lucky, a happier existence. As Wright puts it,

all we can say is that things often work this way [i.e., good people often prosper and bad one’s suffer loss], not that they always do, or that they must. Sometimes unscrupulous businessmen thrive; on occasion, kindness

---

<sup>10</sup> See *Discourse on Origins (Agganna-suttanta)* of the *Digha Nikaya*.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 280. I presume it does the same for laywomen and nuns, as well.



and honesty go completely unrewarded. These occurrences make it impossible for us to claim a necessary relation between moral merit and external forms of reward (84).

They would also seem, I would add, to preclude any necessary relation between Buddhist practice and nirvana. Even those who pursue nirvana get struck accidentally by trucks. All we can say, on this account, is that people who practice Buddhism often, but not always, experience nirvana. But even this is going too far, as observation would surely show that a vast majority never even come close.

It would thus seem that a naturalized concept of karma is not able to satisfy the religious needs of Buddhists as the concept has traditionally done. In the process, it also transforms the tradition into something very different than what it has historically been, viz. a soteriological religion that teaches its adherents the path to salvation and guarantees results. While such a naturalized concept of karma may be useful for ethicists, is unlikely to attract many religious seekers to Buddhism.

### Conclusion

If what I have argued is true, then Buddhism faces a rough road ahead, not only in America, but everywhere it struggles to come to terms with modernity. The ways in which karma has traditionally been understood, i.e., metaphysically, are not “live options” for contemporary, liberal-minded people. If karma is to function meaningfully for them, it will have to function within the confines of their scientific modes of reasoning. The problem, as I have outlined it here, is that a scientific concept of karma, such as that proposed by Dale Wright, is unlikely to satisfy people’s religious aspirations, and so dramatically limits Buddhism’s appeal for religious seekers. It also transforms the tradition to such an extent that many will have a hard time recognizing it as genuinely Buddhist.

It is hard to avoid concluding, then, that the prospects for Buddhism’s success in the West are not good. In its traditional forms it is unbelievable; in its more liberal forms it is religiously impotent. It also suggests that whatever chance Buddhism has for success may very well hinge on its ability to convince its followers to believe in karma as a metaphysical concept, despite the problems involved. While, in the American context, this seems unlikely ever to happen on a large scale, it is worth remembering that the concept of karma is not indigenous to China, for example, and yet the Chinese were convinced, in time, to believe. In the emerging “post-modern” age, perhaps Americans, too, will find it possible and desirable to believe new and foreign metaphysical ideas like karma.