

The Effects of Momentariness on Karma and Rebirth in Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

In the development of Indian Buddhism we begin to see a shift away from the early Buddhist epistemology based in phenomenology and process metaphysics toward a type of event-based metaphysics. This shift began in the reductionist methodology of the Abhidhamma and culminated in a theory of momentariness based in rationalism and abstraction, rather than early Buddhist empiricism. While early Buddhism followed an extensional model of temporal consciousness, when methodological reductionism was applied to the concept of time, it necessarily resulted in a cinematic model of temporal consciousness like that of the Sautrāntikas or in an idea of the tri-temporal existence of dhammas, like that of the Sarvāstivādins. It is in the accounting of the process of karmic rebirth that we can most clearly see the effects of this shift.

The development of a theory of momentariness was incorporated into the Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosa. In Buddhaghosa's treatment of karmic rebirth, karma, particularly death-threshold karma, receives more emphasis in the process of rebirth than was previously found in the Suttas. The incorporation of "duration-less duration" via tri-temporal existence by Buddhaghosa became necessary in order to explain karmic continuity in the rebirth process while retaining the concept of momentariness.

Key Words: Karma, Rebirth, Time and Temporality, Buddhism, Theravāda, Buddhaghosa

Early Buddhist karma theory

In early Buddhism, the karma functions *descriptively* to illustrate principles of causality and continuity in a conventional and instrumental relation to the larger process metaphysics of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, while ethical and rebirth-oriented aspects of karma theory function *normatively* to affirm the efficacy of human action in leading a moral life. Karma describes why the circumstances of one's life are the way they are, while the ethical theory of karma demonstrates the efficacy of human action in changing one's circumstances now and in the future. In addition, the relation of karma to rebirth both reaffirms the descriptive aspects of karmic causality and offers an avenue of escape from karma by the attainment of *nibbāna*.

In Buddhism, karma functions as a denial of determinism and an affirmation of the efficacy of human action, even if it is limited by circumstances beyond one's control. This is best contrasted with the complete determinism of the Ājīvikas. While Buddhism does not put forth an argument for complete freedom of will, it does leave space for moral action. According to the Buddha, Ājīvika determinism and fatalism did not provide a valid reason for living a moral life (D.I.47; A.I.286; M.I.517) and the Buddha explicitly rejected this view. In fact, the Buddha declares that Ājīvika doctrine is the worst of all doctrines specifically because it denies 'karma, deed and energy' (A.I.287) and proclaims (M.I.483) that no Ājīvika has made an end of suffering and that the only Ājīvika who was reborn in heaven over 99 aeons was a believer in karma (*kammavādin*).

However, while early Buddhist metaphysics rejects strong determinism, it also recognises the role that non-intentional and external conditions play in our experience and comprehends the presence of limits on complete freedom of action, with karma as only one of many causal factors involved in the present and possible future states of the individual (S.IV.230). It is precisely in this undetermined, but limited, "field of action" (A.I.223) in which intention and volitional action can operate and from which Buddhist conceptions of karma as causality can be coherently ethicised.

Karma as an ethical theory in Buddhism rests upon the move from karma as action to karma as intention (A.III.410). Bronkhorst points out (21) that ‘Buddhism psychologised the notion of karmic retribution’ by moving the emphasis away from deed toward an emphasis on desire and intention. It is this move that is the key to Buddhist soteriology. The usual Indic view of [Pg.2] karma as action and latent substance leads to theories of liberation through inaction to avoid making new karma, coupled with austerities to annihilate existing karma. In contrast, the Buddhist theory of karma avoids inaction and austerities by focusing on the elimination of mental defilement (*kilesa*) through psychological practice (Bronkhorst b 9-10). This is the essence of the Buddha’s ‘middle way’ and it accommodates an ethical and active soteriology, rather than one based on immobility and austerity.

Karma as an ethical theory may be said to presuppose the existence of a moral order, a moral order best thought of as an explanatory construct rather than as a metaphysical concept like a moral law. While there is some canonical support for an intrinsic moral order resembling a western conception of poetic justice, such as the lascivious male’s three rebirths as animals that were to be castrated (Thig. 437-4), the effects of a karma are not to be understood as determined in a one-for-one fashion. Instead, they depend on the nature of the person and circumstances in which the karma was done (A.I.249), as part of an ‘indeterminate (yet non-random) process’ (Gombrich 194). It is clear from the Buddhist rejection of Ājīvika determinism in regard to causality that any doctrine of karma as strong ethical determinism must also be rejected. It may be that since karma as an ethical theory is primarily directed toward lay practitioners as a basis for practical morality in Buddhist society, karmic depictions of poetic justice can be taken as evidence of a doctrine of moral naturalism and / or as simple pedagogical instruments to teach ethics to lay followers of the Buddha.

In the early Buddhist soteriological project, karma is seen as something to be overcome and ultimately rendered irrelevant with the attainment of *nibbāna*. In other Indian schools which define karma as action and the fruit of action, karma can only be annihilated through the most extreme forms of inaction and immobility. However, due to the Buddhist conception of karma as intention, karma can be rendered inoperable through a purification of the mind that results in actions that are free of the poisons of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), which

causes them to produce karma that is ‘neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright ripening, that conduces to the exhaustion of karma’ (M.I.387).

The Theory of Moments and Karmic Rebirth

A subtle shift away from early Buddhist process metaphysics occurred with the doctrine of momentariness, which developed logically from the reductionist methodology of the *Abhidhammikas*. As phenomena were reduced to *dhammas*, conceived of as the smallest perceptual building blocks of experience, there was a tendency to reconstruct them as discrete ultimate entities (*paramattha-dhamma*). Although, as Karunadasa contends (6), ‘In the Pāli tradition, it is only for the sake of definition and description that each *dhamma* is postulated as if it were a separate entity’, when the same logical reductionism that gave rise to *dhamma* theory was applied to time and temporality, a theory of momentariness arose. This atomistic momentariness of time was ultimately coupled with the conception of *dhammas* to form discrete, time-moments. This introduced a philosophical difficulty in accounting for continuity between *dhammas* conceived of in this way. Without a way of establishing continuity between these time-moments, a great difficulty was also raised in establishing karmic continuity across lives, which threatened the entire soteriological project of Buddhism.

A significant problem arises in putting forth a metaphysically satisfying account of the nature of continuity inferred from the succession of contiguous, momentary *dhammas*. Early Buddhism avoided this problem by using an extensional model of temporal consciousness (Kalupahana 185) which accepted one’s immediate experience as constituting a succession of finite temporal experiences, each with some duration over time, constituting a ‘specious present’ (Dainton 5.1) similar to a Whiteheadian actual entity. These ‘drops of experience, complex and interdependent’ (Whitehead 18, 23) can accommodate the arising and cessation of phenomena in a single, conscious perception of a specious present that endures through a short period of time. This idea of a specious present that is a product of conscious perception *of the world*, but which does not rely on the ontological status of things *in the world*, supports Kalupahana’s assertion that early Buddhism followed the ‘middle path’ regarding time, rejecting as extremes both the concept of absolute time and the hypothesis that time is an illusion of the intellect. Instead, the

Buddha 'seems to have considered time as an essential feature of the universe and the experience of it' (185).

[Pg.3]

Likewise, in Whitehead's version of process metaphysics, the impossibility of perceiving an abstracted temporal location such as the absolute present is remedied while avoiding 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' by postulating an 'enduring physical object' (99), which is, in reality, a nexus of processes functioning as actual entities (occasions of experience) in time. Much like *dhammas*, these actual entities are postulated purely as logically atomized instruments of definition and description rather than as ultimate entities.

The addition of a momentary, atomised, conception of time to the idea of *dhammas* as elementary constituents of perception logically created problems with the concept of direct perception of the external world and with the concept of causality. This type of momentary *dhamma* could not be said to endure over time to condition the successive *dhammas* that arise following each *dhamma*'s cessation without granting *dhammas* some form of substantiality or essence.

An unwillingness to grant this type of substantiality to *dhammas* led to a type of cinematic model of temporal consciousness adopted by the Sautrāntikas in which, 'Our streams of consciousness are composed of continuous successions of these momentary states of consciousness... analogous to movies, which (as displayed) consist of rapid sequences of still images' (Dainton 1.1). This is the logical result when a reductionist methodology is applied to the concept of time. However, this model is subject to the serious objection that a succession of experiences is not the same thing as an experience of succession (Ibid. 4.1). The Sautrāntikas maintained their commitment to the reduction of time by committing to the theory of representationalism rather than direct perception and to radical presentism.

In contrast, the Sarvāstivādins were committed to *dhammas* as actual experiences of events *in time*, or even *as time* (Inada 173), while also being intellectually committed to the abstraction of momentariness. While the Sautrāntika commitment to avoiding essentialism *and* accepting momentariness resulted in radical presentism, the Sarvāstivādins resorted to the

concept of tri-temporal existence in which the *dhammas* were said to exist at all three periods of time: past, present and future. While other schools of Indian Buddhism saw Sarvāstivādin commitment to the existence of *dhammas* in all time periods as the doctrine of substantiality (*atta*) by another name, it had the advantages of complementing the doctrine of dependant arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and accounting for the perception of past and future *dhammas* in line with the theory of direct perception (Barstow 109-125). However, according to Karunadasa (9), the tri-temporal theory of existence introduced among the Sarvāstivādins resulted in the emergence of:

A metaphysical dimension to the doctrine of *dhammas* and thus paved the way for the erosion of its empirical foundation. For this theory makes an empirically unverifiable distinction between the actual being of the *dhammas* as phenomena and their ideal being as noumena. It assumes that the substances of all *dhammas* persist in all the three divisions of time—past, present, and future—while their manifestations as phenomena are impermanent and subject to change. Accordingly, a *dhamma* actualizes itself only in the present moment of time, but “in essence” it continues to subsist in all the three temporal periods. As is well known, this resulted in the transformation of the *dhamma* theory into a *svabhavavada*, “the doctrine of own-nature.” It also paved the way for a veiled recognition, if not for a categorical assumption, of the distinction between substance and quality.

Momentariness Enters Theravāda Buddhism

In this paper we are primarily concerned with the appearance of momentariness in the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa. We contend that Buddhaghosa brought into Theravāda Buddhism an essentialism that is not found in early Buddhism while dealing with the difficulty of establishing karmic continuity across lives. Buddhaghosa inferred continuity from contiguity via the rebirth-linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāṇa*), which is postulated as “existing” momentarily between the cessation of the death consciousness (*cuti-citta*) and the arising of mentality-materiality (*nama-rupa*) and the life-continuum consciousness (*bhavaṅga-citta*) at the

moment of rebirth-linking. The existence of the rebirth-linking consciousness is a logical necessity for Buddhaghosa in order to explain the continuity between the processes of death and rebirth in keeping with the doctrine of non-substantiality. The rebirth-linking consciousness is inserted to avoid any troublesome gaps between existences. The *bhavaṅga-citta* of the new existence is simply classified as a resultant state of consciousness (*vipaka-citta*) conditioned by the karma [Pg.4] that in turn conditioned the rebirth-linking consciousness of the previous existence (Vism.341).

This is an elegant philosophical explanation of how continuity is maintained across lives and a useful tool for meditation on this subject. It also accounts for the ability of spiritual adepts to recall past lives by tracing one's continuity of subjective experience from the present existence back (Vism.411). Even non-Buddhist adepts are said to be able to recall past lives, but only as a succession of aggregates. Buddhists are said to have a more privileged insight by tracing both the succession of aggregates and death and rebirth-linking, while a Buddha can skip the succession of births and deaths in his own or another's stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) and speak of any particular point at will (Vism.411). Finally, Buddhaghosa is able to demonstrate the mechanism by which the *arahant* is liberated from the cycle of existence (*samsāra*), with the attainment of enlightenment (*nibbāna*) stopping the formation of another rebirth-linking consciousness at the cessation of the death consciousness in this lifetime (Vism.460).

Buddhaghosa takes as his premise the idea that just as one conscious moment invariably conditions the next conscious moment in one's present life, the death consciousness invariably conditions the rebirth-linking consciousness, which in turn conditions the resultant consciousness in exactly the same manner as in the present succession of moments (Vism.546). The entire system depends on this uninterrupted succession of *dhammas* as discrete time-moments. It is for this reason the common folk belief in the existence of an intermediate state (*antarābhava*) is also denied in this metaphysical system to maintain continuity (Vism.604).

If one conceives of the cycle of existences as an uninterrupted succession of subjective experience, whether the successive experience of *dhammas* or Whiteheadian "actual entities", the perceived gap separating the end of one existence and the beginning of the next existence

(Vism.554) has no ontological reality (Vism.604) and is not an obstacle to explanation. However, in spite of acknowledging the lack of ontological reality for the perceived gap, Buddhaghosa cannot help but to fill the perceived gap with the rebirth-linking consciousness because he is committed to an acceptance of the theory of momentariness.

Buddhaghosa is clear to point out that no factor is unconditioned and that rebirth is primarily a result of clinging, throwing one forth into renewed existence. However, in emphasising the effects of karma and constructions / dispositions (*saṅkhāra*), whether good, bad or indeterminate (Vism.462), as the primary drivers of existence across lives, we begin to see the emergence of a more essentialist metaphysics of rebirth. This is one reason why we see Buddhaghosa's metaphysics attach primary importance to the karma that manifests itself before death, and why his four-fold classification of karmas that manifest as rebirth-linking (Vism.601) emphasises weighty, habitual and death-threshold karmas as distinct from other accumulated karmas. This is in contrast to the depiction of karma in relation to one's overall behaviour that is found in the *Suttas* and is a direct result of the fact that, for Buddhaghosa, a particular "karma, sign of karma or sign of destiny" (Vism.457) appears at the time of death as an object for the rebirth-linking consciousness.

While there is canonical support for the idea that death-threshold karma can be particularly significant (M.III.214), McDermott points out (19-20) that the Buddha emphasises that it is the totality of a man's character that may shape his thoughts at the moment of death. The idea of death-threshold karma (or weighty / habitual karmas manifesting as or influencing death-threshold karma) directing the rebirth process is plausible in most cases, but it fails to account for cases such as that where one is unconscious at the moment of death. Therefore, it is likely that while admitting death-threshold karma may be particularly significant, the Buddha emphasised it far less than Buddhaghosa does in the *Visuddhimagga*. We contend that this is due to the logical necessities found in the metaphysical systematisation in light of the acceptance of momentariness.

Given Buddhaghosa's commitments to momentariness and direct perception, he was forced to resort to Sarvāstivādin tri-temporal existence, incorporating it into his conception of

dhammas by conceiving of *dhammas* as containing within them (rather than existing in), all three periods of time: past, present and future. Buddhaghosa accomplished this by way of the metaphysical postulation that material *dhammas* endure longer than mental *dhammas*, by a ratio of sixteen to one (Vism.614). This allowed him to assign a tri-temporal categorisation of past, present and future (by way of arising, persisting and ceasing) to *dhammas*, thus giving [Pg.5] them causal efficacy, while at the same time retaining the concept of *dhammas* as discrete infinitesimal time-moments. This ingenious concept had the added effect of maintaining the ideas of direct perception and the symmetry of time.

However, this manoeuvre succeeded at the cost of ascribing misplaced concreteness in differentiating momentary mental *dhammas* from momentary material *dhammas*. It also called into question the very definition of momentariness. Essentialism necessarily emerges from this coupling and Buddhaghosa was forced to downplay the phenomenological and empirical asymmetric nature of extensional temporal causality found in early Buddhism, in which the present is associated with becoming (Kalupahana 186), in favour of this new essentialist paradigm. Although this appears to be a minor philosophical innovation undertaken in order to harmonise diverse doctrines, it results in a profound shift away from the early Buddhist position in order to incorporate a theory of momentariness.

Conclusion

The early Buddhist conception of *dhamma* avoided the temptations of essentialism arising from reification of the *dhammas* by using an extensional model of temporal consciousness that allowed the contents of conscious perception to extend *through time*, and therefore had no need of a theory of momentariness. It also allowed for the presence of past events in the extensional consciousness without according them a type of ontological existence or substantiality, resulting in a type of Sarvāstivādin eternalism. The early Buddhist model of temporal consciousness is in line with the empirical and phenomenological experience of a specious present and it avoided the metaphysical problems of a lack of continuity and diachronic complexity found in the cinematic model of temporal consciousness used by the Sautrāntikas.

While it seems that Buddhaghosa was aware of the danger in attributing substance in the guise of own-nature to dhammas, he was less attentive to the problem of essentialism arising from the atomisation of time via the theory of momentariness. It was this move toward an analysis of existence into a succession of discrete time-moments that fundamentally transformed Theravāda Buddhist epistemology. Ironically, the theory of momentariness that arose in part to avoid essentialism and enduring substances became the vehicle by which essentialism first enters Theravāda thought.

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