

Kamma in Early Theravāda Buddhism: A Doctrinal Analysis

SHARADA POUDEL

Lumbini Buddhist University, Central Library, Lumbini, Nepal

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 - **Email:** shara.poudel@gmail.com
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Abstract

This article explores the philosophical debates surrounding the concepts of kamma and rebirth as articulated in early Theravāda Buddhism. It analyzes canonical texts, particularly the Pāli Canon, to highlight the doctrinal foundations of these ideas and their implications for moral responsibility and liberation. It is claimed that the interpretations of kamma and rebirth within early Theravāda philosophy reflect a complex understanding of causality and ethical accountability, distinguishing it from deterministic or fatalistic perspectives. It is assumed that these debates shaped the moral framework of Theravāda Buddhism and contributed significantly to its soteriological aims, emphasizing the transformative power of intentional action. The article offers insights into the early Theravāda views on life, death, and moral agency through critical engagement with the textual and philosophical dimensions.

Keywords: *Theravāda Buddhism, Kamma, Rebirth, Pāli Canon, Moral Responsibility, Causality, Early Buddhist Philosophy*

Kamma in Theravāda Buddhism

In Pali grammar, “*Karīyati iti Kamma*” means “*Karma* is that which is to be done.” According to this definition, *karma* means action. All activities a person performs through the body, speech, and mind are considered *karma*. However, Buddhism distinguishes between “*karma*” and “work.” Not all actions a person performs are considered *karma*, but all *karma* is a form of action. Only actions performed with intention are regarded as *karma*.

This concept is explained in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* of the *Anguttara Nikāya*, where the Buddha states:

“*Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi, cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti—kāyena vācāya manasā.*” (*Nibbedhikasutta*, AN 6.63)

This means: “Monks, I declare that *karma* is intention. Having intended, one performs actions through the body, speech, and mind.”

The Buddha emphasized that three types of intentions are necessary for any *karma* to take place (Dhakhwa 143):

1. *Pubbe-Cetanā* (Prior Intention) – The thought or desire to act like doing it.
2. *Muñca-Cetanā* (Present Intention) – The thought process occurring while acting.
3. *Apara-Cetanā* (Subsequent Intention) – The reflection or recollection of the action after completion.

Actions with these three intentions, good (wholesome) or bad (unwholesome), lead to corresponding karmic results.

Kamma and Its Consequences

According to Buddhism, both happiness and suffering are the results of *karma*. The Buddha explained the consequences of wholesome and unwholesome *karma* as follows (*Dhammapada* 1-2):

“*Manasā ce pasannena, bhāsati vā karoti vā, tato naṃ sukhamanveti, chāyā va anapāyinī.*”

(“If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves.”)

“*Manasā ce padutthena, bhāsati vā karoti vā, tato naṃ dukkhamanveti, cakkamva vahato padaṃ.*”

(“If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows like the wheel of a cart follows the foot of an ox pulling it.”)

This makes it clear that if one intentionally performs wholesome actions, they will experience positive results, whereas unwholesome actions will lead to negative

consequences.

Intentional *karma* is classified into two types (Gyanpurnik 3)

Wholesome *Karma* (*Kusala Kamma*) includes good habits, virtuous character, and meritorious deeds.

Unwholesome *Karma* (*Akusala Kamma*) – This includes bad habits, immoral behavior, and sinful actions.

Wholesome actions bring only happiness and never suffering. From the greatest king to the most insignificant animal, all the happiness of sentient beings results from their wholesome actions. Buddhists believe that if someone has a pleasant or happy life now, this is because of pleasant actions he or she has committed in past lives.

According to Buddhism, all happiness derives from positive causes and conditions, from our wholesome actions of body, speech, and mind. All the different forms of anxiety, dissatisfaction, and suffering result from our negative *karma*, our negative actions of body, speech, and mind.

Furthermore, *karma* is categorized based on the means through which it is performed (5):

Mano Karma (Mental *Karma*) – Actions performed through thoughts: *Mano Karma* refers to all mental activities, including thoughts, emotions, desires, intentions, and cognitive patterns (*citta vīthi*). These internal actions shape our perceptions and responses to life's experiences. Over time, our mental *karma* influences our verbal and physical actions, which is crucial in determining our happiness or suffering based on how we process and react to different situations.

Vācika Karma (Verbal *Karma*) – Actions performed through speech: *Vācika Karma* encompasses all forms of verbal expression, including spoken words, written communication, and any language used to convey messages. Our words have the power to heal or harm others, making verbal *karma* a significant factor in shaping relationships and social interactions.

Kāyika Karma (Bodily *Karma*) – Actions performed through the body: It is also called *Dahik Karma* and involves all actions performed using the body, such as working, walking, cooking, writing, gardening, and caregiving. Physical actions are the external manifestations of our thoughts and intentions, directly impacting ourselves and those around us.

The body, speech, and mind are the three gateways through which all wholesome and unwholesome *karma* manifests.

Karma depends on its strength and nature

In *Theravāda*, different types of *karma* are classified based on their effects. Not all *karma* results in the same outcome. The impact of *karma* depends on its strength and nature; it can be categorized into four types (*Abhidhammatthasangaho* 36):

Garu Karma: Heavy *karma* can have powerful positive or negative results. For example, the five great sins (killing one's parents, killing an arhat, injuring the Buddha, and causing division in the Sangha) are considered *garu karma*. Depending on whether one is virtuous or non-virtuous, these actions lead to the heavenly realms or hell.

Āsanna Karma refers to actions performed near death. If one performs good deeds like charity or meditation before dying, they are reborn in a favorable state. However, if one recalls past misdeeds, they may be reborn in an unfavorable state. An example is the story of Queen Mallikā, who, despite her previous good actions, had to endure hell for seven days because she remembered an unethical act at the time of her death.

Ācinna Karma: These are habitual actions performed regularly throughout life. For instance, someone who habitually gives charity or practices ethics will be reborn favorably. In contrast, someone who engages in harmful actions like violence or theft may face an unfavorable rebirth.

Kaṭattā Karma: These are actions done impulsively or without awareness. They don't usually mine the rebirth unless committed in a significant context. This type of yield may give results depending on the nature of the action, and profit is less impactful than the other types.

Rebirth in *Theravāda* Buddhism

In Early *Theravāda* Buddhism, “rebirth” refers to the cyclical process where consciousness, shaped by one's actions (*karma*), continues to exist after death, manifesting in a new life form depending on the quality of those actions. This essentially means that past actions influence our current life, and our present actions shape our future life; this cycle is called “*samsāra*,” and Buddhist practice aims to break free from it and achieve liberation (*nirvāṇa*).

Rebirth is a central concept in the Early Buddhist Texts (EBTs), discussed in several key *suttas*, including the *Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 136), *Upāli Sutta* (*MN* 56), *Kukkuravatika Sutta* (*MN* 57), *Moliyasīvaka Sutta* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 36.21), and *Sankha Sutta* (*SN* 42.8). These texts explore various terms related to the rebirth process, such as *āgati-gati* (coming and going), *punarbhava* (re-becoming), *punāgamana*, *punavāsa*, *punanivattati*, *abhinibbatti*, and terms derived from *jāti* and *rūpa*, all of which describe different aspects of rebirth. According to Damien Keown, the EBTs suggest that the Buddha, upon his awakening, gained the ability to recall an extensive number of past lives, some stretching as far back as ninety-one eons (60-187). These memories of past lives are often interpreted as connections to ancestors, with later interpretations linking them to personal recollections of previous existences.

The concept of an *antarābhava* (in-between state) between death and rebirth is also mentioned in the early Buddhist texts. According to Sujato, the most explicit passage on this can be found in the *Kutuhalasāla Sutta*, where it is stated that beings, after death, are fueled by craving until reborn. Another term used in the EBTs to describe what gets reborn is *gandhabba* (spirit), as seen in the *Assalayana Sutta* (*MA* 151), where a *gandhabba* is necessary for conception. The early Buddhist text further indicates that rebirth consciousness is not a blank slate but carries underlying tendencies (*anusaya*) from past lives, which form the conditions for future rebirth (*SA* 359, *SN* 13.39). Additionally, past life memories can be recollected through deep meditation, as the Buddha himself demonstrated in *suttas* like the *Bhayabherava Sutta* (*MN* 4) and the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (*DN* 14), highlighting the cyclical nature of rebirth that extends infinitely into the past (*SN* 15.3, *SA* 938).

This extraordinary ability to remember past lives is a way to understand the connections between individuals and their previous existences, with later interpretations suggesting these memories could also serve as personal recollections of past lives, bridging the gap between present and ancestral existence.

The Role of *Kamma* in Rebirth

Karma determines the cycle of rebirth. Suitable, moral actions lead to a favorable rebirth, while imperfect, immoral actions result in an unfavorable rebirth. Due to craving and ignorance, beings are trapped in the cycle of existence (*saṃsāra*), repeatedly undergoing rebirth. However, through wisdom, one can overcome mental defilements (*kleśa*) and attain *nirvāṇa*.

In Buddhist philosophy, *karma* (*kamma*) plays a central role in determining an

individual's rebirth and future existence. The doctrine of *karma* posits that actions performed through body, speech, and mind shape one's destiny, leading to favorable or unfavorable rebirths. Within this framework, early Buddhist texts describe four distinct types of individuals (*puggala*), each representing different karmic trajectories and their respective consequences in the cycle of rebirth (Vetter 79).

From Darkness to Darkness

The first type of individual is born into difficult and unfavorable circumstances and continues to engage in unwholesome actions. Such a person is reborn into a lower-class family, such as those of outcasts (*Caṇḍālas*), basket makers, hunters, or other marginalized groups who experience material hardship, including scarcity of food and clothing. Additionally, they may be physically unattractive or suffer from disabilities. However, despite their challenging birth conditions, they do not cultivate moral conduct and instead engage in harmful deeds through their body, speech, and mind. As a consequence, after death, they descend into the underworld or lower realms (*apāya*), such as the realm of hell beings (*niraya*) or hungry ghosts (*peta*).

From Darkness to Light

The second type of individual also comes from a lower-class background and faces the same material and social disadvantages as the first category. However, in contrast to the previous case, this person leads a morally upright life, refraining from unethical behavior and cultivating virtue through wholesome actions, kind speech, and pure intentions. As a result, despite their disadvantaged birth, they attain a favorable rebirth in the heavenly realms (*deva-loka*) after death, illustrating the transformative power of good *karma* in overcoming adversity.

From Light to Darkness

The third type of individual is born into an upper-class family, such as those of wealthy warriors (*Khattiyas*), Brahmins, or affluent citizens, enjoying a life of material abundance and privilege. This individual possesses physical beauty and has access to all forms of luxury. However, despite their fortunate birth, they engage in unethical behavior, harming others through bodily actions, deceptive speech, and impure thoughts. Due to their immoral conduct, after death, they are reborn in the lower realms, experiencing suffering despite their prior worldly success. This category highlights that birth in a privileged environment does not guarantee a favorable rebirth if moral discipline is not upheld.

From Light to Light

The final category represents an individual born into an affluent and noble family, enjoying the same advantages as the previous type. However, unlike the one who falls into moral decline, this person leads a righteous life, practicing ethical conduct and engaging in virtuous deeds. As a result, after death, they are reborn in the heavenly realms, continuing their existence in a state of bliss and prosperity.

The division of individuals into these four categories aligns with the broader Buddhist concept that virtuous actions lead to auspicious rebirths, often in celestial realms. In contrast, negative actions result in suffering, typically in lower realms.

The effects of *karma* are influenced by the nature of the doer and the prevailing circumstances. A god or an all-powerful being does not impose the consequences of *karma* but is instead the natural outcome of one's actions. Some life experiences result from past actions, but one is not entirely bound by past *karma*.

The Law of Cause and Effect

If past actions entirely determined our present life, *karma* would be akin to a predetermined fate. However, Buddhism rejects fatalism. The principle of *karma* is based on the law of cause and effect. It is a natural law without connection to justice, reward, or punishment. Every conscious action, whether intentional or unintentional, leads to consequences.

Buddhism teaches that even after death, desires, cravings, and attachments influence all existence. Our body is merely an aggregate of five elements—both physical and mental energies—constantly changing and perishing. When the physical body ceases to function, the energies do not perish but take on new forms and existences.

Here, the Law of Cause and Effect are *Karma* and *Karmaphala* (Bodhisen 123), core Buddhist concepts that explain how our intentional actions bind us to the cycle of rebirth on the Buddhist path. *Karma*, meaning “action,” refers to deeds or Cause. *Karmaphala*, or the “fruit” of *karma*, represents the result or effect of these actions. The concept of *karma vipaka* further describes the “ripening” or maturation of *karma*. Unlike deterministic views, the Buddha's teachings suggest that *karma* is not a rigid process; it is shaped by the individual's intentions and circumstances, not by an external force. The results of *karma* are part of a natural cause-and-effect process, not a divine judgment. Ultimately, the Buddhist focus on *karma* encourages us to break

free from this cycle and end the process of rebirth.

The Inequality in the World Due to *Kamma*

Although all human beings are fundamentally equal, their experiences of good and bad results in life differ. The Buddha explained this in the *Cūlakammavibhaṅga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. When asked why people are born into different conditions, the Buddha replied:

Kammassakā māṇava, sattā kammadāyādā, kammayoni, kammabandhū, kammaapaṭisaraṇā. Kammaṃ satte vibhajati yadidaṃ hīnappaṇītatāyāti.” (Vipassana Vishodhan Vinyasa 824)

(“Beings are the owners of their actions (*kamma*), heirs to their *kamma*, born from their *kamma*, bound by their *kamma*, and have *kamma* as their refuge. It is *kamma* that differentiates beings into higher and lower states.”)

The Buddha’s teachings in the *Sutta* address the causes of differences in human experiences, such as lifespan, health, beauty, wealth, and wisdom. According to the Buddha, these differences arise from one’s deeds, or *karma*. Sentient beings are the “owners of their deeds” and are “heirs to their deeds.” One’s actions shape one’s future experiences, both in this life and in future rebirths.

For example, those who commit violent acts, such as killing or harming living beings, will face suffering in their next life, either in a lower realm or as a short-lived, unhealthy person. In contrast, those who live with compassion, kindness, and wisdom will experience positive outcomes, potentially rebirth in a heavenly realm or a better human life with qualities like health, longevity, and beauty. Similarly, how individuals respond to situations—angry or calm, jealous or content—determines their future circumstances.

Ultimately, the Buddha emphasizes that virtuous or harmful actions cause one’s present and future conditions. By understanding and following this truth, individuals can improve their lives and attain spiritual liberation. Thus, *karma* and rebirth are closely intertwined, with each person’s deeds directly influencing their fate. One can cultivate a future of happiness, wisdom, and peace through mindfulness and ethical living.

The Buddha elaborated that actions determine one’s future conditions, including health, beauty, wealth, family status, and wisdom. By performing wholesome deeds,

one can create favorable circumstances in this life and future rebirths.

Kamma and its Influence on Life Conditions

Although there is equality in humans, the experience of good and bad results varies, as Lord Buddha has given various teachings on this subject in different places. Among these, in the *Majjhima Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, in the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*, it is mentioned that while Lord Buddha was residing in the Jetavana Monastery in Savatthi, a Brahmin named Subha asked Him 14 questions in pairs:

Ko nu kho, bho Gotama, hetu ko paccayo yena manussānaṃyeva sataṃ manussabhūtānaṃ disanti hīnappaṇītattā? Disanti hi... Ko nu kho bho Gotama, hetu ko paccayo yena manussānaṃyeva sataṃ manussabhūtānaṃ disanti hīnappaṇītattā?
(Bajracharya 824)

The Buddha replied to the Subha, “O human, beings are the heirs of their actions (*karma*). They are born from their actions, which bind them and are their true refuge. It is their actions that divide beings into high and low states.”

“O human! The actions of beings are their property; they become part of their actions, their actions are the cause of their birth, their actions are their relatives, and their actions are their true refuge. Actions alone divide beings into high and low.”

Since the good Brahmin did not fully understand this brief answer, he requested an explanation in more detail. Lord Buddha gave a more detailed explanation of this. Those are as follows (Dhakhwa 150):

The Cause of Short Life and Long Life

If a man or woman is cruel toward living beings, engages in violence, and commits acts of killing, they will, after death, fall into a state of suffering, such as hell. They will have a short lifespan if they are not reborn in a lower realm but take birth in the human realm.

On the other hand, if a person abstains from violence, lives with kindness and compassion, does not harm others, and adopts a non-violent way of life, they will, after death, be reborn in a good destination, such as the heavenly realms. They will have a long lifespan if they are not reborn in heaven but take birth as humans.

The Cause of Sickness and Health

If a man or woman harms living beings with their hands, sticks, weapons, or other means and repeatedly engages in such actions, they will, after death, fall into a lower realm, such as hell. If they are not reborn in a lower realm but instead take birth in the human realm, they will be prone to illness.

However, if a person treats all living beings with compassion, refrains from harming them, and does not enjoy such actions, they will be reborn in a good destination, such as the heavenly realms, after death. They will enjoy good health if they are not born in heaven but in the human realm.

The Cause of Beauty and Ugliness

If a man or woman is often angry, resentful, and displeased, they will, after death, fall into a lower realm such as hell. If they are not reborn in hell but in the human realm, they will be physically unattractive.

On the other hand, if a person remains patient, refrains from expressing anger and resentment, and maintains inner composure, they will be reborn in the celestial realms after death. They will have a beautiful appearance if they are not reborn in heaven but in the human realm. Thus, patience and a calm mind contribute to physical attractiveness.

The Cause of Weakness and Strength

If a man or woman feels jealous of others' success, honor, and recognition and resents the respect given to others, they will, after death, fall into a lower realm such as hell. They will lack influence and power if they are not reborn in hell but in the human realm.

Conversely, if a person does not harbor jealousy, respects and honors others, and rejoices in others' success, they will be reborn in a good destination, such as the heavenly realms. They will attain significant influence and power if they are not reborn in heaven but in the human realm.

The Cause of Poverty and Wealth

If a man or woman refuses to give charity to those who are worthy of receiving it, withholds food and essential goods, and discourages others from sharing, they will, after death, fall into a lower realm such as hell. If they are not reborn in hell but in the

human realm, they will be poor and deprived of wealth.

On the other hand, if a person generously donates food, clothing, and other necessities to those in need after death, they will be reborn in a good destination, such as the heavenly realms. However, if they are not reborn in heaven but in the human realm, they will be blessed with wealth and prosperity.

The Cause of Being Born into a Low or Noble Family

If a man or woman is arrogant, refuses to show respect to those deserving of it, and fails to honor or venerate individuals worthy of reverence, they will, after death, fall into a lower realm such as hell. If they are not reborn in hell but in the human realm, they will be born into a lowly family, facing difficulties in status and privilege.

Conversely, suppose a person practices humility, respects and honors those who deserve reverence, and acknowledges the worth of others with sincerity. In that case, they will be reborn in a favorable existence, such as the heavenly realms. If they are not reborn in heaven but in the human realm, they will be born into a noble family, enjoying honor and societal esteem.

The Cause of Ignorance and Wisdom

Suppose a man or woman neglects the pursuit of knowledge, fails to seek guidance from wise ascetics or scholars, and remains indifferent to understanding what is wholesome and unwholesome. In that case, they will, after death, fall into a lower realm such as hell. If they are not reborn in hell but in the human realm, they will be born with limited wisdom, ignorance, and a lack of discernment.

On the other hand, if a person actively seeks wisdom, inquires about moral and philosophical truths, and strives to understand what leads to long-term well-being and liberation, they will be reborn in a favorable existence, such as the heavenly realms. If they are not reborn in heaven but in the human realm, they will be endowed with intelligence, clarity of thought, and the capacity for deep understanding.

***Kamma* and the Five Precepts (*Sīla*)**

Sīla, or morality, refers to ethical conduct and maintaining purity in one's actions. It encompasses restraint from harmful actions through body (*kāyika*), speech (*vācika*), and mind (*manasā*). Upholding *sīla* is fundamental to personal and spiritual development, as it fosters discipline, compassion, and kindness towards others. Those

who observe moral precepts cultivate virtuous qualities, free themselves from ill will, and contribute positively to society.

The Dhammapada (9) emphasizes the significance of morality and wisdom:

“*Sīladasaṇasampanna – Dhammatṭhaṃ Saccavādinam,
Attano Kamma Kubbaṇam – Taṃ Jano Kurute Piya.*”

(Meaning: One endowed with morality and wisdom, steadfast in *Dhamma*, truthful, and diligent in performing righteous deeds is loved by all.)

The Buddha further stated that a person who upholds faith and morality is honored and respected wherever they go.

The Five Benefits of Observing Sīla

According to the *Dīgha Nikāya* (2.3.1) and *Udāna* (8.6), the practice of morality yields five significant benefits for householders:

1. Wealth and Prosperity – A virtuous individual, free from negligence, is more likely to acquire wealth through honest means.
2. Reputation and Trustworthiness – Moral integrity enhances one’s reputation, earning the trust and respect of others.
3. Confidence in Any Assembly – A person who adheres to ethical conduct can interact confidently in any gathering, whether among rulers (*Khattiya*s), priests (*Brahmins*), merchants (*Vessas*), or renunciants (*Samaṇas*).
4. A Peaceful Death – Those who lead a moral life do not experience fear or distress at the time of death.
5. A Favored Rebirth – After death, individuals who have lived virtuously are reborn in a favorable state, such as the heavenly realms.

The observance of *sīla* plays a crucial role in shaping one’s karmic destiny and future rebirth. By maintaining ethical discipline, individuals create harmony in their present lives and ensure positive outcomes in their future existences.

Karma and Rebirth in the Precepts (Sīla)

The practice of morality (*Sīla*) plays a fundamental role in shaping an individual’s *karma* and determining their future rebirth (Harvey 186). In Buddhist

teachings, moral conduct is closely tied to *Sammā Kammanta* (Right Action), one of the three ethical components of the Noble Eightfold Path. Observing precepts ensures harmony in the present life and influences one's karmic outcomes and future existence.

Various forms of moral discipline exist, such as the Five Precepts (*Pañcasīla*), Eight Precepts (*Aṭṭhasīla*), Ten Precepts (*Dasasīla*, observed by novice monks), Right Livelihood Precepts (*Ājīvattamaka Sīla*), and the Ten Virtuous Actions (*Dasa Sucarita Sīla*). These precepts collectively guide individuals in ethical living, preventing harmful actions that generate negative *karma* and lead to suffering in future rebirths.

The Five Precepts and their Karmic Consequences

For householders, adherence to the Five Precepts (*Pañcasīla*) is crucial for personal well-being and a favorable rebirth. Each precept regulates actions that shape one's *karma*, with positive adherence leading to beneficial outcomes and violations resulting in negative consequences.

The first precept, refraining from killing (*Pāṇātipātā Veramaṇī*), promotes longevity, good health, and a peaceful existence. Those who respect life are rewarded with protection from harm and rebirth in higher realms. In contrast, those who take life suffer from physical weakness, fear, illness, and may be reborn in lower realms such as the animal or hell realms.

The second precept, refraining from stealing (*Adinnādānā Veramaṇī*), ensures stability, trust, and financial well-being. Honest individuals find prosperity and ease in acquiring resources. Conversely, theft leads to persistent poverty, economic instability, loss of confidence, and the possibility of rebirth in unfortunate circumstances.

The third precept, refraining from sexual misconduct (*Kāmesu Micchācārā Veramaṇī*), fosters harmonious relationships, peace of mind, and moral integrity. Those who respect this precept enjoy family stability and favorable rebirths. However, engaging in misconduct results in emotional suffering, marital discord, social dishonor, and potential reproductive health issues in future lives.

The fourth precept, refraining from lying (*Musāvādā Veramaṇī*), cultivates trust, credibility, and clear speech. Honest individuals gain influence and are respected in society, leading to noble rebirths. In contrast, habitual lying causes loss of trust, social

alienation, speech impairments, and suffering in lower realms.

The fifth precept, refraining from intoxicants and reckless behavior (*Surāmeraya Majjapamādaṭṭhānā Veramaṇī*), supports mental clarity, self-discipline, and financial stability. Those who uphold this precept develop wisdom and control over their actions, leading to fortunate rebirths. Meanwhile, indulgence in intoxicants leads to loss of awareness, poor decision-making, financial ruin, and rebirth in unfavorable states.

By observing the Five Precepts, individuals cultivate moral integrity, ensuring a peaceful and prosperous life while paving the way for a higher rebirth.

Moral Conduct as a Path to Higher Rebirth

The Five Precepts serve as the foundation for moral discipline and help prevent actions that lead to negative *karma* and lower rebirths. The Buddha emphasized that those who diligently observe morality and cultivate good *karma* through ethical conduct are reborn in higher realms, such as the heavenly realms (*Devaloka*), or as fortunate humans. Conversely, those who violate these precepts accumulate unwholesome *karma*, leading to rebirth in lower realms (hell, ghost, or animal realms) where suffering prevails.

Moreover, moral discipline is intertwined with wisdom (*paññā*) and mental cultivation (*samādhi*). By practicing the precepts alongside meditation and wisdom, an individual gradually purifies their karma, progressing toward liberation (*Nibbāna*), where the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*) ends.

Thus, *karma* and rebirth are deeply connected to moral conduct. Living virtuously ensures peace and happiness in this life and secures a favorable rebirth, ultimately advancing toward enlightenment.

Evolution of the Concepts of *Kamma* and Rebirth

The concepts of *kamma* (*karma*) and rebirth have evolved significantly within Buddhist thought, shaped by both internal doctrinal developments and interactions with other religious traditions. In early Buddhism, *kamma* was primarily understood as intentional action (*cetanā*) that influences future experiences, determining the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*). Unlike the deterministic views in some other Indian traditions, early Buddhist teachings emphasized that *kamma* was not the sole factor in shaping one's destiny; other conditional factors also played a role.

Over time, Buddhist traditions refined and expanded their interpretations of *kamma* and rebirth. In the *Theravāda* tradition, the emphasis remained on individual responsibility for one's actions, with a strong connection between ethical conduct (*puñña* and *pāpa*) and future rebirths. *Mahāyāna* schools introduced the concept of collective *karma* and the bodhisattva ideal, suggesting that enlightened beings could influence the *karma* of others for their benefit.

Later developments also saw the rise of practices like *pattidāna* (merit transfer) and *pattānumodanā* (rejoicing in others' merits), which allowed for a more communal understanding of *karma*. These ideas provided a means for lay followers to engage in spiritual practices by dedicating merit to deceased relatives or other beings, reinforcing the interconnected nature of karmic consequences.

While early Buddhism focused on personal liberation through the cessation of *karma*, later traditions integrated more elaborate cosmological views, including different realms of rebirth and intermediate states. Despite these variations, the core principle remained consistent: actions have consequences, and liberation is achieved by transcending the cycle of rebirth through wisdom and ethical practice (Welimadagama 83-115).

Conclusion

The doctrines of *kamma* (*karma*) and rebirth are central to early *Theravāda* Buddhist thought, shaping ethical conduct, spiritual development, and the understanding of existence. The intricate relationship between *kamma* and rebirth has been a subject of philosophical inquiry, particularly concerning the mechanisms by which moral actions influence future lives.

From the teachings on *Sīla* (moral precepts) to the broader framework of *Sammā Kammanta* (Right Action) in the Noble Eightfold Path, it is evident that actions driven by wholesome intentions lead to favorable rebirths. In contrast, unwholesome deeds result in suffering and lower realms of existence. The Five Precepts (*Pañcasīla*) serve as ethical guidelines that reinforce the karmic law, ensuring harmony in this life while determining the conditions of future rebirths. Each precept carries significant karmic consequences, reinforcing the belief that moral integrity leads to prosperity and enlightenment while transgressions result in misfortune and lower states of existence.

Philosophically, early *Theravāda* Buddhism contemplates whether *kamma* operates in a deterministic or probabilistic manner. While some interpretations

suggest a strict cause-and-effect relationship between actions and rebirth, the Buddha emphasized the complexity of *kamma*, allowing room for transformation through mindful conduct, wisdom, and meditation. The ultimate goal in *Theravāda* Buddhism is not merely to attain a favorable rebirth but to transcend the cycle of *samsāra* through the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*), ethical discipline (*sīla*), and mental concentration (*samādhi*), leading to *Nibbāna* (liberation).

Past actions shape rebirth. Individuals are not bound by fate but possess the capacity to purify their *karma* and break free from the cycle of suffering through ethical living and spiritual cultivation. Thus, the *Theravāda* perspective on *karma* and rebirth is a moral doctrine and a path to ultimate liberation.

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