

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 83

Heredity Beyond Materiality
And
Causality and
Moral Responsibility

Two Essays by
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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY



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Materiality
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Responsibility**

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Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

Bodhi Leaves No. 83

First published: 1979

BPS Online Edition © (2014)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS and Access to Insight Transcription Project

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Heredity Beyond Materiality

Why Heredity Fails to Explain Disproportions in Human Life

In formulating the basis of heredity, biology still falls short in providing the required scientific input to postulate a valid theory that can account for the disproportions in human life the world over. Why do intelligent parents beget mentally backward or retarded children? Why are some people favourably endowed with good health, while others are not? Why do some people live longer than others? Why do some people have charismatic qualities? Why are some people talented or even exceptionally gifted? Supportive evidence on which to base answers to these and similar items of inquiry—biological sciences have failed to provide either on the basis of heredity or of other genetic considerations.

According to biological interpretation of human reproduction, it is the meeting of the sperm cell of a

man with the egg cell of a woman under certain physiological and biochemical conditions that causes a germ of human life to arise in the womb. According to Buddhist thinking, no germ of human life can be planted, although the biological conditions are met, unless and until “re-linking” consciousness activates the fusion. While Buddhism declares that re-linking consciousness is a vitally necessary factor to impel causal continuance through the reproductive cycle, biological thinking does not give any recognition for such a participatory factor as being fundamentally associated in the genetic process.

The Buddha teaches that consciousness is the basic cause and condition of both mind and corporeality. Briefly and simply, how is consciousness and re-linking consciousness to be contextually understood? In as much as heat, light, sound, magnetism and electricity are forms of physical energy manifesting in phenomenal activity, likewise consciousness or awareness, perception or recognition, sensation or feeling, and volition or the mental construct of willing, are forms of mental energy that manifest in human activity.

The Buddha teaches that mental energy reciprocally conditions physical energy. So, mental energy is associated with, and not dissociated from, physical energy. This dualism continues throughout relative,

conditioned or causal existence that is commonly understood as life. Physical energy is present in the human body as heat or radiant energy and motion. In as much as physical energy is inherently a tremendous force impelling its continuity through a causal process of renewal, becoming or change, so also consciousness which is mental energy, is a tremendous force that impels its continuity or onward drive through a cyclic process of change.

The Buddha teaches that a salient characteristic of all forms of energy, both mental and physical, is their continuity through a pattern of momentary arising-ceasing-arising. This means that a quantum of energy, be it physical or mental, arises to serve its purpose which is renewal or becoming, then decays and dies. The arising moment conditions its cessation, while the ceasing moment conditions the origination of the next. Hence, a cycle of cause-effect-cause sustains where one event is neither identical with, nor different from the other. The past moment conditions the arising of the present moment, the present moment conditions the arising of the future moment. The present is not the past but the important fact is that the present is not exclusive of the past. The future will neither be the past nor present, yet neither will be exclusive of them. The past, present and future are causally linked as a differentiated, yet not entirely different, continuum.

Since the present moment arises in dependence of the past moment in strict causal consistency, and since the present moment is neither the past moment nor extraneous of it, no thought or unit of mental energy can make a causally unrelated, disjointed or an incongruous leap. All units of mental and physical energy have a dependent nature. The present thought-moment has its roots in the past—strong or weak roots—and for its part, the present moment conditions, more or less, the succeeding one. Though the present is not the past, the present is not extraneous to the past. The future will neither be the past nor the present, nor unrelated to them. What is of momentous significance is that elements of the past continue to have effect on the present, and thence project into forward time or future. Accordingly, a diversified yet unbroken causal continuity is sustained. Since each person through his or her own efforts and right understanding can ethically change the present moment to be wholesome to a degree, volition or the mental construct of willing is of profound significance in human life.

The Buddha declares and elaborates that ethically relevant volition is karma (*kamma*). As every intentional action is linked to a thought that impels such action, and as the thought is of each person's own making and designing, each person alone

determines the nature of the onward course of life into futurity, for better or worse, on the basis of his or her own volitional input. The cause-effect-cause pattern of continuity, where one event is neither identical with, nor different from, the other is an operating principle of the conditioned or relative world. The Buddha's formulation and exposition of the principle of dependent origination, or relativity, is central to Buddhism.

This universal principle of causation governing our world of relativity is inescapably binding on life and existential continuity. The nature of the antecedent conditioned psychophysical cause has a bearing on the successive effect. Viewed in such a perspective, it will be seen that the past is not intrinsically dead so as to be altogether absent in the "now-ness" of the present moment.

The units of psychophysical energy conditioned by the past and interacting in succession with the present, unerringly projecting causal consistency into futurity, shape man's future, not randomly, accidentally, by chance, fate or destiny, nor by divine programming or theistic will, but on the basis of cause-effect-cause where one event is neither identical with, nor different from the other. The series has no starting position, nor a first beginning that can be related to the space-time-motion continuum as an absolute origin. In as much as

in the present existence the psychophysical units of energy momentarily arise-cease-arise to sustain life or causal continuance, so also the last moment of their interaction in the present corporeal structure that is taken as death in Buddhism, conditions the arising of the first unit of psychophysical energy in the corporeal successor at the new birth.

In as much as in the present existence, there is no substantial bonding of the units of energy from moment to moment or from cause to effect to cause, likewise there is no transmigrating quantum of substantiality from the present life to the successor that can be called an immutable residue or an absolute substrate and which can ultimately be identified as a "self" or "soul". The Buddha declares that matter and energy as well as all elements of conditioned existence ultimately reduce to a voidness of identity or to a voidness of permanent characteristics. The final quantum of the conditioned energy of the present form or life, because of its re-linking force gathered and strengthened by volition or karma, is therefore causally drawn to a womb relative to its charged affinity and where it can best develop and continue. Although man and woman mate under physiological and biochemical conditions, still re-linking consciousness or mental energy must enter the womb to cause to arise the fruitful union of cells in order to

impel causal continuity. Then, and only then, can a new life begin, grow and continue.

A query pertaining to cloning and “test-tube” babies can now arise. Up to this time no successful cloning has been done. So there is no need to venture into hypothetical considerations. Also, no baby has been produced in a test-tube. What has been done is that the sperm cell and the egg cell have been fertilized or united in an artificial setting and the resulting product has been implanted in a human womb. A baby was then born. This experiment in no way invalidates the Buddhist contention that re-linking consciousness is a vital ingredient. Wherever the conditioning genetic factors are present in the right environmental conditions, the re-linking psychophysical force can enter, mould and sustain causal continuity. Although the children come through the sexual association of man and woman, yet they do not belong to either of them because re-linking consciousness does not come through either of them. So, on the basis of genes and chromosomes that are inherited from parents, biology cannot give a satisfactory interpretation to explain the disproportions in human life.

It is each person’s own volitional activity, or karma, conditioning the stream of consciousness and causing the arising of its particular affinity, that shapes the future pattern for good or ill. In the investigative

pursuit to understand the wider basis for the inequalities in human life, the correlations of cause-effect constituting the doctrine of karma in Buddhism can fruitfully augment biological thinking by supplying factors biology does not take into cognizance.

The Cycle of Cause-Effect-Cause (kamma-vipāka-kamma) and Moral Responsibility

It is necessary to mention that Buddhism is the only body of knowledge which reduces and relates the bodily and mental processes to a dynamic flow of psychophysical energy. It is neither possible nor necessary here [\[1\]](#) to go into the detailed significance of psychophysical dynamics which the Buddha

expounds. According to Buddhism, the causal process identified as life relates to a continual interaction of mental and physical energy. The Buddha teaches that all forms of energy, be they mental or physical, momentarily arise-cease-arise to constitute a flux of becoming. Every moment of becoming triggers the arising of the immediately next moment so as to sustain a cycle of cause-effect-cause. Arising conditions cessation while cessation conditions arising. There is therefore change. Change is a manifesting factor in every causal process. Our world of relativity is a world of change. It is through change that causal continuity is maintained. The past moment conditions the arising of the present moment, while the present moment conditions the arising of the future moment (though, of course, the immediately preceding moment is not the only condition operative in a given situation). Past, present and future sustain a differentiated yet not entirely different causal continuum. As long as the causal process of the momentary arising-ceasing-arising of the units of psychophysical energy goes on in what is identified as the present corporeal structure or body, life exists to constitute a human being.

The cessation of the interaction is understood as death in Buddhism. Death is not a mystery in Buddhism. The last or final quantum of

psychophysical energy of the present existence or form conditions the arising of the first unit of psychophysical energy in the next existence which is commonly called rebirth. There is a linkage of birth-death-birth. Because of the linkage of the energy flow from the present to the next corporeal successor, the recall of prior lives is potentially possible. It is defilements of mind that gather the nutriment or motive force to impel existential continuity on the basic cause-effect-cause. The effect is not the cause nor extraneous to it. The extinction of mind's impurities cutting off the nutriment or fuel result in release or liberation from causal bondage. Mind with defilements is charged with the force to impel continuance from one life to another. Defilements of mind and causal continuity bring us to the fold of moral responsibility and the doctrine of karma in Buddhism.

The doctrine of karma expounded in Buddhism relates totally and directly to the Buddha's penetration of the veil of ignorance and with it the realization of the highest knowledge. The operations of karma as understood in Buddhism have therefore no bearing on any pre-Buddhist religious thought or on any other Indian tradition. References to survival and karma are absent in the Vedas, merely hinted at in the Brāhmaṇas, while early Upanishads express several

views, some of which clearly reject the rebirth theme. In Buddhist thought, the technical meaning of the Pali word, *kamma*, or the Sanskrit karma, denotes volitional or intentional action. It is the willed thought that triggers the action. One conditions the other. The Buddha discovered the principle of Dependent Origination, related existential continuity to causal factors and then propounded the doctrine of karma. The doctrine of karma in Buddhism does neither support strict determinism nor complete indeterminism. Between these extreme standpoints, the Buddha taught the Middle Way. On the one hand, the Buddha saw that the causal process of life is not subject to any overriding divine design and control while, on the other hand, he saw that life follows a consistent pattern of causality.

The Buddha's investigative conclusion is that man is a product self-forged in the thought-foundry of man's own creation. So, the Buddha identified volition, or the mental construct of willing, as karma. He therefore promulgated noble ethical values pertaining to moral responsibility in a setting where no such ethical criteria existed to guide human behaviour for human well-being. He did so out of compassion for mankind. Since human conduct unalterably relates to a state of mind, it is an ethically charged mental state that must be caused to arise so as to favourably condition

behaviour.

Thinking, which conditions actions, cannot be morally enriched for man's betterment without an ethical transformation of his nature or "character." The Buddha's emphasis on the ethical regeneration of man now falls into right focus. The ethical process leading to the reduction and final elimination of the roots of the defiling influxes assailing perception is woven into a methodology of mental development.

While mental purity culminates in liberation from all causation, mind with defilements is charged with the force to impel causal continuity. Though in the beginningless cycle of existence (*saṃsāra*) a single life appears insignificant in terms of time, yet the present existence which conditions the next in strict causal consistency is of momentous significance. While karma gathers the force needed for causal continuity by interacting with sensory contact, perception and consciousness, karma or volition also conditions the emerging pattern each existence takes for the better or worse. The Buddha teaches,

"All that we are is the result
of what we have thought;
we are founded on our thoughts...
Evil follows a person as the wheel
follows the hoof of the draught ox ...

Good accompanies a person
as his shadow that does not leave him.”

—Dhammapada

So, the reason and cause for the inequality among human beings, despite the fact of their being human, relate to human thoughts of a willed nature that may predominantly be good, neutral or bad in an ethical sense. Since each person’s volitional input, be it good, neutral or bad, conditions the present thought moment, and as the succeeding moment arises from the present moment, the energy flow projecting into futurity accordingly conditions man’s onward trajectory. What will be will not be through “chance,” nor through “fate” or “destiny,” but will be in relation to each person’s own thought currents. It is the proportion of good or bad in the mind that predominantly shapes the pattern of existential continuity.

Since futurity will have a causal or thought base because of its dependent origination from the present and since a person can condition the present moment for the ethically better, man’s position in the conditioned world is not one of hopelessness. In other words, there is no cause for fatalism because by ethically enriching the present thought-moment, the future thought-moment that will dependently arise

from the present, can be conditioned for the better. Every volitional action is linked to a thought that impels such action. Such an action does not just happen because the intent is a product of each person's own creation. Volition interacting with sensation or feelings gives rise to actions that may be words or deeds, or both. These overt manifestations can be ethically interpreted to relate to a wholesome, neutral or an unwholesome state of mind. The Buddha's emphasis being on the ethical refinement of thought so as to cause to arise an ethically favourable degree of human conduct, the priority then is to prevent the arising of an ethically unwholesome state of mind. This calls for sustained vigilance, effort and discipline. No moment can be left unguarded because danger often lurks just at the point where strength is assumed. Mind formulates thoughts from sensory input. Perception recognizes mind-formed ideas.

The degree of mental calmness or turbidity depends on the nature of ideas which each person alone causes to arise in his or her own mind. It is mind controlled by ethical strategy that is the bearer of happiness. The content and methodology set down by the Buddha to arrest mind's inclination to discursive thought or to arrest mind's fickleness demands individual participation. It is necessary for each person to discipline his or her own mind because no one else can

discipline another's mind in as much as one person eating food can never satisfy the hunger of another.

The operation of karma is only a certain aspect of causation. In the Majjhima Nikāya of the canonical corpus of the Theravada tradition, specific correlations between *kamma-vipāka*, or action-consequence, have been given. We have to confine this article to a certain quantitative limitation, so it is not possible to refer to the many correlations drawn. However, it is possible to refer to a few specific correlations given there. It is stated that those who harm, tease or are cruel to animals tend to be sickly, while those who show kindness to them would tend to be healthy; those who are irritable, angry, obnoxious and abuse others tend to be ugly, while others who are not so inclined would tend to be pretty; those who are envious or jealous of the wealth and success of others tend to lose respect, while others would tend to gain respect and honour; those who are not charitable tend to be without wealth, while those who are vain and haughty and do not respect those who should be respected, tend to be born into evil families....

Although generally valid inferences cannot be drawn on the basis of the foregoing correlations alone, yet it is a hard fact that the manifesting disproportions in human life are not "chance" or "accidental" occurrences in the course of the biological process.

Genetics, in formulating the basis of heredity, still fall short in knowing the real theory underlying determinants of good health, longevity, charismatic qualities, talents, aptitudes and temperaments. They are not uniformly spread out among all people despite the fact that all people are human. The Buddhist view is that man is a product of his own thoughts. Volitional actions are only a pointer to the degree of wholesomeness, neutrality or unwholesomeness of mind at a particular moment. It is not the bodily action itself that is good, neutral or bad, but the state of mind which wills the action. Since the elements of existence are not static, but in a state of becoming, thoughts equally arise-cease-arise in the general process of becoming. So, an evil state of mind can be overcome by a good state while, without sustained discipline, the latter can be soiled by the former. It is the overriding ethical factor influencing thoughts that is the criterion for human well-being.

Beings will be reborn in conformity with the nature of their volitional input. Although they will experience the results of their deeds sometime in the future, the effect of each deed cannot be isolated to relate to a single specific deed alone. To illustratively point out that it is not valid to make firm conclusions on the basis of generalizations, the Buddha draws the analogy of two portions of salt divided equally

between two vessels, one containing a lesser volume of water than the other—each will have different degrees of saltiness to the taste. Incorrect inferences create false views. It is possible for an evil-minded person through subsequent redeeming virtues to favourably condition his or her own thought-stream for the ethically better, so that the energy flow will be wholesomely charged to a degree. The karmically wholesome final thought-moment of the present existence on account of its creatively charged re-linking force will then be drawn to what is most in affinity with its relative nature so as to accordingly condition the arising of the first psycho-physical energy impulse in the new form in more favourable circumstances. Conversely, an unwholesome final thought-moment impels a downward course.

It is the development of calmness of mind that is of fundamental importance to human well-being. Since mind and body condition each other, tranquillity of mind has causally favourable bodily reactions. Very often it is toxic thought interacting with bodily processes that generates disease. Painful feelings or human misery then arise, not necessarily in the hereafter, but in the present life itself. When the Buddha declares, “Thought well guarded is the bearer of happiness,” there is profound meaning in the statement. It is the causes of evil karma that must be

rooted out by changing the basis of human motivation. Concepts of greed, hate and lust tainting and agitating the mind must be eradicated by recourse to the disciplinary methodology set out in the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, for instance its factors Right Effort, Right Thought and Right Understanding. The operations of karma are so complex that they are incomprehensible except to the knowledge of a Buddha. Even with regard to the universe, while the Buddha could observe endless galactic systems constituting the world of relativity, Anuruddha, the Buddha's disciple and specialist in clairvoyance, could only see a single galaxy.

Perceiving the intricacies and implications of universal causation, the Buddha concludes that human beings are founded on their own cumulative mental constructs. He accordingly declares, "All phenomena have mind as their forerunner, mind is their chief; they are mind-formed." This is the opening line of the *Dhammapada* which can be taken as the condensed Buddhist "Bible." As people have a causal linkage to the indeterminate past, and as their past has conditioned their present, so will their present condition their future. Human beings can in no way be dissociated, now and in the future, for better or worse, from their own volitional input. The Buddha, therefore, exhorts the multitudes to commence to live

by the ethical values of the teaching as a priority subordinate to no other.

One consequence of the law of karma is that it is futile to seek personal happiness at the expense of others. Hence the doctrine of karma inculcates a strong feeling of responsibility as to the effect of one's actions on the welfare of other living beings. Moral responsibility that favourably conditions human behaviour, ethically elevates and strengthens "character" for each person's betterment now and in the future.

A single life in *saṃsāra*, or in the cycle of birth-death-birth, when related to the sustaining pattern of causal continuity provides the motivation for developing loving-kindness towards the world rather than for despising the world. There is no valid reason for hatred, but there are valid reasons for radiating thoughts of loving-kindness. And the understanding of moral causation is one of these reasons.

Notes

1. In a forthcoming book on Buddhism, the writer will among other aspects present the deeper significance of the energy principle expounded by the Buddha. [\[Back\]](#)

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