



THE ROLE OF KARMA IN THAI SOCIETY: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Jaras Leeka

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Author Corresponding Email: jarasleeka@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolving interpretations of karma in Thai Buddhism, highlighting its traditional role as a guiding principle for moral causality and its adaptation in response to modern societal issues. Traditionally, karma has been viewed as a personal system of ethical cause and effect, deeply influencing social behavior and practices like merit-making. However, contemporary debates challenge this view, addressing the ethical implications of karma in perpetuating social inequality, gender bias, and political passivity. Progressive movements, including socially engaged Buddhism, have reinterpreted karma to emphasize collective responsibility and social justice. This study examines how these new interpretations offer a more dynamic and socially conscious framework, ensuring that karma remains relevant in guiding both individual actions and broader societal changes in the modern world.

Keywords: Karma, Thai Buddhism, Merit-making, Socially Engaged Buddhism, Moral Causality, Social Justice, Collective Responsibility

1.Introduction

In Theravada Buddhism, karma (kamma in Pali) is a central philosophical and ethical concept that refers to the law of moral causality. It posits that intentional actions—whether good, bad, or neutral—generate corresponding consequences, either in this life or in future lives. The fundamental principle of karma holds that every action leads to a result, creating a cycle of cause and effect that determines the quality of an individual's present and future experiences, including rebirth. Karma is understood as both personal and universal, playing a pivotal role in the cycle of samsara (the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), with the ultimate goal of liberation from this cycle through enlightenment (nirvana) (Harvey, 2013). In Thai Buddhism, deeply rooted in Theravada traditions, karma influences not only



individual morality but also societal expectations and values, as individuals strive to accumulate good karma through ethical conduct and merit-making activities.

Karma significantly shapes moral and ethical behavior in Thai society, serving as a guiding principle for both personal actions and communal life. The belief that every action has consequences creates a moral framework within which individuals are encouraged to live virtuously, adhering to Buddhist precepts such as *sila* (moral conduct) and *dana* (generosity). The concept of karma also informs social practices, particularly through merit-making (*tham bun*), where acts of generosity, such as offering alms to monks, are believed to accumulate positive karma. This reinforces not only religious devotion but also social cohesion, as people engage in merit-making for the benefit of themselves, their families, and the wider community. In this way, karma acts as both a personal and collective motivator for ethical behavior, promoting values like compassion, responsibility, and non-harm in Thai cultural and religious life (Keown, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to explore both the traditional and contemporary interpretations of karma in Thai Buddhism, highlighting key debates and shifts in understanding over time. While karma remains a foundational concept in Thai Buddhist thought, modern interpretations have emerged, influenced by factors such as globalization, social change, and political contexts. The paper will examine how karma is understood in its classical form, how it is applied in the modern Thai socio-political landscape, and the philosophical debates that have arisen regarding its ethical implications. Specific objectives include: (1) analyzing the traditional understanding of karma within the framework of Theravada Buddhism and its influence on Thai religious practices; (2) exploring contemporary interpretations of karma in Thai society, including its role in addressing modern ethical dilemmas and social justice issues; (3) discussing critiques of karma, particularly in relation to social inequality, gender, and political power; (4) investigating the influence of merit-making and economic practices on the concept of karma in contemporary Thailand.

2. Traditional Understanding of Karma in Thai Buddhism

2.1. The Origins of Karma in Buddhist Scriptures (Pali Canon)

The concept of karma has its roots in the early teachings of the Buddha, as recorded in the Pali Canon, the primary scriptural source for Theravada Buddhism. In the canonical texts, karma is explained as a law of moral causality, where intentional actions (whether mental, verbal, or physical) lead to corresponding results. The Buddha emphasized that karma operates across lifetimes, influencing the conditions of both the present life and future rebirths. The *Dhammapada* and *Majjhima Nikaya*, key sections of the Pali Canon, often discuss the importance of ethical behavior and the consequences of one's actions in shaping the cycle of *samsara*.



(Gombrich, 2009). These texts lay the foundation for understanding karma not as a form of predestination, but as a flexible system where individuals can influence their future through mindful, ethical conduct.

2.2. Karma as Moral Causality: The Relationship Between Actions and Consequences

In traditional Thai Buddhism, karma is viewed as a direct application of moral causality, where positive actions yield beneficial outcomes and negative actions bring about suffering. This causal relationship is central to the moral code practiced by Thai Buddhists. Good karma (kusala kamma) is accumulated through acts of generosity, ethical behavior, and meditation, while bad karma (akusala kamma) results from harmful or unethical actions such as theft, dishonesty, or violence (Collins, 1998). The intricate nature of karma means that even small actions can have significant long-term consequences, affecting both the individual and those around them. The concept of karma as moral causality emphasizes personal responsibility, suggesting that one's present circumstances are shaped by past actions, while future experiences will be determined by current ethical choices.

2.3. Karma and Rebirth: How Past Lives and Future Rebirths Are Influenced by Karmic Actions

Karma is inextricably linked with the Buddhist belief in rebirth, which posits that the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is governed by the cumulative effects of an individual's karma. Thai Buddhists believe that the quality of one's rebirth—whether as a human, animal, or being in higher realms—depends on the karma accumulated in past lives. The ultimate goal is to escape the cycle of samsara and achieve nirvana, a state of liberation from suffering, through the purification of karma (Rahula, 1974). Karma determines not only the existential condition of future lives but also the circumstances of one's current life, such as wealth, health, and social status. This belief provides an ethical framework within which individuals strive to act morally, knowing that their actions have long-term spiritual repercussions beyond the present life.

2.4. The Role of Merit-Making (Tham Bun) in Accumulating Good Karma in Thai Buddhist Practice

In Thai Buddhism, merit-making (tham bun) is a key practice that directly contributes to the accumulation of good karma. Merit-making involves acts of generosity, often directed toward monks or temples, such as offering alms, donating to religious causes, and participating in community rituals. These actions are believed to generate positive karma, which benefits both the individual performing the act and their loved ones. Merit can be transferred to others, particularly deceased relatives,



helping to improve their karmic condition in future lives (Terweil, 1979). Merit-making reinforces the communal aspect of Thai Buddhism, where spiritual practice is closely tied to social and familial obligations. This practice not only strengthens one's karmic standing but also fosters social harmony and reinforces cultural values of generosity and interconnectedness.

3. Contemporary Interpretations of Karma in Thai Society

3.1. Modern Ethical Debates: Karma in the Context of Social Justice and Inequality

In contemporary Thai society, the traditional understanding of karma is increasingly being debated in the context of modern ethical concerns, particularly around issues of social justice and inequality. Karma, historically understood as an individual's responsibility for their own fate, has sometimes been used to justify existing social hierarchies and inequalities, implying that wealth, poverty, or suffering are the result of past karmic actions. However, modern ethical debates challenge this view, arguing that such interpretations can perpetuate social inequality and hinder efforts to address structural injustices. Progressive Buddhist thinkers in Thailand argue for a reinterpretation of karma that acknowledges the role of social conditions and collective responsibility in shaping individual lives, emphasizing compassion and activism as key components of ethical conduct (Harris, 2001).

3.2. Karma and the Socio-Political Landscape: Reinterpreting Karma in Times of Political Conflict

Karma's role in the socio-political landscape of Thailand has become increasingly prominent, particularly during times of political conflict. In periods of political upheaval, such as the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt protests, karma has been invoked to explain or justify political events, with different groups attributing political successes or failures to the karmic legacy of leaders and their supporters. These reinterpretations of karma have often reflected the polarized nature of Thai politics, with various factions using religious concepts to legitimize their actions or undermine their opponents. This intersection of karma and politics has led to calls for a more nuanced understanding of karma that reflects the complexity of socio-political factors rather than a simplistic attribution of moral or karmic blame (Jackson, 2013).

3.3. Individual vs. Collective Karma: Shifting Perspectives on Personal Responsibility and Societal Impact

Traditionally, karma has been understood as primarily an individual process, with personal actions determining one's future experiences. However, there is a growing discussion around the idea of collective karma, where the actions of



communities or nations are seen as contributing to shared outcomes. In Thailand, this shift is partly a response to global issues such as environmental degradation, economic disparity, and political unrest, where individuals are increasingly aware of how collective actions shape societal conditions. Contemporary interpretations of karma in Thai Buddhism are expanding to include notions of social responsibility, encouraging a more communal approach to addressing ethical and environmental challenges. This shift reflects a broader trend in Buddhist modernism, where the focus on individual karma is balanced with a recognition of collective moral responsibilities (Queen, 2000).

3.4. The Influence of Globalization and Western Thought on Modern Interpretations of Karma

Globalization and the introduction of Western philosophical ideas have also influenced modern interpretations of karma in Thailand. As Thailand has become more integrated into the global economy and exposed to diverse intellectual traditions, there has been a noticeable shift in how karma is understood, particularly among younger generations. Western concepts such as human rights, equality, and social justice are increasingly being integrated into traditional Buddhist understandings of karma, leading to new interpretations that emphasize social activism, ethical reform, and global responsibility. Additionally, the global spread of mindfulness practices and secular Buddhism has led to a reinterpretation of karma that focuses less on metaphysical consequences in future lives and more on the immediate psychological and social impact of ethical actions in this life (Lopez, 2002). These changes reflect a dynamic interaction between traditional Thai Buddhist beliefs and global philosophical trends.

4. Karma, Merit-Making, and Economic Practices in Thailand

4.1. The Relationship Between Karma and the Thai Economy: Merit-Making as an Economic Activity

In Thailand, merit-making (tham bun) is deeply intertwined with both religious and economic practices. The act of merit-making, which is believed to generate positive karma, often involves monetary donations to temples, monks, and various religious causes. This has given rise to a unique intersection between spiritual practice and economic activity, where merit-making becomes a key driver in local economies, especially in rural areas where temples serve as cultural and economic hubs (Pattana, 2012). Temples rely on donations from the community to fund religious ceremonies, maintain infrastructure, and support the livelihoods of monks. Consequently, economic exchange in the form of merit-making has become a socially accepted way



for individuals to seek karmic benefits, reinforcing both religious and economic structures in Thai society (Keyes, 1987).

4.2. Commercialization of Karma: The Rise of Merit-Making Businesses and Their Ethical Implications

The commercialization of karma has emerged as a notable trend in contemporary Thailand, with an increasing number of businesses offering merit-making services for profit. From pre-packaged alms offerings to temple tours designed specifically for the purpose of accumulating merit, the commodification of religious practices has raised ethical concerns among scholars and religious leaders alike. Some critics argue that the commercialization of karma undermines the spiritual authenticity of merit-making, reducing it to a transactional exchange rather than a sincere act of generosity (Suksamran, 1993). This shift raises questions about the spiritual efficacy of merit obtained through commodified means and whether such practices dilute the traditional understanding of karma as rooted in genuine moral intent.

4.3. Charity, Wealth, and Karma: Debates on the Role of Donations and Wealth in Karmic Accumulation

The relationship between wealth, charity, and karma has been a subject of ongoing debate in Thai society. In traditional interpretations of karma, generosity (dana) is one of the most effective ways to accumulate merit, and those with greater wealth often have more opportunities to give. This has led to a perception that wealth can directly influence one's karmic standing, with large donations to temples or charitable causes seen as a way to secure favorable rebirths (Swearer, 1995). However, this view has been critiqued for reinforcing social inequalities, as it suggests that those with financial means have a greater capacity for moral and spiritual advancement. Some contemporary Buddhist scholars and social critics argue for a more nuanced understanding of merit, one that emphasizes the ethical intent behind the donation rather than the monetary value, thereby challenging the materialistic interpretations of karma in Thai society (Pattana, 2012).

5. Critiques and Debates on the Role of Karma in Thai Buddhism

5.1. Criticism of the Deterministic View of Karma: Does Karma Perpetuate Fatalism in Thai Society?

One of the major critiques of the traditional understanding of karma in Thai Buddhism is its perceived deterministic nature, which can lead to fatalism. Critics argue that the belief in karma as a strict cause-and-effect system may foster resignation



to one's circumstances, particularly in cases of poverty or suffering. This deterministic view suggests that individuals' current life conditions are entirely the result of their past actions, potentially discouraging efforts to improve one's situation in the present (Mills, 1995). Such fatalism, critics argue, undermines social and personal agency by reinforcing a sense of inevitability about hardship, thus reducing the incentive for social activism or structural change. This has prompted a growing debate among scholars and reformers who advocate for a more dynamic interpretation of karma that emphasizes moral agency and the potential for transformation through ethical action.

5.2. Ethical Challenges: The Use of Karma to Justify Social Inequality or Suffering

Another significant critique of karma in Thai society is its potential misuse to justify social inequality and suffering. The idea that one's socioeconomic status or personal hardships are karmically determined has sometimes been used to explain away structural injustices, such as poverty, caste discrimination, or limited access to resources (Keown, 1996). This interpretation of karma can be weaponized to argue that individuals suffering in poverty or marginalized positions are merely reaping the results of their past actions, thus deflecting attention from the systemic causes of inequality. This raises ethical concerns about how religious beliefs can be employed to maintain social hierarchies, rather than challenge them. Contemporary Buddhist reformers in Thailand are increasingly calling for reinterpretations of karma that acknowledge social and economic contexts, encouraging a focus on compassion, social justice, and collective responsibility (Pattana, 2012).

5.3. Feminist Perspectives: Gender and Karma in Thai Buddhism

Feminist scholars in Thailand have critiqued traditional interpretations of karma for perpetuating gender biases within both religious and social structures. Historically, karma has been invoked to explain women's subordinate roles, suggesting that women's lower social status or limited access to religious leadership is a result of past karmic actions. In this framework, women's suffering is often viewed as karmic retribution for their actions in previous lives, reinforcing a passive acceptance of patriarchal norms (Gross, 1993). Feminist critiques challenge these interpretations by advocating for a more egalitarian view of karma, one that does not justify gender-based discrimination. These perspectives argue for greater inclusion of women in religious practices, leadership roles, and interpretations of Buddhist doctrine, emphasizing that ethical behavior and spiritual progress should not be confined by gender (Schroeder, 2004).

5.4. Reinterpretation of Karma Through Progressive Buddhist Movements: Socially Engaged Buddhism in Thailand



Socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand offers a reinterpretation of karma that shifts focus from individual moral responsibility to collective social action. Figures like Sulak Sivaraksa have been instrumental in rethinking karma as a tool for social change rather than personal moral reckoning. This movement encourages Buddhists to address the structural causes of suffering, including economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and political oppression, arguing that karma is not only about individual actions but also about collective societal responsibility (Sivaraksa, 2005). In this progressive reinterpretation, karma becomes a call for ethical activism, where Buddhists are urged to engage in compassionate action for the betterment of society as a whole. This shift represents a departure from more traditional, passive interpretations of karma, promoting a form of Buddhism that is active, engaged, and responsive to the modern world.

6. Karma and Popular Culture in Thailand

6.1. Representations of Karma in Thai Media, Film, and Literature

Karma is a recurring theme in Thai media, film, and literature, where it is often portrayed as a moral framework governing the fate of characters based on their actions. In Thai films and television dramas, for instance, characters who commit immoral acts frequently face negative consequences, while those who act with virtue are rewarded, reflecting the traditional understanding of karma as moral causality. Popular shows and movies often dramatize the effects of karma in a way that resonates with audiences' religious beliefs, reinforcing the notion that ethical behavior leads to positive outcomes, both in this life and in the afterlife (Tejapira, 2001). In literature, authors explore karma through the lens of personal and social struggles, often highlighting the tension between individual choices and the inevitable consequences they bring. These representations help to sustain the relevance of karma in modern Thai consciousness, connecting traditional religious concepts to contemporary issues (Wright, 2017).

6.2. The Role of Karma in Shaping Public Behavior: Superstition vs. Philosophical Understanding

In everyday life, karma plays a significant role in shaping public behavior in Thailand, with people often attributing both good and bad fortune to past actions. However, this understanding can sometimes blur the lines between philosophical interpretations of karma and more superstitious practices. For many Thais, karma is not only a moral principle but also part of a broader belief system that includes ideas about fate, destiny, and supernatural influence. This has led to practices such as making offerings at temples to reverse bad karma or engaging in rituals to improve one's karmic standing (Mulder, 2000). While these practices maintain a connection to



the traditional Buddhist notion of karma, they also reflect a popularized version that leans more towards superstition than philosophical reflection. This blending of karma with superstition raises questions about the depth of public understanding of Buddhist teachings and whether karma is being used to justify behaviors that diverge from the original ethical intent of the concept (Jackson, 2003).

6.3. Karma and Modern Spirituality: The Rise of Alternative Spiritual Practices and Their Relationship to Traditional Concepts of Karma

In recent years, alternative spiritual practices have gained popularity in Thailand, often incorporating or reinterpreting the concept of karma within their frameworks. Practices such as astrology, fortune-telling, and spirit mediumship frequently reference karma, offering individuals ways to understand or influence their karmic destiny through non-traditional means (Pattana, 2012). This rise of alternative spirituality reflects a broader trend of modernization, where traditional religious concepts like karma are adapted to fit the needs of a rapidly changing society. Many of these practices promise to help individuals mitigate negative karma or accelerate the accumulation of merit, blending Buddhist philosophy with New Age spiritualities (Taylor, 2008). The commercialization of these practices, such as paying for karmic "cleansing" or merit-boosting services, highlights the evolving nature of karma in modern Thai spirituality, where it is increasingly seen as something that can be manipulated or controlled through alternative means, rather than solely through ethical living and Buddhist practice.

7. The Future of Karma in Thai Buddhism: Philosophical Perspectives

7.1. Adapting Ancient Concepts for Modern Times: Future Directions for the Interpretation of Karma

As Thai society evolves, the interpretation of karma must adapt to meet the needs of contemporary life. Traditional views of karma, rooted in ancient teachings, are being reexamined to accommodate the complexities of modern Thai society, where rapid urbanization, technological advancement, and global influences are shaping everyday experiences. Some Buddhist thinkers are advocating for a reinterpretation of karma that emphasizes ethical flexibility and adaptability, focusing more on present actions and less on the deterministic consequences of past actions. This modern interpretation encourages individuals to take control of their moral destinies by emphasizing conscious ethical choices in the here and now, rather than focusing on past karma (Swearer, 2010). The future of karma in Thai Buddhism may involve a more dynamic understanding of moral causality, where individuals are empowered to influence their outcomes through proactive ethical engagement.



7.2. Karma and Ethics in an Increasingly Interconnected, Globalized World

In an increasingly globalized world, the ethical implications of karma are being reconsidered through the lens of interconnectedness and collective responsibility. Traditional views of karma as an individual process are being expanded to encompass global ethical concerns such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and human rights. Thai Buddhism, in this context, can offer valuable insights into how karma can inform global ethical practices, particularly in promoting compassion, non-harm, and interconnectedness among all beings (King, 2009). As Thailand engages more with international communities, both secular and religious, the interpretation of karma will likely continue to evolve to address global challenges, highlighting the need for collective ethical responsibility in addressing the consequences of collective actions.

7.3. The Role of Education and Monastic Discourse in Shaping Contemporary Views of Karma

Education, both secular and religious, plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary views of karma in Thai Buddhism. Monastic education has traditionally emphasized karma as a moral framework for understanding ethical behavior, but there is a growing call for education systems to incorporate more critical and progressive perspectives on karma. Monks and educators alike are rethinking how karma is taught, aiming to balance traditional teachings with modern ethical considerations. Monastic discourse is also increasingly concerned with the practical implications of karma, focusing on how it can guide individuals in navigating contemporary moral dilemmas such as corruption, inequality, and environmental degradation (McDaniel, 2011). Through education, both in monasteries and schools, future generations of Thais will engage with karma in a way that aligns with both their cultural heritage and the ethical demands of modern life.

7.4. Balancing Tradition with Modernity: The Evolving Role of Karma in Thai Buddhism and Its Relevance for Future Generations

The challenge of balancing tradition with modernity is central to the future of karma in Thai Buddhism. As younger generations become more exposed to global ideas, secular ethics, and modern spiritual movements, the traditional understanding of karma must remain relevant and meaningful. The future of karma in Thai Buddhism may lie in its ability to evolve while maintaining its core philosophical principles. This could involve a renewed emphasis on personal responsibility, mindfulness, and moral integrity, while also incorporating modern concerns about social justice, environmental stewardship, and global citizenship (Sivaraksa, 2005). The relevance of karma for future generations will depend on its ability to inspire ethical living in a rapidly changing world, guiding both individual and collective actions toward a more just and compassionate society.



8. Conclusion

8.1. Summary of Key Debates and Perspectives on Karma in Thai Buddhism

Karma remains a foundational concept in Thai Buddhism, deeply influencing moral behavior and societal structures. However, contemporary debates highlight the complexities and evolving interpretations of karma in modern Thai society. Traditional views of karma as an individual moral causality are being challenged by critiques that question its role in perpetuating fatalism, justifying social inequality, and reinforcing gender biases. Modern perspectives, including feminist and socially engaged Buddhist movements, advocate for a reinterpretation of karma that emphasizes collective responsibility, social justice, and ethical action in addressing the moral dilemmas of today's world. These debates reflect the tension between maintaining religious tradition and adapting to the demands of modern life.

8.2. The Significance of Reinterpreting Karma to Address Contemporary Ethical and Social Issues

Reinterpreting karma in a way that addresses contemporary ethical and social issues is critical for maintaining the relevance of Thai Buddhism in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. A modern understanding of karma that emphasizes not only personal moral responsibility but also collective societal action can provide a framework for tackling global challenges such as poverty, environmental sustainability, and social justice. This shift towards a more dynamic and inclusive interpretation of karma allows Thai Buddhism to engage with the pressing issues of our time while preserving its philosophical and ethical roots.

8.3. Final Thoughts on the Continuing Evolution of Karma in Thai Philosophical and Religious Thought

As Thai society continues to modernize, the concept of karma will inevitably evolve, reflecting the changing social, political, and economic realities of the country. This evolution offers an opportunity for Thai Buddhism to deepen its engagement with contemporary moral issues while maintaining its spiritual and ethical foundations. Karma, as a flexible and adaptable philosophical tool, will continue to shape personal and collective ethical practices in Thai society. Its enduring relevance depends on its ability to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, providing a moral compass for both individual spiritual growth and societal development in the future.

8.4 Body of Knowledge

The body of knowledge surrounding karma in Thai Buddhism encompasses both its traditional role and its evolving interpretations in response to contemporary



issues. Traditionally, karma has been understood as a system of moral causality, where intentional actions—whether positive or negative—shape an individual's present life and future rebirths. This view has deeply influenced Thai social and religious practices, particularly through merit-making activities designed to accumulate positive karma for oneself and loved ones. However, as Thailand has modernized, scholars and religious leaders have reinterpreted karma to address ethical concerns such as social inequality, gender discrimination, and environmental responsibility. Socially engaged Buddhism, for example, promotes the idea of collective karma and emphasizes that ethical actions should not only benefit the individual but also contribute to the well-being of society. This contemporary approach reflects a shift from viewing karma as solely an individual responsibility to recognizing the importance of collective moral agency in addressing global challenges. As a result, the concept of karma continues to evolve, remaining relevant in guiding both personal and societal ethics in modern Thai Buddhism.

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