

An Excerpt from “Karma and Chaos”

by
Paul R. Fleischman, M.D.
and
Forrest D. Fleischman

I. Science and Karma

This essay addresses one difficulty that is encountered by meditators who have roots in the scientific tradition, and who may be troubled by an apparent clash between science and ancient Oriental descriptions of reality. The goal of the essay is to build an intellectual bridge between world views, over which a few students may walk towards meditation practice with less conflict or confusion. The following pages do not contain a complete description of either science or of the Buddha’s teaching, but are intended to reveal passageways between the two through which a modern Western-based thinker can comfortably pass into a new world without feeling intellectually compromised.

The Buddha’s teaching is built upon an understanding of the phenomenon of karma. “*Karma*” is a Sanskrit term that is often used in English, but for purposes of this essay I will use “*kamma*,” the same word from the ancient Pāli language which the Buddha actually used in his speech.

The twelve-fold chain of causality, which the Buddha said was the essence of his realization, is predicated upon the existence of rebirth. *Kamma* is the causal mechanism underlying rebirth. Although there have been Western apologists for the Buddha’s teaching who have focused on his moral code and on his commitment to mindfulness in the current moment, and who have thereby tried to minimize the importance of *kamma* in the Buddha’s dispensation, the Buddha himself emphasized that the twelve-fold chain of causality, including rebirth, was the essence of his realization. He saw life as continuously and comprehensively lawful, a product of the ramification of action moving from life to life, across the barrier of death. Because all suffering is caused—often by deeds in past lives—it can also be eliminated when the cause is erased. Liberation from suffering, enlightenment, consists of understanding and acting upon the cause and effect relationship by which *kamma* leads to suffering or alleviates it.

To many Western students of meditation, *kamma*, with its implications for rebirth remains a fanciful and preposterous Orientalism to be disregarded. This attitude, however, alienates them from the heart of what the Buddha taught, and limits them to a surface understanding. Other Western students fully embrace *kamma* as the dogma of an orthodoxy in a self-gratifying, fairytale manner, that prevents the very inquiry into causality that the Buddha intended his teaching to evoke.

Kamma is a description of the origin of our personality—a unique conglomeration of forces, values, beliefs, predispositions, and reactions. These personality components were caused in the past, either within this life, or before, and they endure as ongoing traits. But they are not fixed. Through learning, effort, behavior and through insight based on meditation, the volition that underlies personality can change. Traditional Western psychology and *Kamma* are in agreement on this point. Classical Western personality theory certainly assigns a place to personality forces that antedate the environmental influences which begin to mold us at birth. These preexisting directives within personality are attributed to temperament and genetics. But the Buddha explained birth traits as deriving from choices and reactions in past lives. He built his future-oriented ethics on a version of causality continuing beyond this current life into a future life which will be molded by today’s thoughts, reactions, and actions. So a student of the Buddha’s

teaching seems compelled to either accept *kamma* and reject scientific psychology, or vice versa.

When *kamma* is denied, the world is seen as a mixture of causality and fate. Causality operates now: the environment conditions us, and we make choices that express us—but genetics is mere fate. In this viewpoint, causes that lie outside of our own volition make us who we are. We are stuck with a hand that has been dealt by some other force. We are understood as subject to luck. Although we have some power to change, and although our current life follows the laws of cause and effect, our birth does not follow those laws. It is an irony that this world view, which is often mislabeled scientific, is based on a serial suspension of causality. The effects of our actions are believed to commence at birth and cease at death; before and after, personality submerges into a fatalistic, a-causal universe. In this description of causality, personality breaches out of the a-causal unknown, then exists and acts for sixty or eighty years, and then disappears again entirely, without further consequence.

Another feature of a world view which denies *kamma* is that ethics become local and diminished. No doubt there are moral ramifications of my behavior for me during my life, but not before or after, since there is no before or after. Ethics may well be important but of quaint proportion compared to the magnitude of fate that located me where and as I am.

To avoid these conundrums, some meditation students accept the idea of *kamma* as an opinion to be absorbed along with silence and observation. *Kamma* believed as dogma creates a magical world view devoid of examination, in which every turn on the road is attributed to a past life. Self-responsibility, rather than augmented, is eliminated. In this world view, a passive, acquiescent self-romanticization occurs. "This is happening to me because of my past life" becomes an unexamined, universally applied explanation that undercuts the search for right understanding and right action here and now. A description of reality that the Buddha intended to diminish ego is used instead to spin self-serving yarns. Dogmatic believers in *kamma* make up stories about themselves that have no threads strung to any reality beyond self-flattery. They impute causality to an invisible private fantasy of the past, and cease to examine this current moment as the node in which our future is embryonically alive and kicking.

How can a person who is fully committed to and culturally rooted in scientific thought make sense out of a meditation practice that requires neither rejection of, nor blind faith in *kamma*, but which deepens from insight into both the validity and the ethical ramifications of it?

In fact, this apparent dilemma is not a product of Western rationality and science at odds with Indian mysticism. Actually, this conflict stems from shallow stereotypes of science. As scientific thought has progressed, and as its models of reality have deepened in complexity, Western and Eastern world views have merged. The recent development of chaos theory in science is an example of this.

Chaos theory, which describes complex realities as viewed by contemporary science, is a window through which the scientific enquirer can see the world in a manner similar to the Buddha. It helps to elucidate many principles of *kamma*. It represents an advance from the oversimplified descriptions of cause and effect, which predominated in nineteenth and early twentieth century science. Chaos theory extends and replaces images of causality based on the mechanical, linear model, which until recently was considered the essence of science.

The mechanical model of reality explained aspects of the world whose operation is analogous to the interlocking cause and effect of gross, visible connections. The classical exemplification of the mechanical model in science was the behavior of billiard balls. For example, the angle and force with which a white ball strikes a black one can be used to accurately predict the subsequent velocity and direction of the black ball. Notice, however, that this form of science occurs within a fixed and artificial frame, symbolized by the walls of the

pool table.

Since no one lives on a pool table, chaos theory is modern science's attempt to explain the total world we live in beyond fixed, artificial boundaries. It seems more applicable to natural phenomena like turbulence, weather, even personality. Chaos theory extends causal thinking into explanations more satisfying to the swirl of our existence than were the vectors of the artificial and limited world of billiards. The implication of chaos theory is that, in highly complex systems like the human being, causality operates in orchestrated, comprehensible ways that reveal coherence in the phenomenal world.

Previous scientific explanation, with its mechanical model of human life, posited a world of discontinuous causality. Death was viewed as a hiatus in the causal matrix of the world. It was as if the world were a lattice of events, each threaded to and pulling upon subsequent events, but the lattice had many ruptures, through which the new personality would crawl into life in this world, and through which it would ultimately dive out. This primitive, pseudo-scientific world view of the nineteenth and early twentieth century can be described as a theory of causality that is based upon discontinuous temporal and spacial segments of order, interspersed with randomness or caprice of the invisible. This is the world of the billiards game, where vectorial mathematics can predict the physical behavior of balls as long as they stay on the table but, if they go over the edge, they appear ruleless, bouncing around like crazy.

The Buddha taught, and chaos theory provides, another way to envision a world of unbroken causality without parenthesis or exception, based on an open-ended sense of time and space, and describing a world of variation and order governed by universal laws. This is the world of clouds and thoughts. An intellectual excursion through the world of chaos theory may provide some Western meditation students an intriguing tool to facilitate further depth in their practice. Of course, it should be kept in mind that chaos theory is a scientific enterprise and not a spiritual path to *nibbāna*.

[End of section one]