




Symposium: Lived Karma

Universal Karma

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Drawing on recent ethnographic research at a temple-based Buddhist charitable foundation in mainland China, this study joins recent scholarship that questions an understanding of karma as a solely individual soteriological enterprise. It shows how both volunteers and paid staff at the charitable foundation, many of whom were practicing Buddhists, focused on helping both people and other sentient beings as soteriological goals in their own right apart from a consideration of individual karmic benefit. Inspired by environmental awareness, this soteriological orientation saw the karmic fate of all beings as inextricably bound together, an orientation we can refer to as universal karma.

Keywords: karma; collective karma; soteriology; post-Mao China; charity work

IN June 2017, I gathered with staff from the Dafo Charitable Foundation (hereafter DCF), located on the grounds of the Dafo Temple in southeastern China, to hear about their recent activities. Meng Junjie, an enthusiastic staff member in his mid-twenties, described in excited detail a “releasing life” (*fangsheng* 放生) project in which the Foundation had recently been involved.¹ In coordination with a number of temples in the area, Foundation volunteers had released a mind-boggling 1.2 million fish guppies into a local lake. Meng explained how deeply moved he was that hundreds of local residents had gathered together to put into practice a “heart of compassion” (*cibei xin* 慈悲心) by saving so many fellow sentient beings from an untimely death at the hands of local consumers. When I wondered aloud whether releasing so many guppies at one time in one place might have a negative impact on the local ecosystem (see Shiu and Stokes 2008), Meng insisted that the Foundation’s project had, in fact, helped the environment by restoring depleted fish populations.

The Foundation’s emphasis on cultivating a heart of compassion to rescue other beings with whom they felt inextricably linked is illustrative of a soteriological orientation within modern Chinese Buddhism that we can refer to as *universal karma*. In this orientation, Buddhist practitioners are guided toward acts of compassion to other sentient beings *for the sentient beings’ own sake* rather than as a means of individual or collective merit-making. Like individual notions of karma, collective karma remains concerned with the consequences of all actions and how those consequences can extend not only through our present but also subsequent lifetimes. However, unlike individual karma or family-centered forms of collective karma, universal karma sees the actions of all beings as leading to karmic consequences that are, in turn, shared by all beings. Proponents of universal karma do not assume that one can escape the consequence of others’ actions merely through individual or small group acts of merit-making. While influenced by both secular humanist and Christian notions of universal good, universal karma remains deeply rooted in Buddhist understandings of dependent origination and the bodhisattva path. It also reflects experiences with and concerns about both the economic interdependence of social actors and the fragile ecology of our planet.

¹ To protect them from unwanted publicity, I have substituted the names of organizations and people from my own field research with pseudonyms. I have retained the real names of the Tzu Chi Foundation and Master Zhengyan, which are already in the public domain.



Unlike family-centered forms of collective karma which tend to reflect more “traditional” social influences, universal karma reflects the influence of secularism, modernity, and globalization. It is rooted in the modern revival of Buddhist-based charitable activities. As Weller, Huang, and Wu (2017: 96) point out in their recent multi-sited study of religion and charity in contemporary Chinese communities, Buddhist-inspired groups have participated in charitable work throughout China’s history. In pre-modern times, typical good works included building roads, bridges, and wells (see also Overmyer 1976: 112) and forming “inexhaustible storehouses” where staple foods like grain could be stockpiled for later distribution during periods of famine (Ch’en 1964: 265). The “releasing life” activities that remain prevalent among Chinese people today go back to at least the sixth century (Handlin-Smith 1999: 52–53). However, with the advent of modernity, Buddhist groups fell under criticism for focusing on ritual activities aimed primarily at improving practitioners’ fates in subsequent lifetimes (Pittman 2001: 28; Weller, Huang, and Wu 2017: 96). Facing this criticism, Buddhists responded with calls for a refocusing on this-worldly acts of compassion, seen most famously in the monk Taixu’s (1890–1947) framework of a “Buddhism for human life” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教) which included a call for monastics and laypersons to provide social services to the public (Pittman 2001: 102).

Most contemporary forms of Buddhist charity work take their inspiration from the activities of the Taiwanese-based Tzu Chi Foundation. Master Zhengyan, the founder of Tzu Chi, was inspired to start the organization in part after, as a young nun, she was criticized by three Roman Catholic nuns for the failure of Buddhists to take care of the poor and sick in this world in the way that the nuns themselves did (Jones 2009: 294). In recent years, Tzu Chi has become known among mainland Buddhists and now provides the central model for much of Buddhist-based charity work in mainland China. Lu Ping, the leader of the DCF, had been inspired to start the Foundation following her experience as a Tzu Chi volunteer in Shanghai.

Like many other Tzu Chi-influenced charitable foundations, the DCF focused mainly on poverty relief providing food, winter heating, clothing, and basic medical services for poorer populations, often rural migrants, in its city. It was also involved in educational development and elder care. Its project to “rescue” the guppies was a rare example of the Foundation’s foray into caring for non-human beings, but one that it had hoped to continue until the COVID pandemic made public gatherings more challenging. The Foundation employed a small number of paid staff, all of whom were college graduates under the age of thirty-five. They worked to create a highly structured and professional operation, making sure to liaise with local organizations, organize volunteer shifts, and design and update the Foundation’s social media pages. As part of state regulations, the Foundation volunteers were required to keep careful accounts of how much money they had raised and the number of people they had helped. More than simply fulfilling government requirements, however, these accounting practices provided the staff and volunteers with an inspiring feeling of the collective “love” (*ai* 爱) and “compassion” that they were spreading through their work as well as the connections they were making with other people and beings. Many of them had left higher-paying state- and private-sector jobs to work for the Foundation, which they viewed as more meaningful employment in that they were working to help others rather than simply to earn money and advance their own careers.

Many monastics and lay practitioners I have researched elsewhere in China over a two-decade period shared in common with staff and volunteers at the DCF a belief in the importance of spreading compassion to others. However, they placed a far greater emphasis on the earning of individual merit (*gongde* 功德) and helping others to understand the karmic consequences (*yinguo* 因果) of their own personal actions. One group, about whom I have written elsewhere (Fisher 2014: 169–200), drew on Maoist-era themes of serving the people to criticize those who focused on their own salvation at the expense of others; nevertheless, this group was exceptional. While nearly all practitioners criticized those who were motivated to help others solely out of personal gain, they were often quick to point out the karmic rewards of compassionate action. An exemplary

case comes from a middle-aged lay practitioner who lectured me on the benefits of volunteering at her local temple solely out of a heart of compassion for others, only to add moments later that the merit she had gained from her volunteerism had resolved a long-term heart problem that no doctor she had consulted had ever been able to fix. The Foundation staff and volunteers contrasted with these other Buddhists mostly on the basis of what they did *not* say: rarely, if ever, did they discuss the direct benefits of merit-making activities for those who participated in them. Helping others was important because the others one helped were themselves important; immersing oneself in charitable work enabled one to appreciate both one's connection with others and the importance of the shared fate of all sentient beings at a time of change and uncertainty. To be sure, there were a few volunteers, mostly over the age of fifty, who told me that individual merit was the main reason for their volunteerism, but the core staff and the monastic leaders, most of whom were under the age of 40, did not share this focus, a finding also reported by Weller, Wu, and Huang (2017: 98) in their research on a variety of Buddhist-based charity groups.

Given their absence of mention of merit and karmic consequence, it is worth asking to what extent the volunteers and staff at the DCF were Buddhist at all in their practice and outlook. Indeed, their emphasis on personal fulfillment through volunteer work and connecting with others parallels other studies of non-Buddhist based volunteers particularly those born after the 1980s (Rolandsen 2008; Fleischer 2011; Sum 2017). As Weller and Wu (2016: 58–60) have noted, discourses of “great love” (*da'ai* 大爱), such as those used by the DCF and other Buddhist charities in contemporary China, have been adopted and encouraged by the communist Party as a kind of generic, inoffensive principle that waters down religious ontologies that may be incompatible with the state's secular vision. However, Christian and Party influences notwithstanding, participants in the DCF typically had a serious engagement with Buddhist practices and teachings. Most of the volunteers, as well as the paid staff, were practicing laypersons; many had been drawn closer to Buddhist practice as the result of their time in the DCF. Many were active in meditation groups, some of which were organized by the Dafo Temple monastics, with others being translocal or transnational. Everyday work in the DCF office was peppered with references to Buddhist practices. It was not uncommon for staff to break away from their everyday tasks in the Foundation to discuss their personal practice. Monks, fellow staff, volunteers, and myself were often greeted with palms pressed together. Moreover, like other Buddhist practitioners from my fieldwork, they did not refrain from using Buddhist soteriology to explain important everyday events. When one of my students received a research grant only days after I had put up a tablet with her name on it in the temple hall, the DCF staff interpreted it as evidence of the sublime power of the Dharma; when a young temple dog suddenly died, members of the staff solemnly declared that it was evidence of the “impermanent” (*wuchang* 无常) nature of all things and that it was the dog's “karmic burden” (*yinguo bao* 因果报) that had resulted in his death. Moreover, it was not that karmic consequence more generally was an unimportant principle; rather, as growing environmental problems best illustrated to this group, there were important consequences to all actions both for this and subsequent lifetimes. Nevertheless, as their work on behalf of other beings helped them to better understand each day, while karmic consequences could be individually experienced, they were often, and increasingly, shared by all sentient beings bound together in a universal connection.

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