



Symposium: Lived Karma

Introduction: Critical Notes on the Lived Karma Conference

Susanne Kerekes 
Trinity College

Jessica Zu 
University of Southern California, Dornsife

This set of critical notes grew out of the collective wisdom of 20+ participants who attended a conference held in October 2022 at Dartmouth College: “Lived Karma: Situating Interbeing in Society” (Zu 2022). The driving question of the conference was this: how to study karma without borders (across traditions, regions, disciplines, and methods). The participants concluded that scholars must address karma thematically, under working categories we call “karma cluster concepts,” i.e., karma and its related concepts in diverse socio-historical contexts. To document some key ideas and to encourage new research directions, five participants devoted their time to summarizing some of the karma cluster concepts engendered from the conference.

Walters’ Sociokarma as a Launch Point

Because all critical notes in this issue either build upon or extend in different directions the sevenfold typology of Jonathan S. Walters’ sociokarma, in this introduction, we first summarize and critically assess the potential of each type as an analytic lens for future research. Then we illustrate how each critical note has pushed the boundaries further and enriched scholarly understanding of this understudied area.

Walters’ typology, though derived from his analysis of Pāli literature, is a good starting point for further understandings of karma cluster concepts in other forms of Buddhist literature. The reason for this broader applicability is that this typology is not meant to be mutually exclusive categories but rather functions as seven different ways to describe how the notions of karma are deployed by authors of Pāli texts to make sense of relational complexity among sentient beings.

The first five types of sociokarma consider the social dimension of karma as arising from interactions of individual agents of actions:

1. Sociokarma as “social context.” This is the most descriptive and most broad type. It includes two sub-types. The first is how one’s social position, such as wealth, power, gender, shapes an agent’s actions and the results of actions. The second is specifically about the type of karmic ramifications of a group of actors undertaking joint actions. For example, in their past lives the Shakyas jointly killed the fish of a pond and were in this life slaughtered by Viḍūḍabha and his army (Walters 2003: 18–19).
2. Overflow karma. According to Walters, overflow karma differs from social context in two ways. First, overflow karma is not necessarily limited to a shared social time-space. Second, it implies that one agent’s action can directly affect that of other agents, e.g., the effect of the Buddha’s preaching



continues to impact the Buddhists today and a king's righteous actions directly benefits his subjects (Walters 2003: 19–20).

3. Karmic confluence. This refers to the situations where the members of a social group come into their particular social relationships because of their similar or parallel karmic tracks in the past (Walters 2003: 20–21). To the best of our knowledge, karmic confluence is by far the most commonly illustrated type of sociokarma in Buddhist literature. In fact, many authors of the critical notes have pointed out how karmic confluence has been deployed to make sense of the formations of social groups such as a family, dwellers of a city, the poor, the disabled, and, in modern times, citizens of a nation. This type of sociokarma also easily conforms to contemporary views of social groups as the sum of its individual members.
4. The co-transmigration of social units. This echoes what John Strong termed “ongoing karmic nexuses,” whereby the group of actors' karmic actions reproduce social units lifetime after lifetime (Walters 2003: 21–23). This type of sociokarma is also very common in both canonical Buddhist literature and in popular narratives about the relational complexity of family members or romantic partners with strong karmic bonds, such as “soul mates” or “twin flames.”
5. Sociokarmic aspiration. This type is an extension of the fourth type (which examines the past) to the future orientation. Sociokarmic aspiration can be personal or collective. It can be an agent's wish to continue to be reborn with the same group of agents or a wish to avoid being born together, which John Strong terms “karmic dispersal” (Walters 2003: 23–24).

While in the first five types the individual agent's karma still plays a significant role in the actor's own fate and in the formations of the actor's social relations, in types six and seven, the karma of individual members of a group becomes irrelevant. Instead, the institution as a unity gains karmic independence. To put it differently, in types six and seven, the institution or the group is taken as a unitary agent who initiates and bears the consequences of karma:

6. Politicokarma. In this case, a political institution, such as the state, acts as an unitary entity whose action could engender karmic consequences for the governed (Walters 2003: 24–25).
7. The karma of social institutions. Here, social institutions, such as a saṅgha, assume a form of karmic independence apart from the karmas of its individual members (Walters 2003: 25–26).

To gain a more well-rounded picture of the range of karmic theories in Buddhist traditions, at least two new sets of inquiries need to be undertaken. First, is there room for nondualist karma that do not assume karma as stemming from either the individual or the group? And if yes, what does this nondual karma look like, and how was it used, by whom, and for what purpose? Jessica Zu's critical note briefly touches upon this issue. Second, where, when, how, by whom, and for what purpose was karma employed as an integral element of a “relation-centered worldview” that prioritizes relational accountability, in contrast to the predominantly Western ethics grounded in “autonomy- or rights-centered moral reasoning,” which prioritizes the rights of the individual over desirable social relations (Wong 2023: 6–7)? Both Susanne Kerekes' and Justin Ritzinger's critical notes touch upon this issue.

Summary of Each Critical Note

Jessica Zu's “Collective-karma-cluster concepts in Chinese Canonical Sources” is a preliminary survey of cluster concepts related to collective karma in Chinese canonical sources. This is the only critical note that points out the urgent need to study the nondualist theories of karma that go beyond the limits of presentist

notions of individuality and sociality and rights-centered ethical lenses. In addition, the analysis reveals that in addition to Walters's seven types of sociokarma, in *Yogācāra* texts, the karmic explanation of natural environments as mind-only gives rise to a concept of cosmo-socio-karma, which opens new philosophical contemplations on agentless agency, the agency of things, and the agency of relations. Beyond identifying new forms cluster concept, Zu also identifies two premodern debates: one on whether karma is self-made or other-made, and the other on whether the natural environment arises from collective karma or some other mechanism.

Joey Yan's "Karma as a Means of Political Mobilization" zooms in to a particular moment in history and studies Chinese versus Japanese Buddhist uses of karma during the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945. Yan's observations reveal an intriguing contrast. On the one hand, the Chinese Buddhists largely reinterpreted karma as collective or national so as to mobilize people's hopes to quell the unfolding disasters of war and destruction through collective devotional practices. Particularly interesting in this view of collective karma is the processual worldview in which the national karma was likened to a river or tide whose trajectory could be diverted by the commoners' pious actions. On the other hand, the Japanese Buddhists of the time largely interpreted karma at the level of individual ethical actions and rarely extended to the level of society. This collective vs. individual karma debate highlights yet another ripple in the long history of the Buddhist debates about karma.

Gareth Fisher's "Universal Karma" further enriches scholarly understandings of how karma functions in contemporary Chinese Buddhist groups. His fieldwork at the Dafo Charitable Foundation (DCF) reveals an interesting soteriological orientation, which he terms "universal karma." Volunteers at DCF are serious practitioners but rarely talk about karmic merit or retribution. Even when karma is referenced, it is primarily used in the individual sense. That said, to explain why they volunteer, release living beings, and help others in general, they often invoke a generic, watered-down Buddhist discourse on compassion and collective love stemming from a soteriology that sees all sentient beings as "inextricably linked together by shared karmic connections."

Susanne Kerekes' "Sociokarma and Kindred Spirits," instead of being a "critical note," is a critical "acknowledgement." This contribution reveals a philosophical oversight in Walters' sociokarma typology within Theravāda traditions by acknowledging how the world of spirits functions in the relation-centered imagination in Thai culture, which includes not only ancestors in the past but also buddhas and bodhisattvas of other worlds in the present. In so doing, it calls for an urgent reframing of "the collective" away from agent-centered analysis to network-centered agency of relations. In her own words: "It is the relations themselves that we must consider as collective." Further, the article encourages scholars to not treat spirits as an afterthought but to weave into their analysis the omnipresent influence of spirits in Thai people's everyday decision making. This approach is also one of many promising avenues to go beyond the traditional scholarly foci that Kerekes terms the "three Ms": monastics, manuscripts, and meditation.

Justin Ritzinger's "Interpersonal Karma" investigates broadly, across many Buddhist traditions, how karma functioned in relation-centered moral actions. More specifically, he maps out how a rich array of karma-adjacent terms has been employed to imagine, cement, or break karmic bonds, good or bad, past, present, or future. Extending Walters' observations of seven types of sociokarma found within Pāli literature, Ritzinger provocatively suggests that "karma is society ... a projection of the human web of interpersonal relations and reciprocity into which we are all born."

Looking Ahead

Formal discussions on collective karma will continue to have a home forum over the next five years (2023–2027) at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Designated as one of AAR’s five-year seminar units, “Collective Karma and Karmic Collectivities: Conversations without Borders,” calls on scholars to advance a joint investigation of karma that goes beyond the agent-centered paradigm and beyond the binary of the individuals against the collective. Rather, this Seminar encourages scholars to analyze karma cluster concepts from the fresh perspective of aggregated relationships between persons, peoples, animals, ancestors, spirits, and insentient beings, which frames inquiries based on relationship-centered worldviews. In mainstream rights- or autonomy-centered ethics, the individual is taken to be the basic unit of moral consideration, which has led to the misconstrual of “Eastern” cultures as “collectivist,” in cultural clash with “Western individualism.” Whereas, upon careful scrutiny, many so-called “Eastern collectivisms” prioritize relation-centered moral reasoning and the analytic focus is on how relationships are established and maintained (Wong 2023: 3–22). For example, instead of conceiving power or rights as some objects to be gained or lost, in relation-centered ethics, power and rights are conceived as dynamic relational networks that require unending negotiations and adjustments.

We invite scholars who wish to contribute to a fuller appreciation of the following questions: (1) when, how, and why the debates about individual and collective karma arose in canonical sources and in scholarship; (2) how karma is interpreted in noncanonical texts such as minor commentaries, code of conducts, poetry, theatre, plays, and other forms of storytelling; (3) how collective karma is employed as tools of social engagement (e.g., eco-karma, racial karma, national karma); (4) how karma animates the spiritual practices of marginalized groups such as low-rank ascetic women, working-class lay followers including elderly women, gender and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities; (5) how karma weaves together a world where spirits, ancestors, the unborn, animals, trees, rocks, rivers ... are agentive; (6) when, how, and why karma drops out of the moral repertoire of a group or a culture; or (7) how contemporary philosophical and tradition-based advancements of collective karma respond to urgent issues. Likewise, we welcome other questions of research and inquiry on collective karma that we have yet to consider.

While this set of critical notes focuses on collective karma within the Buddhist tradition, the “Collective Karma and Karmic Collectives” Seminar Unit within the AAR strongly encourages contributions to the collective-karma discourse from all scholars, across all traditions, time periods, regions, and theoretical and methodological approaches. Hence, conversations without borders.

Acknowledgements

The conference was sponsored by: Dartmouth College Leslie Center for the Humanities Project Grant, Dartmouth College Religion Department, Dartmouth College Dean of the Faculty for the Arts and Humanities, and the 2022 American Academy of Religion (AAR) Collaborative Research Grant. Special gratitude goes to Sara Swenson for making the conference possible.

References

- Walters, Jonathan S. 2003. “Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist History.” In *Constituting Communities: Theravāda Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, edited by John Clifford Holt, Jacob N. Kinnard, and Jonathan S. Walters, 9–39. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wong, David. 2023. *Moral Relativism and Pluralism*. Cambridge Elements. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zu, Jessica. 2022. “Lived Karma: Situating Interbeing in Society’ Conference Held at Dartmouth College.” *Buddhistdoor Global*. <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/lived-karma-situating-interbeing-in-society-conference-held-at-dartmouth-college>. October 28.