A Theological Response to the Buddhist Doctrine of *Karma* and The Christian Doctrine of *Theodicy*

David Thang Moe
Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY

Introduction

The question was asked of a Brahman who believes in God as the Creator by Buddha: "if God is good and omnipotent, why do humans become murderers, thieves, and liars?"[1] This question is more understandable when a noted Japanese Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe rightly claimed: "In Buddhism, there is no doctrine of *theodicy* for two reasons. First, Buddhism has no notion of God whose goodness must be justified against the problem of evil. Second, the doctrine of *karma* provides the cause for human suffering, even infants.[2] The questions of why evil exists if God is powerful and why the innocents are suffering, if God is good, challenges not only a Buddhist doctrine of *karma* but also a Christian faith. My task is to argue that the problem of evil is not contradictory to the existence of God. In making my case, I will offer four theological responses to the doctrines of *karma* and *theodicy*. The first one is a monotheistic response to the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* and *anatta*. The second is a free-will response to *karma* and sin. The third is a soteriological response to *karma* and the problem of evil. The fourth is the ethical and eschatological response to the doctrines of *karma* and of *theodicy*.

Monotheistic Response to the Origin of Evil and *Karma*

Buddhism has no doctrine of a monotheistic God the Creator. Buddhists believe if God exists, there is no evil, but since evil exists, there is no God. They consider time and space to be beginningless and endless in samsara. Since time and space is beginningless and endless, there is no personal creator at the beginning and no judge at the end. This is the reason why the Buddha did not accept the Hindu notion of Brahman as the sole basis underlying the universe and the accompanying notion *atman* or *atta* as the eternal self.[3] Rather Buddha taught the doctrine of *anatta* (at-atman or no self). *Anatta* is the root of everything to be originated and the goal to be realized. Everything is dependent co-origination. The same is true of good and evil, which co-arises and will co-cease.[4]

---

[1] B.R. Ambekar, *The Buddha and His Dharma* (Napur: Buddha Bhoomi Publication, 1997), 253.

[2] Masao Abe, "The Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, edited by Paul Ingram and Frederick Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986): 139-154 (here p. 145).

[3] Ibid.,

[4] Ibid.,145.

There is no first cause. *Karma* is the only impersonal judge from the origin to the end of good and evil. *Karma* judges everyone's deeds and thoughts from the beginning to the end. The Buddhist notion of *karma* as the primary and ultimate judge is contradictory to a Christian doctrine of God as the creator and judge of the universe. Christians believe that God is the only personal Creator (Gen. 1). This God is the first cause who is immanent in creation and is transcendent in God's power. In contrast to the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, God declares God's self-existence to Moses by saying "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14). Second, I respond to the Buddhist doctrine of the dualistic dependent co-origination of good and evil. By contrast, Christians believe the primordial goodness of the world. The idea that the world is initially good is justified with what God said, "it was very good," (Gen. 1:31) when God saw everything God created. The term "good," God used to evaluate God's creation is the goodness prior to Adam's corruption of the world. However, the Christian notion of Adam's sin as the cause for the problem of evil and death is analogous to the Buddhist doctrine of *karmas* as the source for suffering.

Human Freewill Response to *Karma* and Sin

Buddhist doctrine of *karma* challenges a Christian doctrine of omniscient God on the one hand and enhances a Christian doctrine of human freewill on the other hand. Buddhists challenge Christians with this question: if there is omniscient God, then why is God not responsible for controlling the sin of Adam? Other than freewill defense, there is no answer to this. Whether or not God foreknows the fall of Adam is out of our discussion because such claim is abstract. Rather my aim is to make sense of human freewill more practical. I argue that God created humankinds—Adam and Eve with freewill. God may command Adam and Eve to obey Him, but God does not coerce them.[5]

Buddhism teaches that everyone has his or her individual freedom to do either good *karma* or evil *karma*. Everyone benefits according to what they have acted. A point of contact between Buddhism and Christianity is that since no one coercive Adam and Eve, they freely determine to eat the fruit of the tree (Gen. 3:6). Christians believe that such misuse of Adam's freewill is the origin of sin and its effect was the problem of evil, suffering and death (Rom. 5:12). Does Buddhists believe the transmission of Adam's *karmic* sin in the world? No! It is because their notion of *karma* has more to do with its individual and internal effect rather than to do with its universal and external effect. Thus, they do not accept suffering of infants as the cause of the external Adam's sin (Ps. 51).

The contrast between Buddhism and Christianity is that the former sees sin or *karma* more as a condition or an immoral deed, while the latter sees sin more as a state. In response to Buddhists, Christians ought to re-define the meaning of Adam. Adam (*adama* in Hebrew) means humankind. Hence, Adam is none other than ourselves. This helps Buddhists understand better the transmittable *karma* of Adam to human race. Though they stress that *karma* returns to its doer, they accept that the *karma* of children are determined by their parents. Though Buddhists

[5] Keith Ward, *Divine Action: Examining God's Role in an Open and Emergent Universe*, 2nd edition (West Conshocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007), 217.

stress self-cause, they embrace external cause within a *samsaric* family. In this sense, Buddhists see suffering of infants not only as the cause of their *karma*, but also as their grand parents' *karma* (Adam as analogy).

In short, God created humans with freewill. We see the link between human freedom of *karma* and divine act of justice in the lives of Israel. Israel freely chose to do bad *karma* by breaking the law and turning away from God. "Israel' s idolatry and unfaithfulness are the most common sins in the OT."[6] God does justice by reacting to Israel with anger in terms of punishing the evildoers and rewarding the good doers. Likewise, God does justice by cursing Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17-24). God's anger does not cancer God's love. Anger is the action of God and love is the essence of merciful God. Thus, God sent the Son Jesus into the world to redeem the world (Jn. 3:16; Gal. 4:4-5).

Soteriological Response to *Karma* and *Theodicy*

Soteriologically speaking, there is a contrast between Buddhist doctrine of *karma* and Christian doctrine of grace. *Karma* comes and goes around from inside (from us) in an expected way, while grace comes as a surprising gift from outside (from divine) in an unexpected way. Buddhists teach self-salvation by *karma*. Buddhists see the suffering of Christ on the cross (1Cor. 1:22-23) as a problematic image because their doctrine of *ahimsa* stands against a violent death of any living being. In response to Buddhists, I argue that the suffering for Christ is a punishment for our sin and salvation (Lk. 24:26; Rom. 5:8-10; Heb. 9:22). God punishes the innocent Jesus for our *karmic* sin. Jesus died not because of his own *karma,* because of our *karma* (sinful deed). This is the highest justice of God in human history. We call this the penal and substitutionary atonement.[7]

Some Buddhists think that God kills Jesus. They wonder how possible it is for a loving God to kill Jesus. I do not think that this is morally right. Jesus' death is a combination of God's wrath and Jesus' self-giving. By self-giving, Jesus redeems us as new creation (2Cor. 5:17). In order to redeem us, he had to pay the price. Just as the evil *karma* of Adam leads us to death, so the good *karma* (atoning act) of the second Adam (Christ) restores us into a communion with God (Rom. 5:12-21).[8] Buddhists doubt about the possibility of God's justice of forgiveness. They ask: how would Jesus' death in 2,000 years ago be possible to forgive and to liberate from our sinful *karma* today?

This question reminds us to compare Jesus' vicarious death in 2,000 with Aung San's sacrificial death for liberation of Myanmar in 1947. As Aung San's fight for liberation from British colonialism at the cost of his life in 60 years ago effects the entire 60 million of Burmese today, so Jesus' fight for liberation from the power of sin at the cost of his life could also effect the entire human race. Jesus himself said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (Jn. 12:32). We are all forgiven, but our life is bounded by daily repentance to

---

[6] Patrick D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in Prophets: Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982)), 22.

[7] N.T Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 75-100.

[8] Ibid.,

Christ with new life. Finally, the greatest achievement of God's justice of the cross is defeating evils through the resurrection of Christ. We call this the victory model of atonement. This does not mean that we are now in evil-free world. Evil remains. As N.T Wright said, "evil is still a four-letter word" that challenges God's power.[9] Since evil remains active, we continue praying "Lord, deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13b). As we pray, the Spirit helps us escape from evil. In addition to dependence on the Spirit, we strive for escaping from evil by self-cultivating our mind.

Ethical and Eschatological Response to *Karma* and *Theodicy*

The summary of Buddhist law is: "doing good *karma*, avoiding bad *karma*, and cultivating mind."[10] Buddhists stress that the first two are possible through the third. Since the mind is the source of evil and love, Buddhists stress on cultivating mind so as to achieve the ethical principle. *Doing* good *karma*, such as helping the poor and almsgiving to the monks are crucial to Buddhist practices. Since *nirvana* is unattainable for all Buddhists, their aim is to do good *karma* in this life, which will bring good rebirth in their life to come. Life before death and life after death is equally important for Buddhists.[11] Living in the time between now and after—the struggle between good and evil is crucial to Buddhists and they see the equal strength of good and evil.

We may find the Buddhist ethical struggle of dualism between good and evil analogous to the Christian ethical struggle between good and evil. Paul said, "for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do the very evil thing I hate because sin dwells in me" (Rom. 7:15-19). The struggle between good and evil is even more comprehensible when we make a distinction between two kinds of sin: "sin of omission (we fail to do good what we should do) and sin of commission (we do evil what we should not do)."[12] In this sense, Buddhists stress that evil comes from humans' ethical failure to do good *karma*. For example, oppression in socio-political context is a direct cause from oppressors rather than from the cause of God. How should Christians respond to Buddhists in this case?

At one level, Buddhists are right in saying that socio-political oppression comes from a direct cause of human evils. Again, this is the result of humans' free choice of committing evil *karma*. Many Christians, like John Hick believe that God may permit evils to happen in this redeemed, yet sinful world (Gal. 1:4), but God is ultimately responsible for justice in the midst of evils.[13] But natural evils happen more as the natural cause of the sinful world rather than as the

---

[9] Ibid., 13-18.

[10] Abe, "The Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," 141.

[11] Seree Logunpai, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and Thai Buddhism," in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World,* edited R.S. Sugirtharajah, 3rd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006): 347-354 (here p. 350).

[12] Quoted in Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), 13. It was Thomas Aquinas who coined these two kinds of sin.

[13] John Hick, *Evil and God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 237.

direct cause of human evils. In either case, God of justice is responsible for healing the broken world in partnership with moral agents. In this regard, moral Buddhists and Christians are the stewards of God's creation.

Another question raised by Buddhists is: where is God in the midst of human suffering? I often hear this in Myanmar. Buddhists are not the first people who ask this. The Psalmist first asked: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me; why are you so far from saving me? (Ps. 22:1-2). Jesus echoes this on the cross, saying "My God, my God where have you forsaken me" (Mk. 15:34). We must respond this with the attributes of God. God is merciful to all suffering beings regardless of whom. Since God is transcendently hidden, we cannot see God's immanent presence, but we can experience God's omnipresence and omnipotence by faith. It is difficult for Buddhists to accept this because their doctrine is based on philosophical realism. We must be patient to convince them that Jesus does not merely suffer for us (vicarious suffering), but he suffers with us as our divine healer (solidarity-suffering). According to Jürgen Moltmann, the Jesus who experiences human suffering shares our pain and fights against evils as we pass through the valley of death. So, the problem of evils is not contradictory to the silence of God.[14]

The final question raised by Buddhists is: why do good people suffer and bad people do not, if God is just? The answer for this is difficult. Two possible responses should be made. First, for Christians, sin is the root-cause of cosmic suffering. Sin has no eyes and no mercy. It can catch anyone good or bad. Second, everything good or bad happens for the glory of God. Let me relate the latter to Jesus' answer to question by the disciples about the retributive explanation of a man's blind. The disciples asked, "Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither than man nor his parents, this happened so that the works of God may be displayed in him (Jn. 9:2-3). To this contrast, Buddhist must say, "that man."

In sum, Buddhism and Christianity have some convergences and divergences on *karma* and theodicy. We see more convergences from the ethical perspective, and more divergences from the eschatological perspective. Soterio-ethically speaking, we are not saved by the law of *karma*, but we are saved for the law of good *karma* (moral law).

We are saved not simply from something, but *for* something good (Eph. 2:9). In this sense, one may say that Jesus came not to abolish the Buddhist law of *karma*, but to fulfill it. Jesus said, "I came not to abolish the Law or prophets, but to fulfill it" (Matt. 5:17). Jesus' grace did not totally replace the law of good *karma*, but to fulfill it in the sense that good *karma* (good ethics) may shape us more ethical Christians. Paul said, "We will read the fruit whatever we sowed" (Gal. 6:7). If sow the good seed, we will reap the good fruit now and latter. Buddhism has this ethical analogy. Buddhists teach:

> According to the seed that is sworn; so is the fruit ye reap therefrom. Doer of good will gather good; doer of evil, evil reaps. Sworn is the seed, and though shall taste. The fruit thereof.[15]

---

[14] Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Passion for God: Theology in Two Voices* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 75-77.

[15] http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm (accessed May 29, 2017).

Yet, their eschatological vision of overcoming the duality of good and evil is different from Christians. While Buddhists transcend the duality of good and evil, Christians try to overcome evil with good so that good will prevail (Rom. 12:21).

Conclusion

This paper employed four theological approaches in response to the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* and the Christian doctrine of *theodicy*. First, the monotheistic approach contrasts Buddhist doctrine of *karma* who is the judge of good and evil and proposes a Christian doctrine of God as the Creator who is the first cause of the universe. Second free-will approach argues that Adam's ill use of freedom is the result of the problem of evil and suffering. God is ultimately responsible for the consequence of humans' free choice of doing either good or evil *karma*. Third, soteriological approach shows the innocent suffering of Jesus on the cross as the climax of God's theodicy. This theodicy of grace not only confronts Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, but also transforms it. Finally, ethical approach argues that duality is the circumstantial existence in which our struggle for good and against evil is the ethical duty of both Christianity and Buddhism.

Eschatologically, Buddhists tend to transcend the good-evil duality, whereas Christians tend to overcome evil by good. The eschatological rest for Buddhism is *nirvana* where there is no more good-evil duality, and Christian vision is a fulfillment of life in which good will reign and evil will be gone. This is natural for Christians because the final division of the saved and the damned lies at the heart of monotheism. But Buddhists do not see the rebirth of *karma* as a judgment but rather as a reward. Divine judgment is a problem for Buddhism, and in their point of view, monotheism cannot adequately solve theodicy. Bur for Christianity, monotheistic God is the first cause and the source and end of theodicy. In short, evil or suffering exist not because God is powerless, but because God allows it to happen, and from out of it, God of love does divine justice and salvation. In other words, God uses human suffering as a channel through which God continually acts God's merciful salvation of justice in the world of injustice and evil.[16] May our humble dialogue and critical engagement with our neighbor-Buddhists continue!

[16] Alone these lines, see Terence E. Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," in *Word and World*, Vol. 24. No. 1 (Winter 2004): 18-28.