

Ethical Impact of the Buddhist Samsara and Its Localization in Southeast Asia

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Abstract. The article focuses on the impact of the Buddhist Samsara on ethical construction by exploring its spreading scope, conceptual system, and localization in specific Southeast Asian countries. The Samsara represents the view of life and death of Buddhism. Through the statement of karma and the theory of the six great divisions in the wheel of karma, Buddhism inspires and teaches people to be aware that they need to be responsible for their own actions. Compared to other religions, Buddhism places more emphasis on self-motivated good deeds. Driven by the fear of painful consequences of evil deeds and hope for blessings brought by accumulating good deeds, believers will actively cultivate virtue and awareness of avoiding evil thoughts. During the process of spread, Buddhism is localized and combined with local culture. The Southeast Asia countries are regions where Buddhism has considerable influence. In these regions, the Samsara further developed, playing a significant role in promoting the living of a virtuous life.

1 Introduction

Buddhism, as one of the three major religions around the world, has numerous branches and a huge influence. Due to the educational significance of religion, guiding believers to perform good deeds is an important function of religion. In the complex doctrine system of Buddhism, Samsara represents the life and death concept that Buddhism passed on to believers. In Buddhist Samsara, the description of continuous life and karma is thought-provoking for believers, which helps believers to cultivate positive ethical notions and has rich research value in moral philosophy. In a previous study, Yao's research systematically organizes the vast Buddhist concept system of Samsara. Dong's *The Moral Metaphysical Significance of the Buddhist Concept of Samsara* builds a connection between the Samsara of Buddhism and moral philosophical meaning. Other literature focuses on the significance of Buddhism as a whole to morals and ethics rather than focusing on Samsara. In the context of English, there is a huge gap in such literature. This essay aims to fill the gap in the study of the Buddhist concept of Samsara in the English context. Moreover, it further explores the moral meaning behind branched concepts in the Buddhist Samsara. This essay also probes into the specific impact of the Buddhist concept of Samsara on ethical concepts after its localization in representative countries in Southeast Asia.

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2 The Spread of Buddhism

The origin of Buddhism traces back to the 4th-6th century BC. Prince Siddhartha, Buddha, is the founder of Buddhism. After its founding, Buddhism first spread locally in India. According to Rost's research, with the promotion of Asoka, emperor of Magadha from 268 BCE to 232 BCE, Buddhism spread to West Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia [1]. During the process of spreading, branches of Buddhism appeared. Theravada and Mahayana are two main branches that made a stronger impact. The Theravada was mainly introduced into countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia, such as Ceylon and Myanmar. Mahayana, influenced by the Sanskrit Classics, was introduced to countries and regions in East Asia like Korea and China. Because this essay focuses on the impact of samsara on East Asian Countries, this part of the discussion will examine the spread of Buddhism in East Asia.

Buddhism first spread to China and Tibet in East Asia, and then from these two regions, expanded to the whole region of East Asia. The earliest record of introduction of Buddhism in China concerns that Li Fang brought Buddhist scriptures to China in 279 B.C. . However, Buddhism did not gain the official recognition until Emperor Mingdi built the White Pony Temple in Luoyang, which marked official foothold of Buddhism in China. In the Tibet region, the appearance of Buddhism derived from the event that the King sent missions to bring back religious works from India in 339 A.D. And then, King Song-tsen Gam-po, inspired by his two Buddhist wives, one from China and another from Nepal, adopted Buddhism as the state religion.

Due to the worship of Buddhism in China and the Tibetan region, through communication with foreign countries in East Asia, Buddhism spread further. Buddhism was first introduced to the Korean Peninsula. In A.D. 552, Buddhism was transmitted to Japan from Korea, and combined with Shinto to develop a new branch of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism affected the Mongolian region. In 13th century, the Mongolian emperor Kublai accepted Tibetan Buddhism and promoted Buddhism in Mongolia.

Knowing the widespread of Buddhism in the East Asian region helps to build a foundation for the targeted geographical analysis of the topic discussed in this essay.

3 Concept of Samsara in Buddhism

In Buddhism, Samsara describes a continuous and non-stop cycle of birth(jāti), aging-and-death (jarāmarana), death, rebirth(abhijāti, āgati) and redeath [2]. It represents the view of life and death that the doctrine of Buddhism conveys to believers.

3.1 The origin of samsara

This concept doesn't only appear in Buddhism, while Buddhism is not the first religion to promote the idea of Samsara. Learning about the development process of Samsara helps to better understand some branching concepts in Samsara and build a foundation for further discussion.

According to Yao's research, the concept of Samsara originated from Hinduism [3]. Mentioned in Rigveda, which is the oldest part of the core classic of Hinduism Vedas, the description about Samsara is roughly as follows: In the highest heaven, you will reunite with the parting family members, meet Yama(the king of heaven in Hinduism) and receive the return of your good deeds. In this stage, the notion of Samsara didn't fully developed, but the ethereal existence of life had been mentioned. People leave the original world of survival and then move to another world that belongs to the dead. However, it provide the reference for

the development of Samsara in Buddhism because the statement of “receive the returning of your good deeds” aligns with the notion of karma accumulation in Buddhism which is an important part of Samsara. This initial description connected the destination of the dead with their behavior before the death, but it was limited to the discussion of the afterlife fate of good people instead of discussing both the kind and evil people.

The development of Samsara appeared in Upanishad. In this stage, the result of Samsara started to be distinguished by good and evil deeds. The notion of Samsara had started to instruct believer what to do and become the intangible ethical restriction in their behavior because they firmly believe that the actions in this life determine the fate of the next life. It is worth noting that the standard to differentiate “good” and “evil” in this stage is relatively simple, which only mentioned that “good deeds” are actions that learn about the doctrine of Brahmanism and fulfill obligation of their own caste, and “evil deeds” represent the completely opposite side [3]. Due to this standard, the ethical guidance provided by concept of Samsara in this stage is relatively limited and immature. Although it proposed the idea that good and evil deeds eventually have corresponding result, the good deeds refer to following the caste system that divide people into different classes and promotes inequality in society. People in a lower class can’t transcend the barrier between castes because it makes them fail to fulfill obligation of their caste. Thus, they can only suffer from the misery brought by their family backgrounds and expect to accumulate good deeds to change their fate in the next life.

3.2 Samsara in buddhism

Based on the notions drawn from other religions, Buddhism further elaborated and enriched the meaning of Samsara. Referring to Brahmanism, karma became the most core and basic concept. Due to a more mature conceptual system, the interpretation of karma is complicated. To understand it clearly, karma is categorized by different standards according to different properties.

Considering the corresponding person’s activity, karma is divided into two types [4]. One refers to the karma generated by inner thought, which is related to the motivation of a person. In this essay, it will be called by Siye(which is the name based on its Chinese pronunciation). Another one represents the karma formed by the behavior after reflection and consideration in the mind. In this essay, it will be called Siyiye.

According to the value differentiation, the karma is categorized into good karma, evil karma and neutral karma [5]. Buddhism introduced the concept of neutral karma, which belongs to neither goodness nor evil. It avoids the simplification of moral judgement, admitting the complexity of moral situations. In Buddhism, the degree of goodness and evilness is further distinguished by the subjective and objective two criteria [5]. The subjective standards mainly assess people’s determination to do good or evil deeds. The more conviction people act with, the greater the degree of good or evil. The objective standard considers the object that people’s actions affect. If the object is human, goodness or evilness is the greatest. If the object is a common animals like cows, the degree of goodness or evilness is less than the previous case. If the actions affect pest or other life entity that is harmful to people’s life, it is considered good or evil with the least degree.

Due to the more developed conceptual system and clearer standard to distinguish good and evil, Buddhism gives believers clearer guidance on their behavior. Moreover, compared to Brahmanism, judgement on people’s behavior becomes more flexible, and the definition of goodness is no longer limited to following the doctrine of religion.

Karma is the cause, and each karma has its corresponding karmic results. “Wrongdoings inevitably lead to wrong outcomes, as actions in the dark realms result in dark consequences.”

“Good deeds will certainly be met with good rewards, and actions of purity will lead to clear and positive outcomes. [4]” As mentioned in the classic of Buddhism, the good deeds and evil deeds can all get the corresponding retribution. Good deeds deserve rewards, and evil deeds will receive punishments.

In Buddhism, due to the existence of Samsara, the result of karma will exist for a long time, and it is definite to be undertaken by people who create the cause (karma). “A father’s wrongdoings cannot be borne by his son. Similarly a son’s wrongdoings cannot be borne by his father. Each person will be responsible for the consequences of their own actions—good deeds bring blessings, while evil deeds bring calamity [4].” This statement clarifies the subject that bear the karma and karmic result. It means that a person’s fate is determined by themselves. Relatives and friends have no obligation to be affected.

The above-mentioned theory raised a problem that, in some cases, within a limited lifespan, people may have no time to obtain the result brought by their actions. Some people who follow the law and maintain the order of society, but have a short life to enjoy the rewards. Some criminals who hurt and even kill others are sentenced to death but they cannot make up for the harm caused to the victims. In the Buddhist view of Samsara, the doctrine of the Three Lifetimes of Cause and Effect provides a relatively reasonable explanation for this. In Buddhism, a person’s life is divided into past life, present life and future life [5]. Past life has ended and future life have not yet arrived. As stated in *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra*. The karmic result is categorized according to the time when the results are received. The fastest one is that people receive the karmic results caused by their karma in present life, and it is termed as “Shengbao”. If the results affect the fate of the next life, it is called “Houbao”. If the karmic results can only be experienced in the second even more lifetimes, it is called “Houbao”. In the cycle of life after life, the fate of present life is determined by the actions of past life and reflects the previous karmic result, and the actions of present life determine the fate of the next life.

4 The Role of Samsara in Ethical Concepts

Generally, under the guidance of Samsara, the believers of Buddhism realize the importance of karma and understand that each person should be responsible for their own actions. For this reason, some actions that hurt and prejudice the interests of others will be avoided. Ideally, if this awareness is spread in society, harmony will be achieved and maintained well. As mentioned above, in the vast concept system of Samsara, there are many branch concepts. In this part, it will start from each branch and break down the complex concept of Samsara, analyzing its meaning for ethical guidance in detail.

The classification of “Siye” and “Siyiye” proposes a perspective to consider the morality of a person. This contrasts with another view that only focuses on people’s actions to judge their moral integrity. In Buddhist theory, people first consider their minds and then have the motivation to take action. Concept of “Siye” considers this process. It emphasizes that this process should be taken into account in moral judgement, and thoughts in the mind are also a part of karma created by people. Thoughts are the origin of actions, so stopping at the source is the best solution to reduce the evil deeds in society. If evil thoughts are allowed to breed in the mind, though they will not be exposed and reflected in people’s behavior in the short term, when people with these thoughts experience challenges or receive other stimuli, they are likely to take extreme actions. Therefore, Buddhism instructs believers to ensure the purity of inner thought and prevent the emergence of evil deeds from the source.

In Buddhism, the appearance of neutral karma is another important progress. It avoids the binary classification of moral situations. It teaches believers that morality isn’t either white

or black. In some cases, there are many behaviors that are tough to distinguish between good and evil. According to the opinion of moral relativism, due to different cultural contexts and individuals' backgrounds, absolute and immutable moral standards are difficult to exist [6]. Under the guidance of Buddhism, believers are likely to be aware of the complications of moral judgement and hold a cautious perspective when they face contentious moral problems.

The clarification of the degree of good and evil karma further standardizes the behavior of those who believe and follow the guidance of the doctrine. The subjective standard guides believers to firmly carry out good thoughts and reject evil deeds. Determination plays an important role in the cultivation of people's virtues. If people feel hesitant to do good deeds, they may lose the best opportunity. By contrast, if people feel hesitant to reject evil deeds, they may be shaken by interest or other temptations. In Buddhist theory, the objective standard to distinguish the degree of goodness and evilness considers the objects affected by people's behavior. This seems an intangible ranking of the life value of living beings and highlights the value of human beings. For this reason, it may be questioned and resisted by those who advocate for all living beings. This theory is needed to be interpreted in combination with the six great divisions in the wheel of karma. On Samsara, there are six worlds where beings are reincarnated based on their karma. The three Good Realms are deva(gods), manushya(human beings), and asura(warlike demigods). Three Evil Realms are tiryagyoni(animals), preta(hungry ghosts) and naraka(Hell) [7]. Beings that enter good realms are because of the good karma they accumulated. Oppositely, beings enter evil realms due to the accumulation of evil deeds. For this reason, the people who reincarnate as human beings are people who did good deeds and should enjoy blessings in their new life. If they are hurt, those who hurt them ought to accumulate greatest degree of evil karma and receive more severe punishments. Moreover, the animals and pests are people who did wrongdoings in past life and reincarnate as animals and even pests. The misery they suffer from is the karmic result of their evil deeds, and they are need to bear the punishment. However, doctrine of Buddhism still regards harming animals and pests as evil deeds, reflecting Buddhism's pursuit of equality among all beings. This theory makes believers aware that their relatives of past life might have been reborn as animals due to some mistakes. Therefore inspire people to treat animals and even pests kindly.

In the Buddhist concept of Samsara, the subject of reincarnation and the long-term impact of its existence have also been explained. "Fear of future consequences can extinguish evilness, and righteous actions lead to a good result of reincarnation" [4]. In Buddhism, as a description of Samsara, people restrain their behavior not longer obeying god's will. Instead, they are responsible for their fate and happiness in the next life. The desire for happiness and fear of sufferings guide them to do good deeds consciously and self-motivated.

5 Impacts of samsara on specific regions of Southeast Asia

Except for the generalized influence of Buddhist concept of Samsara on the construction of ethics and morality, when Buddhism was introduced to Southeast Asia, combining with specific local culture, Samsara developed new interpretations and have a special impact on the ethical ideas of people living in those places. In this part, starting with representative historical events, the localization of Buddhism in some typical Southeast Asian countries will be analyzed, showing its impact on social ethics.

5.1 The reform of emperor wu of liang in China

Emperor Wu of Liang published "Proclamation of Stopping Alcohol and Meat" in 517 A.D.

[8]. The content of the proclamation is based on the Samsara notion of Buddhism. According to Chen's research, Emperor Liangwu referred to the theory in classic Nirvana Sutra and regarded the act of eating meat as an evil deed that hinders one's moral cultivation, bringing the evil karma. Based on the Samsara of Buddhism, Emperor Liangwu integrate it with traditional Confucian thought of filial piety [9]. In the proclamation, the subject to bear the result of Samsara is no longer limited to people who create karma. If a monk eats meat or drink alcohol, it will implicate his parents and relatives to share the evil karmic results with him. In this way, personal behavior is closely linked to its moral consequences, emphasizing the importance of respecting for other living beings. The integration of Buddhism and filial piety associates personal behavior with serious moral consequences that involve relatives, promoting the impact of Buddhism on the cultivation of the virtue of filial piety.

5.2 The zen buddhism core of Japanese bushido

As an important cultural symbol of Japan, Bushido was influenced by Zen Buddhism in the Kamakura Shogunate period. As mentioned, Mahayana, which is one of the significant branches of Buddhism introduced to Japan through China as medium. Zen Buddhism belong to sinicized Mahayana Buddhism. According to Shan's research, the concept of life and death in Buddhism was valued in Bushido spirit [10]. Samsara of Buddhism helps to cultivate notion of viewing life and death equally because justice death can guide samurai enter better realms. Moreover, Bushido qualities like loyalty and courage are regarded as ways to accumulate good karma. In this way, the Samsara influences the ethical behavior of the Japanese people through the spirit of Bushido.

6 Conclusion

Samsara of Buddhism interprets the theory of continuous life and karma. The believers' hope to do good deeds and gain happiness then enter good realms in the next life, and fear of bearing the painful result brought by evil deeds motivates them to cultivate the quality of kindness. Everyone should be responsible for their own actions, this is the core of the Buddhist Samsara. Compared with other religions, the Buddhism emphasizes the self-driven goodness instead of only following god's will. This is the part that remains unchanged though it is localized and reinterpreted during the process of dissemination. The spread of it in Southeast Asian regions achieves the purpose of teaching people to be kind after integration with local good qualities like filial piety in China. Further in-depth research is needed regarding the localization of Samsara in other Southeast Asian regions.

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