

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “MEANS OF ACTIONS” IN JAIN KARMA DOCTRINE

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the means of action (*nimitta*), understood through *dravya*, *kṣetra*, *kāla*, and *bhāva* (*dkkb*), in the Jain doctrine of karma. It argues that although these factors serve as efficient causes in the fruition of karma (*karma-phala*), they are not governed by the universal law of karma. The paper distinguishes between universal, invisible consequences – karma bound to the karmic body – and non-universal, visible consequences that depend upon external circumstances. Since visible consequences vary according to place, time, living beings, and states, they cannot be considered consequences governed by the karma doctrine. This distinction clarifies the relationship between *upādāna* (material cause) and *nimitta* (efficient cause). The analysis further demonstrates that the karmic process is neither strictly deterministic nor entirely indeterminate, because individuals exercise constrained free will in selecting the means of action.

Introduction

All living beings, like human beings, engage in actions continuously. In common parlance, actions are generally understood as physical activities. From the perspective of the doctrine of karma, however, this understanding is erroneous, since the psychical dimension of an action is more significant than its physical dimension. The karma doctrine deals with voluntary actions that include two components: the physical activity of mind, speech and body, termed *yoga* (Tattvārthasūtra That Which Is 6.1); and the psychical activity that involves intention, motivation, desire, etc., which in turn are driven by *mithyātva-cum-kaṣāya-cum-nokaṣāya* (perversion-cum-passion-cum-quasi-passion), termed *moha* (delusion) (Mokṣamārga Prakāśaka 38). Various scholars have made use of different definitions of action. Varni has defined action as “*sthāna-parivartan* (change of place) and *rūpa-parivartan* (change of form) of any substance, self (*sva*) or other (*para*)” (Varnī 107). According to Bharill, a substance (*dravya*) or a particular attribute of the substance (*guṇa*) undergoes change and is called *kārya* (action) which has the synonyms as *paryāya* and *kāla* (Bharill 17).

It must be observed that all actions entail the deployment of means of action (*nimitta*). It is not possible to perform actions without the means. Consider everyday activities like eating, reading, watching television, sleeping, and experiencing the emotional highs and lows of financial gain or loss. In these scenarios, the activities themselves constitute our daily actions,

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while the underlying objects – such as food, books, television programs, a bed, and material wealth – serve as the primary means through which these actions are executed.

For instance, a reader engaging with this text is actively performing the action of reading, a process that perfectly illustrates the four factors. The reader's conscious soul and the physical screen represent *dravya* (substance). The room or chair where they sit constitutes the *kṣetra* (space). The specific moments spent in reading the article consumes the *kāla* (time). Finally, the reader's mental focus, comprehension, and intent form the *bhāva* (state)², which dictates the spiritual depth of the entire experience. This can be collectively abbreviated as *dkkb*.³ No action can occur without utilizing these *dkkb* dimensions; they are the indispensable prerequisites of all worldly activity. (Jain 21). Also, different actions need different *dkkb*. For example, you could perform a different action of, say, watching a television program instead of reading this article, but that different action would need different *dkkb* that include a television and different states of mind. Akalaṅkadeva in *Tattvārtha-vārtika* states that rise of karma occurs, not by itself, but with the assistance of the *dkkb* (*Tattvārtha-Vārtika* 336). According to Ācārya Mahāprajña, the *dkkb* assist in the fruition of karma (*Mahāprajña* 117). In other words, the *dkkb* are a cause of *karma-phala* (fruition of karma)⁴. Let us try to understand how this works.

The paper elucidates that the *dkkb* are not governed by the karma doctrine that corresponds to the following ideas: uphold that the karma doctrine is not deterministic; explain the role of free will; and, reconcile the two apparently contradictory proverbs: “*jaisā karoge, vaisā bharoge* (as you sow, so you shall reap)” and “*kare koī, bhare koī* (someone sows, someone else reaps).” The means of actions (*nimitta*) thus play an important role in several aspects of the karmic process.

Causes of *Karma-phala*

Due to three simultaneously occurring processes – performance of action (*kārya*), fruition of past karma (*karmodaya*), and attachment of new karma (*bandha*) – the modes (*paryāya*) of the soul and also of the physical body keep changing. It must be noticed that the new modes of the four properties of the soul, namely perception (*darśana*), knowledge (*jñāna*), spiritual power

² It is interesting to note that Todarmal negates the role of external objects in the mental or inner states of a living being: “No external object (*paradravya*) forcibly spoils or corrupts [our minds]. When our own inner states (*bhāvas*) become disturbed, that external object is merely an external instrumental cause (*nimitta*). Moreover, our inner states can become disturbed even without that instrumental cause; therefore, it cannot be regarded as an invariably necessary cause. Thus, to see fault in an external object is itself a deluded state of mind (*mithyābhāva*).” (*Mokṣamārga Prakāśaka* 244)

³ Jain scriptures emphasize on the concept of *dravya*, *kṣetra*, *kāla* and *bhāva*. A good example can be seen here: *yadasti tat svāyattadravyakṣetrabhāvarūpeṇa bhavati netareṇa tasprastutātvāt | yathā ghaṭo dravyataḥ pāṭhivatvena, kṣetratayā ihatyatayā, kālato vartamānakālasambādhitayā, bhāvato raktatvādinā, na parāyattairdravyādhīhistoṣāmaprasaktatvāt iti* | Meaning: Whatever exists is so in the form of its own dependent substance, place, and state, and not through another, because it is related to that [own nature]. For example, a pot, with respect to substance, is earthen; with respect to place, it is situated here; with respect to time, it is connected with the present time; and with respect to state, it is red, etc. It is not dependent upon another substance, place, time, etc., because those are irrelevant [to its being what it is]. (*Tattvārtha-Vārtika* 4.42.15.254)

⁴ *tasya karmaṇo yanniṣpādyam sukhaduḥkham tat karmaphalam* | Meaning: The happiness and suffering produced by karma are the fruits of karma. (*Tattvapradīpikā* commentary on *Pravacanasāra* 124)

(*vīrya*), and bliss (*sukha*), are the *karma-phala* of the four destructive (*ghātiyā*) kinds of karma, namely perception-obscuring (*darśanāvarṇīya*) karma, knowledge-obscuring (*jñānāvarṇīya*) karma, *vīrya*-obscuring (*antarāya*) karma, and deluding (*mohanīya*) karma.⁵ Furthermore, the new modes of the four vitalities (*prāṇa*) of the physical body, namely sense vitality (*indriya prāṇa*), age vitality (*āyu prāṇa*), respiration vitality (*śvāsocchavāsa prāṇa*), and power vitality (*bala prāṇa*), are the *karma-phala* of the four non-destructive (*aghātiyā*) karma, namely feeling-determining (*vedanīya*) karma, age-determining (*āyu*) karma, embodiment-determining (*nāma*) karma, and status-determining (*gotra*) karma.

The relationship between material (*upādāna*) and efficient (*nimitta*) causes in the fruition of karma (*karma-phala*) can be illustrated through the act of reading. As you read this article, you simultaneously bind new karma and experience the fruits of past karma. At the same time, you are also gathering new information about karma. Naturally, this new understanding cannot arise out of nothing, your prior knowledge is a necessary cause for this mental shift. This process tracks a sequence of two states: the pre-mode and the post-mode of your being. Philosophically, the pre-mode is the material cause of the post-mode. This mimics the classic analogy of clay: a lump of clay must cease to exist in its original shape for the clay pot to emerge. Similarly, your previous state of soul and body transforms directly into your current state, establishing a continuous chain of cause and effect.

This raises an important question: what role does the actual act of reading play in transforming your understanding? Common sense suggests that reading this text is solely responsible for your change in knowledge. However, just as a potter cannot craft a pot without a wheel, you cannot perform the action of reading without the article itself. The external medium is indispensable to the process. Consequently, just as the potter and the wheel serve as the efficient causes (*nimitta kāraṇa*) of the pot, the *dkkb* factors linked to your reading serve as the efficient causes of the act of reading itself. This act, in turn, acts as the efficient cause for your *karma-phala*, ultimately manifesting as a shift in your knowledge.

While this illustration emphasizes the shift in your cognitive state, the fruition of all eight types of karma concurrently alters the modes (*paryāyas*) of the soul's four intrinsic properties and the body's four material attributes. Furthermore, your immediate environmental conditions – not just the specific mediums of reading – act as efficient causes (*nimitta kāraṇa*) for this comprehensive karmic fruition. Specifically, the fruition of destructive (*ghātiyā*) karma alters the properties of the soul (such as knowledge), while non-destructive (*aghātiyā*) karma drives changes in the physical body. Ultimately, the preceding states (pre-modes) of the soul and body serve as the independent material causes (*upādāna*) for their subsequent states (post-modes), while the *dkkb* factors and active karmic fruitions serve as the efficient causes. Crucially, the material cause and the karmic fruition are individualistic, affecting the agent alone. In contrast,

⁵ *kevalaṇāna-damśaṇa-sammatta-cāritta-vīriyāṇaṃ aṇeya-bheya-bhiṇṇāṇa jīvaguṇāṇa virohittenēṇa tesīm ghādivavadesādo* | Meaning: Because the qualities of the soul, which are differentiated into many kinds – namely, omniscience, vision, right faith, conduct, and energy – are opposed/obstructed, they are designated as destructive. (Dhavalā commentary on Puṣpadanta-Bhūtabali's Śaṭkhaṇḍāgamaḥ 7.2.1.15)

the external *dkkb* factors are non-individualistic, as they actively influence both the agent and the surrounding environment.

Karma-Doctrine-Governed Consequences of Actions

A question remains: are the means of action, that is, the *dkkb*, governed by the doctrine of karma? This question can be answered by considering a more fundamental one: are all consequences of actions governed by the doctrine of karma? An analysis of the universal nature of the karma doctrine provides an insightful answer and leads to a broader understanding of its scope. For the law of karma to be meaningful, it must be universally valid. If it applied only in certain places, for example, in India but not in other countries, a person could evade its consequences by performing desirable actions in India and undesirable actions elsewhere. Likewise, if it applied only at certain times – for example, on weekends but not on weekdays – a person could circumvent it by acting differently on different days. A universal law cannot depend on such arbitrary limitations. Like the law of gravity, therefore, the law of karma must operate everywhere and at all times. Moreover, it must apply to all living beings, regardless of their particular states. In other words, the law of karma is universal with respect to all regions (*ksetra*), all times (*kāla*), all living beings composed of soul and matter (*dravya*), and all states (*bhāva*).

If the law of karma is universal, then the principles governing the relationship between an action and its consequences must also be universal. Consequently, a consequence governed by the law of karma must depend only on the action itself and not on factors external to the action, such as its *dkkb*. The karma-governed consequences of an action must therefore be the same whether the action is performed in India, in the United States, or anywhere else in the universe; whether it was performed in the past, is being performed now, or will be performed in the future; and whether it is performed by one living being or another, regardless of their respective states. It follows that consequences that vary according to the *dkkb* of an action cannot be regarded as consequences governed by the doctrine of karma.

Consequences of Actions

There are two types of consequences of actions: universal and non-universal. Universal consequences depend only on the actions themselves and not on the *dkkb*. Non-universal consequences, in contrast, depend not only on the actions but also on other factors, such as the *dkkb*. Universal consequences take the form of karma that attaches to the karmic body. They are termed invisible consequences because they cannot be identified through our physical senses. These universal, invisible consequences are governed by the universal karma doctrine.

Non-universal consequences are termed visible consequences because most of them can be identified through our senses. These non-universal, visible consequences are not governed by the karma doctrine; rather, they are governed by man-made laws or by the *dkkb*. This distinction provides a rule for determining which consequences of actions are governed by the karma doctrine: The karma-doctrine-governed consequences of an action do not change with the *dkkb*.

The universal, invisible consequences of actions that take the form of karma and attach to the existing karmic body (*kārmaṇa śarīra*) are the consequences governed by the karma doctrine. The distinction can be illustrated with examples of non-universal, visible consequences. A man is caught committing a theft and sentenced to two years in prison. The act of committing theft is his action, and imprisonment is one consequence of that action. Similarly, a person receives remuneration for performing a job. The activity of performing the job is the person's action, and the remuneration received is one consequence of that action. Such consequences can vary from one country to another, may differ between the past and the present and in the future, and may differ for different living beings and according to their states. In other words, these consequences change with the *dkkb* and are therefore visible, non-universal consequences that are not governed by the karma doctrine. Rather, they are governed by man-made laws or by the *dkkb*, neither of which is universal. Since every action has invisible consequences, both the act of theft and the activity of performing a job also have invisible consequences in the form of karma.

Every action has invisible consequences in the form of karma, but not every action necessarily has visible consequences, as illustrated by the following example. A man spends several days planning to murder an enemy, but fails to do so because the enemy has left the region. Will he nevertheless experience the consequences of his action of planning the murder? Although his action has no visible consequence, he will still experience its invisible consequence in the form of karma. Thus, some actions have no visible consequences but always have invisible consequences in the form of karma. We cannot escape the invisible consequences of our actions.

We can now answer the question raised earlier: “Are the means of actions, that is, the *dkkb*, governed by the karma doctrine?” This article, which is the primary means of your present action of reading, is a visible consequence of the author's action of writing. Similarly, the primary means of the various actions mentioned above – such as food for eating, books for reading, television programs for watching, a bed for sleeping, and loss or gain of wealth for experiencing misery or joy – are visible consequences of actions. Since visible consequences of actions are not governed by the karma doctrine, the primary means of action are likewise not governed by the karma doctrine. Consequently, the *dkkb* associated with these primary means are also not governed by the karma doctrine.

The Role of the Means of Actions in the Karmic Process

The means of actions play a critical role in various aspects of the karmic process, and some of them are examined below:

- **Determinism, Free Will, and Karma Doctrine**

According to the Jain karma doctrine, the fruition of the old karma attached to the karmic body by past actions results in new actions, which in turn bind new karma to the karmic body, and the cycle continues. Though this statement about the fruition of old karma is true, it does not tell the complete truth. The incomplete truth gave rise to the notion that the man is a prisoner of his past actions; he has no control over his

present actions. Such a notion raised several issues concerning the moral responsibility of human beings, their liberation from the cycle of birth and death, and their free will (Reichenbach 80).

It is interesting to note that if both efficient causes of *karma-phala* – the fruition of the past karma, and the *dkkb* – were fully controlled by the karma doctrine, then the *karma-phala* would be fully controlled by the karma doctrine, and the karmic process would be deterministic and free will would have no role to play. But as only one of the efficient causes of *karma-phala* is controlled by the karma doctrine, free will has a role in performing actions. As the present actions are not completely determined by past actions, the karmic process is not deterministic. Is the karmic process then non-deterministic? Are the causal conditions not sufficient to cause humans to act in a certain manner? Once a person deploys a set of *dkkb* as the means of an action, the causal conditions are then sufficient to cause him to act in a certain manner. It implies that the karmic process is near deterministic, not strictly deterministic. Humans do choose the means of actions, i.e., *dkkb*, but they are free to choose *dkkb* with some constraints.

- **Reconciliation of the two proverbs**

There is a proverb “*kare koī bhare koī*” (someone sows, someone else bears), which is based on the fact that people experience the effects of others’ actions and of accidental and natural events. When the head of a family makes or loses money in a business venture, the consequences of his business action affect the members of his family. The consequences of decisions of a nation’s government officials affect the population of that nation and other nations. Loss of lives and properties due to natural events, such as earthquakes, floods, fire, etc., and accidental events, such as an airplane crash, bomb explosion, etc., make people miserable. All these suggest that one bears the consequences of others’ actions and accidental and natural events. But according to the karma doctrine, one bears only the *karma-phala* of one’s own karma. How is it possible that when one bears only the *karma-phala* of one’s own karma, he or she also bears the consequences of others’ actions and accidental and natural events? How does one reconcile the two proverbs that apparently contradict each other? Others’ actions and accidental and natural events affect us through the *karma-phala* of our karma if we deploy them as the means of our actions, i.e., *dkkb*. We only bear the consequences of our actions.

Conclusion

The means of actions we deploy in our daily actions serve as efficient causes of *karma-phala* and are not governed by the karma doctrine. These facts are significant for several aspects of the karmic process. Based on these observations, it is shown that the karmic process is not deterministic and free will plays an important role in the karmic process. We bear only the consequences of our actions, and the karmic debt is reduced by deploying favorable means of action.

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