Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice

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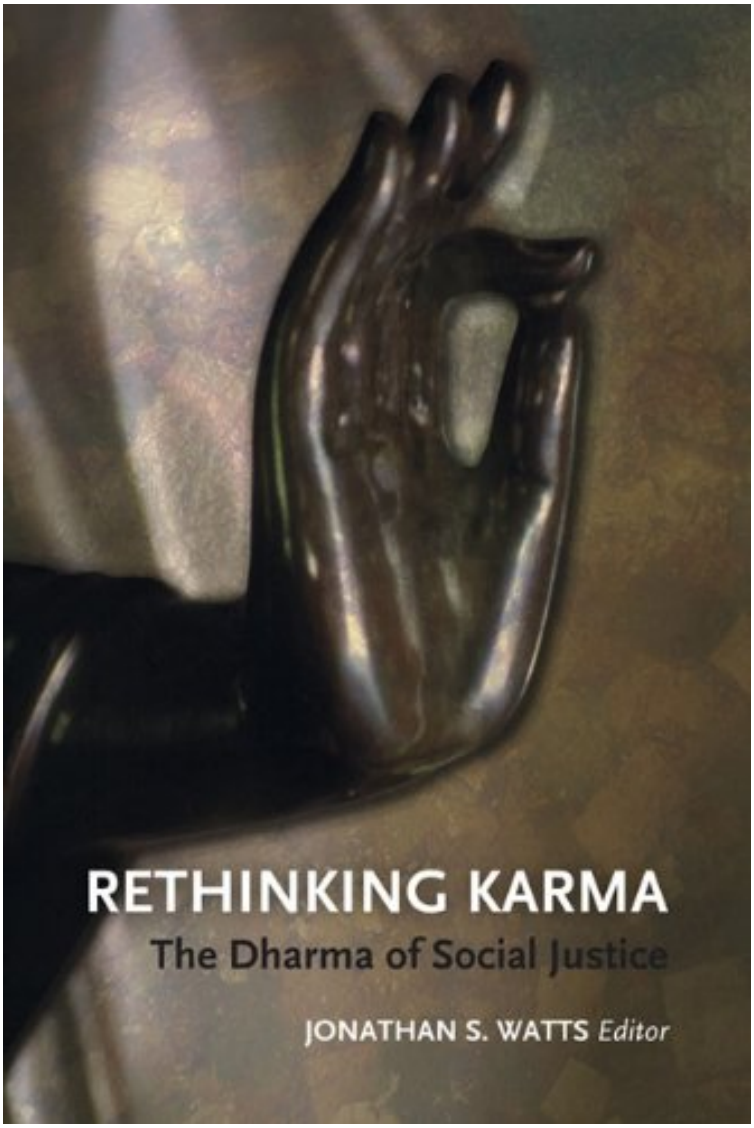

#1655302 in Books 2009-11-20 2010-01-08Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.30 x .80 x 5.60l, .55 #File Name: 9749511786272 pages | File size: 36.Mb

From Silkworm Books : Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice:

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. It Is Time to Rethink KarmaBy Hozan Alan SenaukeWhat is the connection between karma and social justice? It is a fair question; a question that will immediately raise many eyebrows here. The Buddha had much to say about the practice of "just;" much less to say about justice, particularly in comparison with the Abrahamic religions. Rethinking Karma is an important book for two reasons. First, in editor Jon

Watts introduction and in a powerful essay by Sri Lankan scholar Nalin Swaris -- "Karma: The Creative Life Force of Human Beings" -- we find a close investigation of the Buddha's early teachings and of the context in which he lived. In his time, in many of the Pali suttas, the Buddha makes a practical, logical and, for the most part, equitable case against the dominant Brahmanic powers. He relies on clarity and direct experience, never on principles of righteousness or domination.The book's second strength builds on this analytical base. The Buddha's ancient teachings are background for modern Buddhist scholar-activist-practitioners from diverse backgrounds -- Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, India, and the U.S. -- investigating and coming to grips with their own traditions and with the suffering each one perceives in their culture and in their own life.The book, well edited by Jonathan Watts -- co-founder of the "Think Sangha," a loose-knit Buddhist social analysis group linked to the International Network of Engaged Buddhists -- grows out of a 2003 meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, looking at the social nature of suffering and of karma. Watts explains in his editor's note:In response to experiences of extreme social suffering in many parts of Southeast Asia, especially the conflict areas of Sri Lanka and Burma, questions about forgiveness, acceptance and justice were discussed at length...What does Buddhism say -- or imply -- about collective karma and social justice?The Buddha's teachings on karma and rebirth arise within his brilliant discovery of dependent origination - paticca samupada. Karma is, essentially, volitional action -- including thoughts, words, and deeds. There are other forms of causation that manifest in the world, but karma is "preceded by mind." So it is something we can work with and do something about. It is a field of practice.But our understanding of karma and its fruits is often and distorted. We are confused about the suffering we see around us, why bad things happen to good people, and why good things seem to happen to bad people. In an early sutra, the Buddha listed the results of karma as an imponderables, saying, "...whoever speculates about these things would go mad and experience vexation."We may not untangle all the results of karma, but in forceful essays Watts and Swaris, building on a prologue by the late Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, argue that if the so-called self is co-created or co-conditioned by other beings and by non-self dharmas, then there is no such thing as "my" karma. There is precisely no "me or mine" that can be directly pointed to. Swaris goes in an unusual direction (for a Buddhist), referencing Karl Marx's useful concept of "species nature," as taken up by scholar J.G. Jennings:Jennings' proposal that karma be understood as the collective karma of human beings opens up a theoretically refreshing perspective to look at karma or human agency as the distinctive potential of the "species nature" of the human being as such, irrespective of gender, race, class, or historical period.There is much more I would like to say about these ideas, but here I can only whet your interest. Aside from the validity of this interpretation of the Buddha's teachings -- and like all religious texts, one can find Buddha's words to support many points of view -- much of Rethinking Karma provides analysis of how the principle of karma has been misused, re-Brahmanized, and applied to validate systems of social oppression and power over. As David Loy writes in his fascinating essay "The Karma of the Rings," reinterpreting Tolkein for Buddhists, "Buddhism has not had much to say about power." He goes on to propose:Today the primary challenge for socially engaged Buddhism is the individual and collective craving for power, which, Midas-like, destroys whatever it touches.Looking at the entanglement of karma and power, Mangesh Dahiwale, a leader of India's Jambudvipa Trust, training young Dalit Buddhists -- ex-untouchables -- writes of the vital movement begun by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the 20th century, and the present-day struggle against entrenched Brahmanic values that twist karma into a rigid principle of caste duty. In a long essay about Sri Lanka, Jon Watts looks at what he describes as the "reformation and deformation" of the Sri Lankan sangha, falling under the sway of nationalism and colonialism which as led both to a fratricidal ethnic civil war and the introduction of caste in the sangha itself.Scholar-activists Phra Paisal and Santikaro describe the commodification of dana, in Thai Buddhism as capitalism and materialism become a new religion. Merit-making becomes a new name for acquisitiveness, echoing the function of Brahmanic sacrifices against which the Buddha took an unequivocal stand.Feminist educator and practitioner Ouyporn Khuankaew investigates the intertwining of patriarchy and distorted understandings of karma in her own difficult younger years. She describes her successful approach to deconstructing the ideology and oppression of patriarchy in Asia, using the real, living tools one finds in the Buddha's teachings.An activist from Burma's Shan State, Khuensai Jaiyen found his root in dharma Buddhism came in prison, developing mindfulness practice as a remedy for bitterness at his circumstances. His compelling story and his understanding of the Buddha's message of liberation contrast with what he sees as the prevailing "fatalism" of organized Buddhism, as promoted by the Burmese state itself.This is provocative thinking and writing, right in line with the Think Sangha's mission of Buddhist social analysis. But Rethinking Karma, also offers us voices that we don't often hear in the west -- the voices of Asian grassroots activists firmly grounded in their own practice and culture. We are fortunate to have this opportunity to listen to them and learn.3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. THoughtful and practicalBy EllenAs someone who works in the intersection of traditional buddhist practice and social change, I found this compilation of essays very valuable and thought provoking. Some of the essays challenge traditional buddhist teaching, some share how that teaching is manifest in the world today. I have come back to a number of issues raised in the essays since reading it, in particular what kind of social movement would the Buddha catalyze if alive today? And what does that mean for my/our actions in the world, given that I/we are not separate from being buddhas? Also, as someone who struggles with notions of rebirth and traditional explanations of this teaching, I found it useful to widen my frame of

exploration.Mostly I want to say thank you to the editors and authors for sharing their understandings, which reflect their practice in the world. I would recommend this book to anyone who is exploring buddhism, karma, or social action, whether you identify as a buddhist pracitioner or not. Lots of good food for thought and action here. I bought a couple of copies to give to colleagues, in addition to one for myself.7 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Wishful thinkingBy A readerHerein we have a volume reflecting the usual MO for the so-called "Engaged Buddhists." The agenda--recasting Buddhism as a sort of ancient version of modern secular humanism with liberal politics--is supreme, and the authors often resort to dishonest pseudo-scholarship to further it. Cases in point--Jonathan Watts uncritically quotes the notorious revisionist Payutto asserting "As for the unfolding of the present life, the results of previous karma stop at birth, and a new beginning is made." pg 28. This is not at all what one finds in the early Suttas--all over the place the Buddha talks about the fruit of karma manifesting in the course of future lives. It's not even arguable.Second, we have Nalin Swaris referencing the theories of J.G. Jennings as if they were authoritative. Jennings seems to have done some Pali translations in 1947 or earlier, but otherwise is totally obscure. Yet Swaris cites him as a basis for arguing that "the theory of karmic rebirths is not compatible with the Buddha's teachings on anatta" and in favor of that old Engaged Buddhist favorite, "collective karma." Swaris repeats Jennings' wild unsupported assertions that every point of doctrine he finds unappealing is surely the result of later corruptions and "Hinduization." Swaris finds this "a theoretically refreshing perspective."I have no problem with people who want to rethink or even reformulate Buddhist doctrine so that it is compatible with what I agree are worthly ideals, goals, and sensibilities. I myself am politically liberal and a Buddhist. But I do demand that this be done honestly and forthrightly. If Engaged Buddhists feel that traditional Buddhism is flawed, then they should openly repudiate the doctrines that they don't like, not misrepresent them to support their agenda. It's just dishonest.

What is a Buddhist response to political oppression and economic exploitation? Does Buddhism encourage passivity and victimization? Can violent perpetrators be brought to justice without anger and retributive punishment? What does Buddhism say -- or imply -- about collective karma and social justice?Rethinking Karma addresses these questions, and many more, through the lens of the Buddhist teachings on karma. Acknowledging that a skewed understanding of karma serves to perpetuate structural and cultural violence, specifically in the Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia, the book critically reexamines the teachings on karma as well as important related teachings on equanimity (upekkha), generosity (dana), and "merit" (punna).The eleven authors featured in this volume are thinker-activists who have been deeply involved in issues of social justice at a grassroots level and speak from their own experience in trying to solve them. For them, these issues are seminal ones requiring deeper contemplation and greater sharing, not only within the Buddhist community at large but among all those who seek to bridge the gaps between our idealization of human harmony, our tendencies toward violent confrontation, and the need for greater social justice.

"This collection of essays is full of provocative thinking and writing and offers us voices that we don't often hear in the Westthose of Asian grassroots activists firmly grounded in their own practice and culture. We are fortunate to have this opportunity to listen to them and learn."BuddhadarmaFrom the Inside FlapWhat is a Buddhist response to political oppression and economic exploitation? Rethinking Karma addresses this question and many more. The contributors have been deeply involved in issues of social justice at a grassroots level and speak from their own experience in trying to solve them.About the AuthorJonathan S. Watts serves on the executive board of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) and coordinates Think Sangha, a socially engaged Buddhist think tank affiliated with INEB.