



THE CONCEPT OF KAMMA-NIYĀMA (CAUSAL ORDER) IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT :

Kamma-niyāma, commonly rendered as the “order” or “regularity” of kamma, describes the dependable relationship between intentional action and its moral results. It is often presented as one of five niyāmas, or orders of regularity, alongside utu-niyāma, bīja-niyāma, citta-niyāma, and dhamma-niyāma. This article examines the concept against the background of the Pāli Canon, Abhidhamma, and commentarial tradition. It argues that the fivefold scheme should be identified as a later Theravāda systematization rather than treated as a standard formula throughout the early discourses. The canonical foundation lies in teachings on intention, kamma, dependent arising, and the varied conditions through which results mature. The article distinguishes kamma from fate, divine judgment, and a simplistic one-action-one-result model, and explains how kamma-niyāma relates to other forms of conditionality. It concludes that kamma-niyāma expresses moral regularity within a plural causal world: actions matter, but not every experience can be explained by past kamma alone, and the Buddhist path aims to end the conditions that perpetuate suffering.



KEYWORDS: *kamma-niyāma; kamma; causal order; Theravāda Buddhism; paṭicca-samuppāda; Abhidhamma; commentaries, Cetana, Vipaka, Five niyama; dependent origination; causal order; moral causation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Causality is central to Theravāda Buddhist thought. The Buddha’s teaching explains experience not as the creation of a permanent self or an omnipotent deity, but through conditions: phenomena arise when supporting conditions are present and cease when those conditions end. Within this account, kamma has a distinctive moral significance. Intentional actions of body, speech, and mind shape future experience and character. Theravāda explanatory literature sometimes describes this regularity as kamma-niyāma, the order or lawfulness of kamma.

The term requires careful treatment. The fivefold classification of niyāmas—utu, bīja, kamma, citta, and dhamma—is familiar in modern Buddhist education, but it is not a standard five-part formula repeatedly stated in the early Nikāyas. It is preserved principally in commentarial and post-canonical Theravāda sources, including the Dīgha Nikāya commentary, the Atthasālinī, and manuals such as the Abhidhammāvatāra. Modern explanations should distinguish canonical teachings on kamma and conditionality from the later system that groups different regularities under five headings.

This article surveys kamma-niyāma in three contexts: canonical teachings on intentional action and results; the commentarial fivefold classification of natural and moral regularity; and the practical

implications of kamma for ethics, responsibility, and liberation. It argues that kamma-niyāma is not fatalism or a universal explanation for every event. It describes a dependable moral dimension of causality within a larger network of conditions.

2. KAMMA IN THE PĀLI CANON: INTENTION AND RESULT

The most direct canonical definition of kamma appears in the Nibbedhika Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.63): “It is intention (*cetanā*), monks, that I call kamma; having intended, one acts by body, speech, or mind.” This statement places intention at the centre of moral action. Physical movements alone do not define kamma in the ethically relevant sense; the volition informing an action is crucial. A deliberate act rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion differs morally from one rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

The same discourse connects kamma with its results (*vipāka*) and with the conditions under which results are experienced. The relationship is regular but not reducible to an immediate, mechanical exchange. Some actions bear fruit in this life, some in a later life, and some at a more distant time, depending on circumstances. The canonical teaching therefore affirms moral causation without claiming that every deed produces an immediately observable consequence.

The Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 135) presents differences among beings in relation to conduct, including killing, taking what is not given, and other forms of behaviour. Its explanations connect actions with corresponding results, emphasizing moral responsibility across lives. Yet the broader canon places kamma within dependent conditions and distinguishes the moral quality of an action from the full range of factors shaping a person’s experience.

The Loṇaphala Sutta (AN 3.99, numbering varies by edition) offers an important qualification through the simile of a lump of salt. A small quantity of salt makes a cup of water undrinkable, but the same quantity is scarcely noticeable in a large river. Similarly, the result of a minor bad action can vary according to the person’s development and the conditions in which it ripens. The discourse resists a crude model in which a deed produces an identical result regardless of context.

3. DEPENDENT ARISING AND THE WIDER CAUSAL FRAMEWORK

Kamma-niyāma must be situated within *paṭicca-samuppāda*, dependent arising. In the Nidāna Saṃyutta, the Buddha explains the arising of suffering through a structured series of conditions, including ignorance, formations, consciousness, craving, and clinging (SN 12). The formula is not simply a theory of moral reward; it describes how suffering is conditioned and how the cessation of its conditions brings cessation. Kamma is important, but it is not the sole cause of every phenomenon.

The Kaccāyanagotta Sutta (SN 12.15) presents dependent arising as a middle way avoiding the extremes of existence and non-existence. Instead of affirming an unchanging self that acts and receives results, or claiming that actions have no meaningful continuity, the teaching focuses on conditioned processes. This framework explains moral continuity without requiring a permanent agent: actions have consequences because causal processes continue, not because an eternal soul travels unchanged from one life to another.

The Paccaya Sutta (SN 12.20) uses the language *dharmatthitatā*, *dharmmaniyāmatā*, and *idappaccayatā*—stability of the Dhamma, regularity of the Dhamma, and specific conditionality. It states that conditional relationships remain whether or not a Tathāgata appears in the world. This passage is an important canonical basis for speaking of lawful regularity. It does not, however, itself lay out the complete later five-niyāma list. The discourses emphasize conditionality, while commentarial classification elaborates domains in which regularity can be observed.

4. THE FIVE NIYĀMAS IN THE COMMENTARIAL TRADITION

The fivefold *niyāma* scheme distinguishes five broad orders: *utu-niyāma*, associated with temperature, seasons, and physical processes; *bīja-niyāma*, associated with seeds and biological growth; *kamma-niyāma*, associated with intentional action and its results; *citta-niyāma*, associated with the order of mental processes; and *dhamma-niyāma*, associated with distinctive regularities of Dhamma

or extraordinary events described in Buddhist cosmology. Explanations vary among texts and later interpreters.

The scheme appears in commentarial sources such as the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, the commentary on the *Dīgha Nikāya*, and the *Atthasālinī*, the commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*. It is also discussed in post-canonical manuals, including the *Abhidhammavatāra*. These sources organize causal regularities into an explanatory framework. Their purpose is not necessarily to divide reality into five independent systems, but to show that conditional order is not confined to moral action alone.

The fivefold list is sometimes presented as though it were a direct quotation from the Buddha's earliest discourses or a Buddhist equivalent of modern scientific laws. Such claims overstate the evidence. The list belongs to the history of Theravāda systematization and should be described as such. Its categories can be useful, but their historical source and interpretive purpose should remain visible.

Kamma-niyāma identifies moral causation as one kind of regularity among several. Seasonal changes are not ordinarily explained as the moral result of an individual's action; seed growth depends on biological and environmental conditions; mental events arise in patterned sequences; and certain events are explained in the commentarial tradition through dhamma-niyāma. The classification discourages the assumption that every occurrence must be the direct fruit of an individual's past kamma.

5. WHAT KAMMA-NIYĀMA DOES—AND DOES NOT—MEAN

Kamma-niyāma means that intentional actions have morally significant consequences in accordance with conditions. It does not mean that every event is caused by past kamma, that the future is fixed, or that a person can infer another's moral history from present circumstances. The *Sīvaka Sutta* (SN 36.21) challenges the view that everything a person experiences is caused by what was done in the past. It lists other possible causes, including bodily disorders, climate, careless behaviour, and assault, alongside kamma. The passage warns against karmic reductionism.

This qualification has ethical consequences. To tell a sick, poor, or suffering person that their condition must result from bad past kamma is neither a justified inference nor a compassionate application of the teaching. The canon recognizes multiple causal factors. Present suffering may arise from physical, social, environmental, interpersonal, and psychological conditions. Kamma is one dimension of causality, not an all-purpose explanation that removes the need for medicine, assistance, or social responsibility.

Nor does kamma-niyāma imply fatalism. If all present action were irrelevant because the past had already determined the future, the Buddha's emphasis on training would make little sense. The path consists of intentional cultivation: right view, right effort, mindfulness, concentration, ethical restraint, and wisdom. Present choices are among the conditions shaping future experience. The teaching supports responsibility without claiming unlimited control over outcomes.

6. MORAL CAUSALITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND COMPASSION

The ethical importance of kamma lies in the fact that actions shape future results and the dispositions from which further actions arise. Repeated acts of generosity can strengthen generosity; repeated hostility can reinforce hostile habits. This psychological dimension is visible within a single life, while the traditional account also extends the continuity of kamma and its results across rebirth. The principle encourages practitioners to attend to intention rather than judge actions only by appearance or immediate success.

Kamma-niyāma supports a disciplined understanding of responsibility. A person is not an unchanging self who owns actions as permanent possessions, yet moral life is not meaningless. In dependent processes, intentional choices contribute to later conditions. This middle position avoids both eternalism and the denial of moral continuity. It also discourages blame: because actions arise from conditions, harmful conduct can be addressed by changing conditions, cultivating understanding, and supporting wholesome alternatives.

Compassion remains essential. The fact that kamma has consequences does not justify indifference to suffering. The canonical discourses commend generosity, kindness, and care. If someone

experiences hardship, the appropriate response is not to speculate about hidden past deeds but to respond to conditions that can be changed. The doctrine should deepen careful conduct and responsibility, not provide a rationale for victim-blaming or social neglect.

7. Kamma-Niyāma And Liberation

Kamma-niyāma concerns the moral efficacy of intentional action, but the final aim of Theravāda practice is not simply to accumulate favourable results. Wholesome kamma supports fortunate circumstances and a mind capable of practice; nevertheless, even good kamma belongs to conditioned existence. The path seeks the cessation of ignorance, craving, and clinging, the conditions sustaining suffering and renewed becoming.

The Noble Eightfold Path demonstrates the transformative role of present action. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood discipline conduct; right effort, mindfulness, and concentration train the mind; right view and right intention guide understanding and motivation. Ethical action creates supportive conditions, but liberation requires wisdom that penetrates the nature of experience. The teaching is therefore not merely a moral calculus in which good deeds purchase happiness.

The Abhidhamma and commentarial traditions develop analyses of wholesome and unwholesome kamma, types of consciousness, and conditions under which results occur. The Visuddhimagga discusses classifications of kamma by the time at which results are experienced and by the priority with which actions may ripen. These taxonomies attempt to explain why not every action produces a visible result immediately. They should be read as traditional analytical models, not as formulas by which ordinary observers can calculate an individual's future.

8. CONCLUSION

Kamma-niyāma is a useful Theravāda concept for describing the regularity of moral causation. Its canonical foundation lies in the Buddha's teaching that intention is kamma, that actions bear results, and that experience arises through conditions. The later fivefold niyāma scheme places kamma among other forms of regularity and helps resist the mistaken view that moral causation explains every event. Textual care is necessary: the fivefold list is principally a commentarial and post-canonical systematization, whereas the early discourses more commonly develop causality through kamma and dependent arising.

Properly understood, kamma-niyāma is neither fatalism nor a universal explanation for suffering. It affirms that intentional conduct matters while acknowledging that outcomes depend on many conditions. It supports ethical responsibility, encourages the cultivation of wholesome mental states, and leaves room for compassionate responses to suffering. Most importantly, the Theravāda path does not end with the accumulation of good results. It uses ethical and mental cultivation as conditions for wisdom and aims at liberation from the ignorance and craving sustaining suffering.

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