

MY SAY: The politics of karma

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Last year, when a Hollywood celebrity tried to relate a major earthquake to the state of karma (simply put: you reap what you sow), she was heavily criticised. Some demanded an apology. How dare an Anglo-Saxon speak about something that she does not know much about. The disaster is a phenomenon of nature, so what has karma got to do with it, argued some. The mood was unforgiving. One comment simply read: "Shut up, shameless woman."

So, when I chanced upon a commentary entitled "Blame our karma for our predicament", I was naturally curious. How so this time? That it was written by a non-Anglo Saxon woman — probably Buddhist, going by the name — made me even more curious.

Published in The Nation (Jan 12), a leading English daily in Thailand, a Buddhist-majority country, gave her the credentials I was looking for.

The chances are she is not all wrong and to share her view can be instructive to the Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. After all, she was talking about an unnatural form of earthquake — the economic kind — that is now engulfing the world. Because it is entirely human-made, it must be karma-related, as I deduced from the "shameless woman" incident.

Referring to the trillions of dollars of wealth wiped out worldwide because of the global economic crisis, the writer boldly asserted: "If you believe in the Buddhist theory of karma, human beings are now seeing the results of their own bad karma." How is this?

Well, the article recounted how lifestyles have changed for the better, becoming more comfortable since the dawn of the industrial age. Nothing wrong with that, I presume, although not everyone has the same level of comfort or quality of living. On the contrary, there is evidence that while there are many more rich people now, the gap between the rich and poor is also widening — at an alarming rate in some countries.

This is where the karmic argument begins to make sense. The writer asked: "In the past year, how many expired cans of food did you throw away?" She alleged that some of us "fill up refrigerators with food, much of which simply sits there past its expiry date". This is certainly an interesting observation that many of us take for granted because foodstuff is easily available, until recently that is.

Certainly, according to the commentary, there will be major future consequences following similar lavish and unsustainable habits.

The writer backed this up by giving current and relevant examples, like the diminishing fish stocks in the ocean as a source of food, higher emissions of greenhouse gases, melting ice shelves and frequent flooding that would most likely affect "more than half of the world's six billion people (who) live within 100km of the coast".

These are all now associated with human activities — buttressed by scientific evidence — which are leading to climate change and global warming. And if this can be linked to the more frequent occurrences of natural disasters, including earthquakes, then the karma theory can be invoked, presumably.

For now, I am just happy to find out that sustainability is associated with good karma and vice versa. And there is no better time to learn about this than during festivals like Chinese New Year and Thaipusam, where our karma is tempted more than at any other time. Moreover, at no other time is the karmic theory more significant than today, when the world economy is in turmoil.

The question is, can we change anything? The answer is yes, "but only through drastic and quick measures", which every government seems to be trying with the multi-billion-dollar stimulus packages — without much effect, at least in the foreseeable future. Some countries are desperately doling out money to be spent by its citizens. The Taiwan government, for example, reportedly distributed US\$2.5 billion (RMS.9 billion) worth of spending vouchers to its 23 million citizens recently in a bid to spur buying and prop up the economy!

While consumer spending might work and add so much of percentage points to gross domestic product growth, one is not sure whether it will chalk up better karma.

How does this translate to karmic fruitfulness, if at all? Whatever it is, as the writer reminds us, it is good to amend bad karma in this life, and not wait for the next.

In summary, it is far more desirable to live a sustainable way of life. At the same time, build cumulative

karmic capital to make up for the wasteful and lavish days as a form of economic retribution, in the hope of better days ahead. Such is the politics of karma!

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