Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 37:34

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

To start at the beginning to understand the Buddha's way of looking at what happens in the universe, he talks about the fundamental law which is known as the *paccayatā*, the law of this and that, *idappaccayatā*, the law of this and that. You can't get simpler than that.

So the law states: because this happened in the past, this is happening now. Because this hasn't happened in the past, this doesn't happen now. Because this is happening in the present, that is also happening in the present. And because that isn't happening in the present, that does not also happen in the present. Need I explain?

So the first one is concerned with kamma in terms of cause and effect, temporal cause and effect, passing through time. So you made a decision to visit a dentist and there you are. Cause and effect, passing through time.

However, if it were just that, if it were just that the present moment were conditioned by the past, then you're into predestination, aren't you? You're into a set pattern. It would be hard to see how you could get creativity. Perhaps the universe would just keep repeating itself. If things only happen because things arise in the now unconnected with the past, then you're looking at a chaos, aren't you?

If we can put those two concepts together, then we have the Buddha's understanding of what's happening in the universe. And in a sense, it approximates, as far as I understand, the modern theory of chaos. So, having read that book, and therefore, of course, presenting myself as an expert, it says in one example that the butterfly wing, the flap of a butterfly wing in Australia, ends up as a hurricane bursting its way through the United States. So, in the past we can see the butterfly wing, but conditions around it produce the turbulence, conditions around that produce further turbulence, and before you know it, you have a hurricane or a tornado.

So the law states that something is coming into the present and meeting other things coming from different pasts in the present, and hence you have a new creative situation. And the opposite is true. If something doesn't arise, something else happens. So the sun comes up and it's a lovely summer and the harvest is great. And the workers are out there and the money's earned and everybody's happy. The sunshine fails to come, the harvest doesn't happen, people don't eat, and there's famine.

All of us are here in this room having made decisions in the past, completely separate from each other. And here we are. Oh, happy gathering. So that's the law of *idappaccayatā*. That's what the Buddha saw as basically happening at that level.

When it comes to something that happens to human beings – so that's a physical law, you see, the law of physics, you might say – when it comes to something that happens to human beings, it's fairly easy to accept the law of kamma so long as we can see some justice. So they work hard and you get the money and you own a nice house. That's good kamma. You have a good life, but then unfortunately you get a bad illness. That's bad kamma. But that's the way it is.

When something outlandish happens, then it's difficult. So the murder of two little innocent girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. An earthquake in Turkey, or the one in Japan. Thousands of people just crushed. Or indeed, the people in the Twin Towers. So when we come across a real disaster which doesn't make sense, then this idea of human justice comes in. Something has to be just.

Now justice belongs to a system of punishment and reward. So in the 18th century it was perfectly just to hang somebody for stealing a sheep. Now you can commit mass murder and you go to jail. I'm not suggesting that that's not what should happen. It's just that, obviously, when we come to justice, reward and punishment, it's entirely dependent on what human beings think is justice. Remember the old Gilbert and Sullivan? The Mikado, isn't it? Let the punishment fit the crime. For his innocent merriment, that was the emperor, wasn't it?

So that isn't the law of kamma. The law of kamma is really stating that in fact all this business about reward and punishment is something that we produce for ourselves. It's our personal kamma. If we decide to punish somebody, then we're laying on that person extra suffering. Because whatever we do, there's got to be some consequence. That's the better word for kamma. Consequence. You do something and there's a consequence. There's an effect.

However, we are not in charge of the process that happens to an action once we've performed it. That's the problem. That butterfly never meant to do any harm. But it was put in jail for years for causing that hurricane. There was a case here in Totnes, I was told, of a charity group that collected clothes. Clothes for the poor in Africa. A very compassionate, loving idea. So they collected all these clothes and they all went to Africa. And they put all the tailors out of work. So that wonderful compassionate act ended up with massive suffering for a lot of people. Just because you do something out of the goodness of your heart doesn't mean that everybody's going to be happy with it. So the world is a very complicated place.

Now, if we say that kamma is much more to do with action and its product – and I'm using here kamma as we use it in the vernacular, in the ordinary sense of something that's resulted, that's not its actual proper use. Its proper use is just action. The result is, the proper word for that is *vipāka*. But just using it as we normally use it, bad kamma, good kamma – we can see that everything that happens to us is not our personal responsibility.

So the law of kamma is only one of five laws that the Buddha taught. Now, strictly speaking, I'm not absolutely sure that this was something he taught directly, because I can't remember, or whether it's something which was extrapolated from the text by later commentaries. But these five laws are, shall we say, a compendium of laws which hopefully explain why things happen to us as individuals, to us as we experience ourselves as individual human beings.

So the first one is known as the law of heat, *utu*, and it actually refers to what these days we would call physics, chemistry. Now, there are things that happen in that world which have nothing to do with us. An earthquake. You can't say that you were crushed in an earthquake because in a past life you stood on a thousand ants. The connection between all those ants that you very cruelly stood on in that past life and the movement of the earth with its tectonic plates is difficult to see. Did all those ants go down there and push those plates? It gets ridiculous. You can't measure what happens to you from the outside world as being your personal kamma. In fact, it seems a little arrogant.

The second law is *bīja*, and it translates as seed, and it equates to our genetics. So now we know the physical structure we have is the product of history. I mean, if you're born with a congenital disease, what can you do? It's come up to you from past generations. If, as we had that awful disaster in the 60s, I think it was, when thalidomide was produced as a help for women in pregnancy, and children were born without limbs. It's not a personal kamma. So when it comes to anything to do with genetics, this body has to be accepted as a product of past generations.

Now, there is a little side comment to make there. Because remembering Buddha says the mind and the body are intimately connected. Milk in water, the Buddha says. And we can see that when we produce in ourselves unwholesome states, it has an effect on the body. Very simply, we know that anger hurts the heart, we know that anxiety gives you bad indigestion. On that level, it's pretty obvious. But there's also suggestions that it can also change the very genetic structure, so that the gene patterns change, or fault, so that you come up with a fault line in a genetic pattern. And this carries on. This carries on as a history.

But it could also be other things. It could be all the radioactive pollution that we've got. All these poor animals up in the Arctic, these polar bears being born with all sorts of peculiarities because of this distortion in the genetic code through this pollution up there. So we can't say that they deserve that. So that's *bīja*, that's the business about genetics. So the body we end up in, well, that's just it, you've got to do your best. Not part of our personal kamma.

The third one is *citta*, which means mind. Now, strictly speaking in the commentaries, it refers to the way the mind works, what we would call psychology. But I don't think you can abstract that from the effects of society on the mind. So, through mind, you have to include culture. You have to include the language you speak, which orders your thoughts, gives you certain patterns of thinking which connects you with your civilization and on a very personal level connects you with the culture of your own family.

So your mind is that whole business of what we've constructed within ourselves, made within ourselves,

our emotional and thought life, that we've made within ourselves, but obviously in communion, in communication with the situation that we've found ourselves. Now we're not in charge of that situation, are we? If you happen to be born destitute in a family which is in the middle of Africa or India, it's a very different life, isn't it, from somebody who's born, say, in the West, generally speaking. Not to say there are not poor people here. But you've no control over that. That's what we're working with. That's the stuff that we've got to work with. So that's the mind, *citta*, in its general form.

Now the next one is kamma, and I'll leave that for a moment.

The last one is *dhamma*, and that's all the laws, the spiritual laws. So the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, all that. So they belong to another section in Buddhist understanding, which are laws which, if you follow, have certain effects.

So there's your five laws and one of them is kamma.

Now kamma is specifically to do with our intentions. As the Buddha says, it's quite clear. *Cetanāhaṃ cetanāṃ kamma vadāmi bhikkhave*. I call your will kamma. Now, the Buddha here is using kamma to mean action. Action. And the will is what empowers something to produce an action. And there are three actions. Actions of thought, actions of speech, and actions of body. And what you do is you are empowering, you are empowering an intention.

So this kamma, in terms of why we suffer, is contained in the wheel of dependent origination. In that wheel, what you have is the contact with the world. For those of you who know it, the *phassa*. That's the contact we have with the world. From that, we have an internal response, which we call feeling. Pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. And that's our reaction, response to the world as it comes to us. Whether it be a television set, somebody speaking to us, a meditation room, it doesn't matter. It arises in the heart a certain response, a certain feeling.

And we react to that coming from a self of either indulging what is pleasant or pushing away what is unpleasant. We're always caught up in that game. The self really doesn't have an option apart from just simply ignoring something. It's always caught up in the game. You've only got to watch yourself. The mind is always moving from, oh that's nice, oh no, I don't want that. It's always shifting.

As soon as you've decided on something that you want, as soon as you've decided that you like something or dislike something, then you have that reaction of wanting, not wanting. And that's your *taṇhā*. That's your desire. And as soon as that desire has arisen, there's an identification with the desire. I want. In our language, the I comes first. I want. But in Buddhist psychology, it's the other way around. Want I. There's a grasping onto it. That's why it's called *upādāna*. It's grasping onto it.

And as soon as you've done that, that desire is empowered. *Bhava*. And *bhava* translates as becoming. Becoming. So becoming and kamma and will are all the same thing.

Now, when you do that, two things are happening. First of all, there's an action which goes out into the world over which now we can see we have very little control. Whether I set up a good action of sending old clothes to Africa or a bad action of mugging some sweet old person on the street, after that, it's that butterfly wing. I don't know where it's going to go. I might get away with it. I might get away with this mugging. And it so happens the person has one million pounds in their pocket. It's pretty good. On the other hand, I might be taken to court by all these tailors in Africa and sued for ruining their jobs. Next time you send clothes, send us a wage. See?

So you don't know. Now, how much responsibility can we take for that? Because you've put it into the pot. Other people are going to grasp it. The environment is going to grasp it. Surely the only responsibility we can take is for our initial intention. As soon as other people join in, as soon as the environment takes hold of it, that's it. So we can't blame ourselves or find ourselves feeling guilty for things over which we've no control. But we can over our particular intention, the initial intention we had.

So, having made this decision, there's an action which goes out in the world over which we've got very little control and which will come back to us in some way. Come back to us in some way. So it may be, for instance, that I'm here preparing this wonderful charity and all these people are really getting cheesed off about it. And I go out there thinking what a wonderful thing it is that I've done. And I land and somebody shoots me in the head. Somebody doesn't like me. Am I responsible for that?

Now what is happening on the outside, something else is happening on the inside. So that action, that act of will is now producing a circumstance within my own mind.

So as soon as I intend something, I'm setting up a specific conditioning within my mind, within my heart. So if I intend something compassionate, I am producing a conditioning in myself to produce a compassionate heart. If I set up one intention which I empower, even in my thought, remember, it doesn't have to be speech or action, just in my thought, and I empower a cruel thought, I set up a conditioning for cruelty.

Now, you can see that we have two things here, two things happening. We have the outside world, over which I have little control, and the inside world over which I have total control. There's a real split. It's myself who's produced all these emotions, all this restlessness and depression and guilt. But I've also produced joy, compassion, peace. My inner environment is my own little domain.

I didn't know this as a kid, else I wouldn't have done a lot of things that I did do. But unfortunately, I'm stuck with what I've got. That's my ignorance, that's myself. That's me looking at the world as a place where I can be perfectly happy. Trying to manipulate the world so that I can be happy in it. But I'm also constantly creating this environment within myself.

So we can see that when something happens to us from the outside we may be only connected to it by way of being there. I mean, all those people in the towers, they were just there. Some of them were just there.

But somehow they were connected because of what they did, because of their job and all that. They were connected with all this business that's going on at this political level. But some of them were there just as tourists.

So now what is their kamma? In the sense of what is it that they've suffered as a consequence of something in the past? Or what is it that they're suffering as personal kamma? You see, if we say it was the crushing towers then we've got a lot of explaining to do. If we say it was their fear or their lack of fear, then that's them, isn't it?

So, in that situation, as in all situations of great stress, be it a war, be it an earthquake, or be it something as terrible as that, there's always this individual who is in that situation, in their own little world.

We see it as an objective thing. We see the wall, we see the towers collapse. But what the person there is experiencing is only what they're experiencing. And that's their suffering or non-suffering. And that's their *kamma*.

So there will have been somebody in that tower who will not have felt afraid and who will have felt a need for compassion to help people who were in dire straits. There will have been those who would have been killed outright. There wouldn't have been perhaps any feeling at all. There would have been those who died in abject fear, in terror. But that's them, that's their particular mental state produced by their own internal kamma.

What we're trying to do in our meditation is to purify the heart completely and to take away that initial mistake that we've made. It's a mistake of believing that this is what we are—this body, mind and heart psychophysical organism. I like that phrase: psychophysical organism. It's breaking through the delusion that that's what we are. And if that's not what we are, how can it ever cause us suffering?

So if we look at something like innocence, like these two little girls... Well, we know that there are many children these days who are in dire straits. And I'm just bringing back to memory now that the Moors murder, where they even taped the screams of the kids that they were torturing. They were on tape, for heaven's sake. So that for us, of course, is very difficult for us to bear. Because of the innocence of it. Even if it's somebody who isn't so innocent, it's difficult to bear. But when it's a child, it's extra specially difficult to bear.

So what then would be the understanding of kamma for those children? Well, for some reason, conditions outside them—this man, who knows how he came to be in that state of mind to commit that act—suddenly chooses them. Lots of children. Why choose them? Was it opportunism? Was it the fact that it just happened that they were there and therefore he was suddenly taken by this obsession? Who knows. Was it planned? Had he planned it before? Had he had some sort of special relationship with them? Who knows. It may come out in court.

But for those children, that whole time now has produced in them, one can only presume, this huge

conditioning of absolute terror—real hell, a real hell state. One can only presume that, at worst.

So now what happens is, in Buddhist understanding, is that this is something they will have to sort out in future lifetimes. So this fear—remember, has not been caused, and this is what you really have to grasp—this has not been caused by that man. Nobody can cause us psychological pain. That fear has been produced by their fundamental delusion, the same delusion that we have: that I am this body, I am what I appear to be.

Now, what happens in Buddhist understanding is that through the process of rebirth there is a working out of that, and everything that was unwholesome in that mind is eventually turned into its opposite. So the amount of fear that we have in us will produce the equal amount of courage once it's turned. The cruelty that we have in us will produce an equal amount of compassion. Because all it is, is an energy force. All the hate we have will turn into love.

But more than that, because as this transformation takes place, we can then continue to develop those qualities of joy, peace, love and compassion infinitely. Well, better word, indefinitely. Infinitely takes us into metaphysics. Indefinitely. Indefinitely in two ways: horizontally in the sense that since there are a limitable number of beings we can extend those qualities indefinitely that way, and vertically in the sense that there is no end to the depth of love, compassion, joy and peace we can feel.

So even though these two children have had to suffer, have had to go through an experience which has produced in them because of their delusion an awful and dreadful state of mind, in the fullness of time they will work it out and they will gain the benefit of that working out. So nothing is wasted. Nothing we suffer is for nothingness. It always will produce something beautiful in the end.

Now, the universe, as far as our consciousnesses are concerned, is so manufactured that we don't have a choice but to become enlightened. You don't have a choice. Only once in Buddhist history was there ever the dastardly theory that there were some people who would always be in *saṃsāra*—onward going. They were called the Ichikantas, those who would go on forever, because it was understood that there were some people who were just too thick. This awful doctrine remained only in a very small sect in Mahāyāna for a very short time and was banished.

And the reason is that the self is continuously trying to find happiness in this world. It only has two ways: It either must try to build up a very pleasurable situation, or it must run away from what is unpleasurable. So, the image is the base of a triangle. It's always running towards pleasure, or it's always running away from hatred, away from painfulness. It's always running up and down this base.

And that's what you're observing when you meditate. You're observing, this is *dukkha*. This is what the Buddha is talking about when he says suffering, unsatisfactoriness. Every time we hit the wall of pleasure, when the pleasure doesn't arise, when the pleasure we depended upon disappears, suffering arises. Every time aversion arises, every time something horrible arises, we run away from it, but it chases us. You can't

get away from your internal pain. You might think you're doing it. You can take drugs if you want, but it's still there.

So, this game, the Buddha says, at some point, this suffering awakens a person. And it awakens the person to find the end of suffering. And this is his own life, right? There he is, having a good time, and he comes across a very sick person, a very old person, and a corpse. You know the story. And each time he says, what is this? Because he's never seen anything like this before. And when they tell him he's a human being, his next question is crucial: Does it happen to me?

When that broke into his consciousness that he could grow old, sick, and die, he had what we would call a nervous breakdown—an existential identity crisis. And it shot him out in search of the end of suffering. And he found it.

Now, that's exactly what is happening to us. So I think that's it, really. I think I've done my bit.

Beginning with the fundamental law of *idappaccayatā*: because that happened, this happens. Now, because that didn't happen, this doesn't happen. Now, because this is here, that arises. Because this is not here, that doesn't arise. There's your fundamental plan.

So it allows an enormous creativity, especially when the human will comes into it. And remember, human will creates. Look what we've done to this planet. This is human will. It's human will that's doing this. On top of that, you've got all the laws of the universe around us. You've got also the laws of culture and the laws of civilisation. All these things we're in the middle of.

And in the middle of that there's this little puddle with its own little internal dynamic. And that's us, that's our little minds and our understandings. And although we have contact, there's a separation. We all live in a little personal bubble. My world—although none of us would disagree that this room is here, we've all of us had a different experience of it. Even if it's very similar, it's different. So we live in this little bubble and this little bubble is what we're creating. And if it's awful stuff, then we've got to do something about it, and we can. And if it's good stuff, then we increase it.

And all the time we're trying to discover how it is that this bubble is boiling and not cool. Why is it that we can't be in a very peaceful state, a joyous, compassionate, loving, peaceful state?

And remember that this individual, because of that wrong relationship to the world, whenever something happens in the world out there, will produce pleasant and unpleasant feelings. These pleasant and unpleasant feelings will produce a reaction. And the reaction is what causes all our fear, depression, anxiety, etc. It's not caused by the outside world, and that's the essential hope of the Buddha's message.

That an individual can completely cure themselves of all dissatisfaction and suffering in the midst of a horrible world or beautiful world. And you can do it in a very lifetime. In fact, you can do it in seven days if you come and join my course. That's what the Buddha says: seven days if you really work at it.

So, that's it really. Are there any immediate questions that arise out of that?

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