The Law of Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 41:48

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened one.

These past two talks really are more theoretical, just so that we can put our meditation into a greater perspective. Yesterday we looked at it from the point of view of the psychology that the Buddha taught. Tonight, just to go a bit wider into what we understand by *kamma*. So for many of us it will just be a bit of repetition, but it's worth reflecting on these things over and over.

Just as a warning: when Ānanda had been with the Buddha for quite some time, he said to him, "Bhagavan, Lord, I think I understand this dependent origination." And the Buddha said, "Oh no, Ānanda, this stuff goes deep, subtle." So that blew him out. Everything you hear from me you have to understand is not as deep as obviously somebody like the Buddha would go, but at least it gives us some indication.

Kamma is a very central concept to the Buddha's teaching, and of course it wasn't as though it wasn't known at the time. There were many ideas about *kamma*. *Kamma* here means action, more than karma with the R. Karma has come into our languages as result - you deserve it, it's your karma. But technically *k amma* means an act, and what follows is known as *vipāka*.

First of all, two general statements. The first one is about the way the Buddha saw our experience and the way it was understood at those times. The world and consciousness were one and the same thing. We, over a period of two or three hundred years, have separated the world out and seen it as very objective. It's brought us the scientific revolution, industrial revolution, technological revolution. It's brought us a huge load of gifts.

But we generally live under the delusion that what I see and feel really exists out there, and that it really is out there and I'm actually experiencing it as a true object. These days of course, with our neurobiology and all that, we've come to realize that in fact that's completely untrue, and that we live in a world that we have concocted ourselves in our own little brains within our own bubble of consciousness. The magic of it is that it does produce this world outside.

That doesn't mean to say the world outside doesn't exist. It exists - if all human beings disappear from this planet there'd still be the planet. It's not as though it doesn't exist, but we cannot see it in itself.

What this means is that when you're reading the scriptures, when you hear a questioner ask "How do you get to the end of the world?", we might think he's talking about a flat planet because in those days most

civilizations thought the earth was flat. But generally speaking, it was always meaning: where do we get to the end of consciousness? Where does the world end? In that phrase I quoted last night - there is a consciousness which has nothing in it, it's not manifested, without boundary and in all directions full of light - the questioner had asked where do the four great elements come to an end? By which he means, where does the world come to an end?

And the Buddha says, that's the wrong question. He said, that's a mistaken question. The question should be: where do the four elements not find a footing? And then he comes out with this phrase. In other words, this consciousness which we are close to when we are in the state of the observer is something which is beyond this phenomenal world.

The real point about *kamma* is that the world we are living in is truly being created by us. It depends on our eyes of course what we see, our ears - a lot depends upon the culture we're in, the way we understand things. That's all information coming in, but what we actually experience is actually being created by us. If this room, for instance - nobody would deny it disappeared if we all left, but all of us have a different experience of this room. So there are as many rooms here by way of personal experience as there are people.

Now what this means is: if I'm creating my world, if I'm truly creating my world and it's a mess, then it must be me that's creating the mess. If I'm suffering, nobody's causing it - it's me, I'm doing it somehow. So then there is this investigation of: well, what am I doing to create this mess? And that's the process of *vipas sanā*, the process of insight.

The next thing is to understand what the Buddha means by causality, and it's known as the *idappaccayatā*, which means "the law of this and that." To put it simply: because that happened, this happens; and because that didn't happen, this doesn't happen; and because this happens now, this happens; and because this doesn't happen now, this doesn't happen.

At first sight you'd think, well that's a little bit "this and that." The first one is the linear causality which most of us would understand very simply as: because this happened in the past, this happens now. For instance, at the end of the week when you look at your bank account and you've seen the wages go in, then you know that's because you just worked this past week. If you didn't, it wouldn't go in. There's a definite way of looking at what's happening now with its relationship to what's happened in the past.

Now the problem with that is: logically speaking, where would creativity come in if everything is some repetition of the past or caused by the past? It would suggest a very repetitive universe, like a mechanical wheel. And from a moral point of view, it would definitely suggest some form of fate or predestination, because how can you change anything if it's determined from past action? Sometimes you do get the feeling that things have happened to you as a fate. So having only that view of time, that view of the way things happen, puts us into a strange place. It wouldn't make any sense to think about looking at our intentions and being able to change them because everything would have happened anyway - all because

of something in the past.

The other one is: because this happens now, this happens. This is much more immediate. From a linear point of view, we've all arrived in this room. But from an immediate causality point of view, the whole situation would be different if even one of us left. It's taken all of us to create this course. If all of us hadn't been here, this course wouldn't be here now. If you all suddenly decided this Bodhidhamma is just a load of rubbish and you all get up and left, the course will come to an end. That'll be the end of it. So the fact that we're all here means that I can give forth. That brings us into an immediate causality.

Now the problem with that one is: if everything is just immediate, then presumably we're looking at a chaotic universe because there's no connection between anything. Anything could happen anytime depending on what was happening at the present moment. There wouldn't be any sense or connection. And morally speaking, that leads us to an amorality because you murder somebody and maybe get away with it, maybe you don't. You rob a bank and you might get away and you might not, and that's because of present conditions.

That leads us into an impossible situation from the Buddha's point of view if we think that our actions have future effect. If you live in a chaotic universe, well, you don't know what's going to happen. There was a case - listening to this news - this man, crazy fellow, unbelievable really, married this poor woman and within a week or a year of their marriage he killed her, caused a crash, set this car on fire, and claimed this massive amount of insurance, and got away with it. Then he tried it again in New Zealand - he got copped. Then they found him, he escaped, and they found him later trying to get this poor woman to give him her will, give him all her money. You might think, well, if he'd have got away with that, we live in a chaotic universe. It doesn't really matter, there's no connection. You can get away with things. That would lead us to a position where morality wouldn't be so important.

Now, the Buddha's position is that there are both of these laws. There's both this causality coming from the past, and there is also this contingency, this immediate meeting of these different lines of *kamma*, these different lines of actions. We can include in this all nature as well. Physically, the physical universe and the plant life and the animal life and the human life are all converging all the time into little events which are a compendium of all these streams of actions coming from who knows where.

What this gives us is a very creative universe, because first of all there's always some connection to the past - there's a rationality to the process - but also there's an unknowability because you don't know exactly what's going to meet. If you just look at a natural disaster - this dreadful tsunami in Japan - that was happening from one law and these people were just getting on with ordinary living and suddenly this happened. That's looking at it in a negative sense, but also in a beautiful sense: the weather suddenly becomes beautiful and everybody's out on the beach. There are things coming from the past but they're meeting in the present, and the effect of their meeting in the present is unknowable. In that sense we live always in that sense of uncertainty. We don't know the hour, the day, the time when we're going to drop

dead. If we knew that, well, we could run from it, we could try and get around it somehow.

So it's that unpredictability and yet this amazing creativity. When you take it into the human realm, what you have is philosophy, art, technology - that's all working on these same principles. Things are coming to us from the past, people are meeting in the present, minds are meeting and suddenly something is produced.

You might say that's the basic template upon which the Buddha understood the world to be behaving.

Then there are these five laws, of which *kamma* is only one. The first one is the law of heat, as it's translated, or energy, which we can very easily translate into physics and chemistry. It's that level of matter - the mineral world as they would talk about it - and of course that has its own laws. We just talked about the tsunami, earthquakes. There are these different laws running alongside each other, and every so often they produce something beautiful such as this planet, and other times they can be quite destructive. But there is this law concerning the material world.

The next one is *bījaniyāma*, which means seed. So here we're talking genetics. The bodies that we have ended up with are the product of past generations. The actual original cell of our body contains with it stuff that's come from the past, material stuff that's come from the past. When it develops, it develops in the particular way of that original seed. Again, this isn't our personal *kamma*.

I'm sure some of you will remember the English manager talking about congenital diseases or being born - Glenn Hoddle. He says he was misinterpreted, but he said that if you're born with a deformity, that must be because you did something horrible in the past life. That disgusted so many people that he lost his job. And of course, that wouldn't be the Buddha's point of view. Although, in a sense, that's the way traditional Buddhists would actually think about it because they transpose this personal *kamma* onto everything. Even when the tsunami hits Sri Lanka, they might come up with some idea that that was personal *kamma*.

Just on that note, there's this tale in the tales after the scriptures, that are all added on to Buddhism. One of them is, I thought, rather telling, in which a ship is going along and it suddenly stops. There's a wind up, but it suddenly stops. So the captain wonders what to do and asks the monks - there's a group of monks there - what they think is happening. The monks went into deep and profound concentration and discovered actually it was his wife. His wife in a past life seems to have drowned so many dogs, so the only way the ship would move was to chuck her overboard. That's a clever way of getting rid of your wife, isn't it? Anyway, they did so and the ship moved on.

So you get this dreadful mechanical type of *kamma* taught to kids and everything. I once asked this elderly man who used to look after us at the monastery - I was just generally interested, we were talking about *ka mma* and this and that - I said to him, "Why do you think Jesus Christ ended up on the cross, dying such a painful death?" He said Jesus must have done something terrible in a past life. There just isn't the concept that you can suffer for compassion's sake or for love's sake.

This idea of our bodies being personal *kamma* also doesn't work because it comes from situations which are simply not under our control. We just end up with this body. Of course, when we're in the body, when the mind and what we do to the body gets in there, well then that is part of our personal *kamma*. But the original structure and all that is there. That's how you get family diseases. All mine, up until now apart from one, die of strokes and heart stuff. So I'm expecting to go any moment. I'm coming to the age when I should fall off a cliff or something. That comes through the family, and it may be that this is because some earlier generation was immoral in some way and has caused a weakness within the genetic structure.

This lovely thing that you read in the Bible: that the sins of the father will be on the generation for seven generations. That's very interesting because there were some reports I read where...

If your grandmother or grandfather was overweight, then it's probable that you will be. And that's how quickly the genetic structure can be changed and affected. So if we care for our future generations, stay slim. So there's that whole area of genetics and our bodies as physical, which is not part of personal *kamm a*. That's the important thing.

The next thing is *citta*. So *citta* is your mind—psychology. And here, some writers stretch that out to include our society, because society is simply a conjoining of minds. What we're really talking about here is just the fundamental way the mind works. So in other words, we have sense bases, which brings in certain stimulus. The brain-mind complex—remember, in Buddhism the mind and the brain are two different forms of energy; there's not just the material brain there—but putting that aside, there's this whole mentation process going on which is producing for us images, thoughts, etc. And it's obvious that there's some sort of physical base to our thoughts and feelings. That comes under mind itself. Some writers stretch that out into sociology, but it really depends on where you want to put the dividing line between that and *kamma*.

Leaving *kamma* aside just for a minute, the fifth one is, of course, the spiritual laws, which is what we learned from the Buddha. Just the law of—well, the first one was cause and effect, but it's mainly to do with the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path and those instructions that take us out of the world of suffering. So all that is also a separate area.

If you keep those divisions of the world separate, then you've got this business of *kamma*. Now, we've said that we create our own worlds. The next one is to do with understanding that all our suffering and joys are an ethical problem. The whole psychology in Buddhism is to do with ethics—it's ethicized, as it's put. For instance, when somebody now falls into depression, we would see that rightly as maybe a medical problem, a psychological dis-ease, and I think that's perfectly skillful and perfectly alright. But from the Buddha's point of view, the fundamental problem would be an ethical problem. And this ethical problem isn't to do with a simple morality of right and wrong—it's to do with relationship.

If we go right back to the beginning, all this massive suffering—all the depressions and the anxieties and the worries and the guilt and all that—all come about because of this wrong relationship with the world,

which substantiates itself into a feeling of me, the self. The self isn't, remember, a thing—it's a process. It's a bit like the word marriage. A marriage doesn't exist; what exists is an ongoing relationship. Some writers use the word "selfing" just to get that point across, that it's a process of becoming somebody else all the time.

We think of our mental problems as perhaps medical, and we tend to psychologize things, whereas from the Buddhist point of view it would be much more of an ethical problem. Now, it doesn't particularly help knowing that if you suffer from depression—you've got to treat it as a mental dis-ease, and we're getting rather good at that generally speaking in this society: coming off drugs and teaching people how to use mindfulness.

This *kamma* is to do with our ethics, which is specifically to do with the way we're creating suffering. Once we've grasped that, then we understand what this *kamma* is. It's nothing to do with the outside world. It's to do with the inner world. It's to do with the world I'm creating. That's my real *kamma*.

For instance, I've just pointed out this guy who's committed these murders. So he's going to end up in prison. Now prison itself is not the suffering. The suffering will be how he can bear with that situation. And that situation is within his own mind. So what happens to us from the outside is not our personal *kam ma*. It's not the *kamma* which leads to liberation. It's always what's happening inside.

And that's what we're working with when we practice *vipassanā*. So when we sit here, and somebody coughs just at the point when we're going to become fully liberated, and then we get all angry and hot about it, then that's it. We've created this world of heat and horror. Actually, all there was was a cough—it was just a sound—but we've turned it into a disturbing noise.

If we can grasp the idea that when the Buddha's talking about liberation and *kamma*, he's talking really about the world we're creating inside ourselves—that's the real *kamma*, that's the real comeuppance—so when you do something harmful, the karmic result of that is not being put in jail. Sure enough, that's obviously a result of it. The karmic result is the feeling of guilt and shame and having to live in a room for the rest of your life. And how you deal with that. So that's where spiritual *kamma* is—that's where the escape is from suffering. It's within us.

Whatever happens to us from the outside, which may have some direct causality with us—I might have done something in the past which now produces some bad or some good results—heaven's sake, like you buy a lottery ticket and you win a load of money, well that's pretty straightforward, that's good *kamma*—b ut that's not the *kamma* of liberation. The *kamma* of liberation is to do with how we're now becoming attached to money and how it's drawing us into a wrong relationship with the world and which will eventually cause suffering.

Once we grasp the difference between what you might call an outer *kamma*, which is all related, it's all contingent, and this inner *kamma*, then you're much more concerned with the inner *kamma* because it's

the inner *kamma* which is actually producing the suffering, not the outer *kamma*.

For instance, these days people are losing their work. Well, to lose your job is bad enough. To lose the finance that the job gives you is bad enough. But then there comes loss of status. What do I do now? I've always defined myself as an engineer. And now what am I? I've always defined myself as a doctor. What am I now? I always define myself as a bureaucrat. Now, what am I now? And it's that loss of identity which is going to create all the depressions and all that sort of stuff. And that's unnecessary. That's the point. It's all come about because of a wrong relationship with the work you're doing.

Tomorrow we'll go into what might be a right relationship so that suffering doesn't arise. The obvious word is service—to see your life as a service. And if it's not wanted, well, that's okay. You've entered into it with a proper intention.

So that's the clarity we need when we're looking to the end of suffering. We're creating our own suffering. Nobody can cause us psychological suffering. Can you grasp that? Nobody can cause you that. Physical suffering, yes. Nobody causes psychological suffering—that's all an internal process. And if it were not so, how could I become fully liberated from suffering unless I get rid of you lot? I've got to get rid of all human beings and anything that disturbs me before I can become fully liberated! It's the very fact that I'm creating my own suffering that means that I can uncreate it and enter into this state, this relationship with the world, where there's no more psychological suffering. That's the point.

So what you're saying here is that if I did something that is considered really bad, say, killing someone, if I decided that actually I'm very happy about this, and I'm not going to be upset because I'm going to be in prison, and I'm going to deal with this in a good way, then actually, punishment doesn't need to exist?

What happens is that that attitude is a very surface attitude. And it's not really connecting with the true heart of the person. So what happens is that one becomes callous. And then what happens is that callousness goes out into the world and the world begins to mirror back your callousness.

Jung talks about this woman who turned up at his office and she had murdered her rival because she wanted to marry this man. And she had come to a point in her life where she realized that all her children didn't want to know her. She'd lost all her friends. All these catastrophes happened. And she made the connection that it all went back to this murder. And he said in his book that he felt she'd suffered enough. There was no point of him reporting this to the police. She already understood what happens when you do something harmful.

In a sense, even that doesn't make sense unless you see some continuity after death, because you might get away with it and you might live a good life. Even if you do become callous, you still might end up generally happy, and that would seem to us a little unjust. So here we have the doctrine of rebirth.

Now the doctrine of rebirth—just very quickly—it's not something you can scientifically prove. How can you scientifically prove it? Those people who remember their past lives, and there's a lovely clip that's

going around on the websites about this young boy in America who remembers himself being killed during the Second World War against the Japanese. He was in an airplane, and he remembers it quite distinctly. And the Japanese director is very interested in this and takes him out to where his plane went down. The interesting thing is he remembers his sisters and he says things about his sisters who are still alive in America. He remembers all about them. And he knows exactly where the plane went down. And they even found somebody who was on the ship who remembered him and who remembered where the plane went down. And this is all done by a little boy of about nine, ten, eleven. And of course he's got this creed that we shouldn't go to war.

You get stories like that plenty in the East. I think probably in the West we still suppress these things a little bit. But if we understand that there is this consciousness, there is this Buddha nature, and it finds itself in a material world, it finds itself in this physical world, forms a relationship to this physical world where it thinks that this world is me, and in so doing it forms an unethical relationship which creates acquisitiveness, greed, thieving and all that, and aversion, fear and all the rest of it—when it leaves, upon death, we can see it wanting to seek a similar world elsewhere. It's seeking always rebirth. Even outside in the mental body, it's still seeking—I don't know, we call them ghosts, but basically they are these beings that have found rebirth exactly around the places where they died.

This consciousness is always seeking where its happiness is, and that's why it's drawn back into another life form constantly, into another life form. In the verse that we chant in the morning of the Buddha's birth, he's been born from life to life to life, but he's found the house builder. He's found this mechanism that keeps creating the house, this body, this mind. And he said he's broken the rafters, smashed the poles, all very terrible stuff. And he said, "I have now achieved the *cittam asaṅkhataṃ*"—which means the unconditioned consciousness—"and all my defilements are destroyed."

And that's the point. The whole thing about rebirth—without trying to work out its detail in hell realms and the whole cosmology of it—is that process whereby this *cittan*, this consciousness, is constantly seeking happiness and it's making this mistake. So that's why it keeps being reborn. And so when it achieves its liberation from that delusion, there's no knowing. We don't know what happens to that consciousness. Later tradition says the Buddha reappears in a blissful body and so on. But generally speaking, the Buddha was silent, because it was beyond descriptions, beyond words.

What you come back with is attitude. And this attitude manifests within a given society as patterns of behaviour. So if you come back with greed, you're going to find yourself in a greedy situation, because you're manufacturing the greedy situation. If you come back with hatred, you find yourself in it. If you come back with love—well, that has a strong effect, just like when you go to sleep. If you go to sleep with some big anxiety on your mind, what do you wake up with?

Now that's what I always point out: if you want to understand rebirth, see what's happening now, because it's happening right now. We're rebirthing right now from moment to moment—not the same, not

different. Not the same, not different. The connection's there, but there's something different, and that's where the creativity comes in.

The Buddha would point out that what drives us to seek the end of suffering is suffering. Very simple. If we didn't suffer, we wouldn't bother about it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your careful investigation of the mind and the world we live in, attain that peace sooner rather than later.

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