Kamma Revisited

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:47

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambhudassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambhudassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambhudassa

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

Following on from the talk on dependent origination, there's usually a need to talk about *kamma* and what the Buddha says about *kamma*, because obviously there's sometimes a lot of confusion about it. The Buddha was quite clear that what we experience isn't always our personal *kamma*. So we have to be pretty clear what we mean by *kamma*, or else we're going to get into all sorts of silliness.

To give you a rather strange example of that, we had an elderly man who used to look after us at the monastery. He swept the paths and things like that, and I said to him one day, "Why do you think Jesus Christ ended up being crucified? He must have done something terrible in his past life." There was no concept that one might suffer out of compassion. One might, for instance, like these people who undergo torture and terrible things for political freedom. It's like they must have done something bad in their past lives.

It's funny, Noreen, whom some of you know, she's had this operation to take away the larynx so she can't speak. And somebody said to her, "You must have done something terrible in your past life." That didn't make her feel very well, and I said, "Yeah, something that we've done in our past lives does come through, but what about something done to us in our past lives that has also been worked out?" So supposing you're stuck in, say, Syria at the moment and you're just an innocent kid and you get blown up. That's in your system—that has to be worked out. And in your next life somehow you're going to have to process that so that it clears out of your system. So all this business about things that happened to us—it must have been something that I did that was terrible—just doesn't hold.

Now of course when we talk about *kamma* there's a presumption of future lives, future births, which presents a problem of how that process happens. And there are Buddhists—they call themselves Buddhists, secular Buddhists—many of whom don't believe in that at all. They just think you die and that's the end of it. So really, that's just something that you put on the back burner.

The Buddha was also up against that sort of scepticism. He said, "Look, if you follow the Dhamma, follow the good life, then you'll get the benefits in this life. If there is a future life, then you'll get the benefits there as well." So it's like we practise just for practice's sake because it does better our lives.

We talk about the five *niyāma*, the five laws, and many of them approximate to what we understand. They

are the physical laws, the laws of heredity, the psychological laws, then the law of *kamma*, and then spiritual laws. And so you can see there it's one of five that might happen to us.

When this terrible tsunami happened, quite a while back now, it really killed a lot of people on the seaboard of Sri Lanka and of course other places—Indonesia and places like that. And there would have been many who would have been at ease with that on the grounds that they'd done something terrible in their past lives. It's a very Eastern way of looking at things, and the fact that we live in a world that's impermanent and all that. Many good-hearted therapists, Western therapists, went out to help them and found they really didn't need that much help. It's only Westerners who can't handle the way things really are that need therapy, it seems.

As soon as you are born into this world, of course, you're part of a matrix. And if you happen to be born in an earthquake area and you're walking on the street and suddenly you're swallowed up and crushed to death, that's just part and parcel of the contract and it's nothing to do with you personally. Once we can see that when you get these strong winds, somebody dies because of these strong winds, or they're carried out to sea and drowned—all that belongs to the fact that we're on this earth. It's just a simple fact.

The *kamma* which is to do with liberation is how the person reacts when they're in that situation. Years ago there was an earthquake in Brazil, and I remember it because of this little story. Days on—can't have been that many days, but days on—they found this woman with her young child, to my memory under three, a very young child, completely locked into this little space. And to feed the child, she'd cut her finger so that the child could suck the blood and survive beyond her.

Now when you read that story, you can see that that woman is—what can we say?—because she's with her child and her love goes out to her child, she's able to transcend the situation. Whereas others might have died in absolute abject fear, slowly, horribly. So you can see in a case like that that it's how the person reacts. It's always this *taṇhā*—what we talked about yesterday or the day before about the way that we react to things coming from this delusive place. So that would be your *kamma*.

If you found yourself in a road accident or a tree blows over and hits you on the head for some such reason, how you react to that—that's your suffering. The actual what happens to your body is just pain. So we learn that here on the cushion. We sit in a position and there's pain in the knees. That's just pain. And what we discover is by taking this attitude of investigation, objectifying it, then there's no suffering. There's not that secondary arrow that the Buddha talks about, those secondary darts. So there's a real distinction to be made there.

Then there's this business of heredity. So the bodies we end up with are the product of who knows how many generations, and if you happen to be born with some birth defect or a disability, now that isn't your personal *kamma* either. It's how you deal with it.

There's always an example I point to when I talk about this. I stayed at Amaravati, the Buddhist monastery

just north of London, for a while, and a young man came who had a hereditary illness which really distorted all his limbs and he virtually couldn't do anything for himself. It was like that, and he was bedridden mainly. And very light-hearted, very interested in spiritual matters, very much at ease, and seemingly accommodated to his situation, to his condition.

But the story went that when he began to develop this in early childhood, the parents had asked the doctor whether this would happen again, and they all said, "Oh, it's a million, a hundred million to one." Unfortunately, the daughter they had also began to develop this very same thing. And the story goes that she was very embittered by it, very distraught and had not really come to terms with it.

So you can see there again, you have the body and then you have the reaction to it. And that was her *kam ma*. That's the *kamma* which is creating suffering. *Kamma* here means actions. Not the product of your action. So it's a case of recognising that what we have from heredity is a given. And again, that's the way it is.

When I was a teenager, I did lots of exercises to grow taller. Lots of suffering. Nothing happened. Terrible. It was worse when my hair fell out. Suffering. God, there was suffering. Spent pounds on special lotions. I don't know, somebody made a lot of money out of me, that's obvious. If I'd have known I was going to become a monk, I wouldn't have worried so much.

So that's just one of those things. I should have missed it, by the way, because my father was as bald as a coot. So I should have missed it, my generation should have missed it, but my mother's family also had baldness. So I got stricken.

The next one is the laws of psychology, which is what we studied, what we talked about the other night. The *citta*, the mind. In this language the word *citta* refers to both the mind and the heart. Remember we split these two in our great Enlightenment. But in the old, in the old pre-Enlightenment days, pre-17th century or something, it was understood in Christianity you had a body, a soul, and a spirit. And the soul, really, was your body and mind. And this goes back to the Greeks, and it was just understood that we're made up of these three things. Body, heart, mind, and the spirit.

So this word *citta* actually is that, and often in the East when people talk to you and they say "I think," they point to the heart—they don't point to the head. They're still coming from how they feel about things as well.

So the important thing there is to recognise that your *kamma*—if the brain, for instance, begins to go sick, you'll end up with Alzheimer's or dementia. That's not your personal *kamma*, it's just what you're ending up with. If you haven't got a very good memory, you haven't got a great intelligence because you haven't got a good memory, all these sorts of things—they're not your personal *kamma*. I mean we'd all wish to be geniuses, but unfortunately they're few and far between.

So there is that law going on, there's the law of perception that comes in. You can't see anything else but

what your eyes will give you. It's a full stop. You can't hear beyond what your ears will offer you. You're trapped in this sensory bubble. And that's it. Not to say that we can't extend our hearing through various devices and stuff like that, but it's a case of recognising that the whole psychology of perception, of memory, of understanding, of intellectual thought—all that belongs to the mind, the body-mind complex, the brain-mind. In Buddhism the mind is separate from the body. The Buddha talks about it as the subtle body or the mental body, and that's what separates at death and takes rebirth.

And then we come to *kamma*, which I'll come to in a minute. And then there's the spiritual laws. So the spiritual laws are all those things concerning the teachings of the Buddha basically. So it would be the Four Noble Truths, the hindrances, how to deal with them, the fact of enlightenment which we've touched upon—all those things come under the spiritual laws.

And as soon as you meditate, as soon as you meditate and you put yourself into that position of awareness, the spiritual laws begin to manifest. You don't have to do anything. So with awareness, with this right awareness, the other factors just arise naturally to support it. So there has to be concentration there, there has to be the effort to maintain it, there has to be the interest which is driving the investigation, there has to be the equanimity. Even though as you become more skilful you can see that some of these things can be a bit out of balance—too much effort especially, that's the usual one—the fact is when you have right awareness all the factors are there.

And just on that point, because this is often confusing, when we begin meditation we start with calmness usually. That calmness is a body feeling and it's also a mental thing—calm, still, silent. There might be just moments of it. Now it begins like that as a mirror in the body, heart and mind of the quality of calmness. But as you pull out of that into the observer, all these factors are within the observer. The observer is calm even though the body is restless. That's why in that inner eye, that inner looking of the awareness, once it's positioned itself, once it's found this observation post, all the factors must be there. They can't not be there.

Then of course we make mistakes because we perhaps over-effort. We start looking for something rather than looking at something. Or we get a bit lazy and then you fall asleep. But when it's right awareness, all the factors are there. They arise naturally.

And the whole business that we're talking about with hindrances, all these unwholesome mental states and stuff like that—just observing them allows them to dissipate. That's a spiritual law, how to purify the heart.

So remember, part of the process, there's two processes going on. There's the purification of the heart from all this negativity and its growth in beauty, *mettā*, all that. And on the other side, there are these insights going on which is fundamentally changing our relationship to the world so that we don't keep making the same mistakes.

So these things happen quite naturally, and this is the magic of it, quite naturally once you're in that state of awareness. That's why the Buddha's always on about awareness. And if you were to choose one word which encapsulates the whole of the Buddha's practical teaching, it would have to be *sati*, this one word. It all hangs on this one word, *sati*.

So now we've talked about *kamma* in terms of what it isn't. So I suppose we should say what it is. It's important, I think it's also important to understand how the Buddha saw things happening. Because one of the mistakes that we can also make is the idea of fate. That things just happen to us and we've no control. That it was fated that the tree fell on top of me. It was just fate that I ended up being brought up an English person. You see what I mean? Everything happens to me because I can get the feeling that I don't really have a choice. The feeling is that things just happen to me. Or that when I do make a choice, the choice is conditioned anyway.

And this arises in Christianity with this whole idea of God knows everything. So he knows you're going to be saved or not from all times. You get Calvinism. Predestination. So it doesn't matter what you do in this life. You're going to be saved or not saved. Sounds a bit wicked to me, but there we are.

So this idea of how do you get beyond that idea of fate, and on the other hand there's this idea of some sort of chaos that things just happen—there doesn't seem to be any order whatsoever. So the Buddha's understanding around causality was that yes, because of something in the past, something happens now. Because something happened in the past, something happens now.

You know, if you buy a lottery ticket and you win some money, that's because you bought the lottery ticket. Of course, I'm not suggesting you buy a lottery ticket. It's terrible, terrible. And on the other hand, if you didn't buy it, you can't win. So there's also this omission as well. Something that you didn't do will also have its effect. So that would be a progression in time.

And you can see that if that was the fullness of why things happen, then you would be into fate, because it's already predestined from the past. You did this, and now this has happened.

But the other thing the Buddha points out is that because something happens now, something is happening. And to understand that, it's a case of recognising that when you do something, it doesn't go into a vacuum, it goes into a matrix. So you never know the consequence of what you've done.

So here, for instance, all of you had this idea to come to Satipaña, from all sorts of different places. And the arrival here, now, is a consequence of all that. And this wouldn't have happened were it not for those decisions made in the past. And you were coming here not knowing, anyway, not knowing what the hell was going to happen. See what I mean? It's like you don't know. And when you get here, there are all these strangers, all these horrible people.

So it's a case of recognising that what happens now also is having an effect in the now. So, if you can imagine all these strands of past actions, the physical world, the biological world, the psychological world,

personal decisions, all meeting every moment. Now, if it were just that, then you could see, well, where would there be any order? It would be quite chaotic. And it's the conjoining of these two that's a sort of paradox.

That some things are ordained from the past and yet come into the present and meet things that they didn't expect. And therefore every moment has this creativeness about it. This creativeness about it. So that we never know what's going to happen next. Absolutely. You never know absolutely what's going to happen next.

So you can see there how the Buddha explains the fact that things are ordered and yet we have creativity. And that undermines the idea of fate. Because if you're aware of this present moment and its constituents, then the decision you make is dependent upon what's in the now, not what's in the past. And then that affects your future. So there's always a possibility of change, changing personally as an individual, of changing the path, of changing what you're doing. And you get that feedback loop comes back to you, keeps coming back to you, and then you wake up.

Take, for instance, somebody who goes through multiple relationships. And at first the other person is absolutely glorious – I'm so lucky and all that. A couple of months, two or three months down the line, I don't know what the hell I saw. And this keeps going on – they're horrible, people are absolutely horrible. And then suddenly they wake up one morning and they suddenly grasp, maybe it's me. And just a little small insight that maybe I'm also part of the cause of these multiple relationships – that helps them to correct their, make decisions, correct their path, and then hopefully find something a little more lasting.

So that's the idea of how things come to be, the law of causality. So *kamma* then becomes really what you do, your actions. And remember that we come back now to intention. Everything that happens, we have a reaction towards because of past history towards what's happening. So if you hear beautiful music, there's a tendency to want to listen to it and to really enjoy it, and sometimes to indulge in it – keep playing over and over and over. That's conditioning. This is what we mean by conditioning, or this word *saṅkhāra* that we chant, and that's all been conditioned in the past. And in this present moment when it arises again, it always comes up with an intention. And that's your *taṇhā*.

So *taṇhā* is wrong intention. I'm only speaking now about unwholesome *kamma*, but there is, remember, wholesome *kamma*. So you've got *kamma* which comes out of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, reciprocal joy. And that, of course, would develop the better side of us. So always comes this intention.

Now one of the things that I haven't particularly pushed on this retreat, but I would do so on a full Mahāsi, is really noting intentions. So there's the noting, but it's the noting of intention which is so crucial. Intending to open the door. Intending to eat. The fact that you're saying it is the intention. And what we're trying to understand is that even the smallest action, even me doing this business, shaking my hands about, even that has some intention in it. Even if it's only subliminal, there must have been some intention.

There's a lovely example of that given in the Visuddhimagga, which is a later work, but it's seen as Theravāda Buddhism. It's written by a monk that was called Buddhaghosa. And in it he talks about, there was a teacher giving a talk, and suddenly he raised his hand and stopped talking, and then in silence he put his hand back. So the student said, what happened? He said, I didn't note the intention of moving my hand. That's how, you see? So you can see how advanced he was compared to me. I haven't a clue what I'm doing, mate.

So it's catching this intention. Now, every intention, once it's empowered, becomes an action. Okay? So if you intend to open the door, you open the door. Now, there's nothing particularly ethical about that. It's just opening the door. But every action produces a habit, so that after a while you definitely know how to open doors. And remember that opening a door here should have an existential quality about it. It's not the case of just opening the door, it's the case of doing it very slowly and recognising that you've actually moved out of a different space. You've become somebody else on the other side of the door, even though it's not so obvious.

So it's actually recognizing that from an intention comes an action, and then you create a habit. Okay? So if you decide that you come home and you're going to watch the news on the TV, then once you've done it and you enjoy it, the next day you come back and do it. And then after a while it's just something you do. It becomes habitual. If you put all these habits together, the *saṅkhāra*, then what you have is your personality. In Buddhism, that's your personality and character. It's a set of habits. That's all it is.

And once that's set, as it were, your destiny is ahead of you. And it's only when we keep falling over that we might wake up and think, well, what about these habits I've got? Maybe I should change a few of them. And that's of course the practice we're in – trying to move away from those habits which cause problems to those which are beautiful.

So that's the process of *kamma* in the sense of an action. Now the other thing that we have to remember is that it's those actions which have an ethical value which are important. So if we remember the story of the Buddha again, there were three knowledges. The first one was that he was purified. There were no more unwholesome mental qualities in him. And that he saw how he came to this position through a series of past lives driven by his ethical decisions. And then he saw other beings moving around in the same way.

So ethics is, in other words, our whole relationship to human beings, to buildings, to trees, everything else – that is our ethics. That's what Buddha meant by ethics. It's not just a simple case of morality. It's not just a simple case of doing right and wrong. It's a case of how do we relate to everything that we meet. And of course that includes ourselves. How do I relate to myself?

So when I said that it's only opening a door, it can be done gently and then it becomes an ethical opening of the door. It can be done angrily and then it becomes an unethical opening of the door. So then you realise that everything you do, everything you do really has an ethical value to it. And that's when you get worried, because that's our conditioning, and the conditioning is driving us to a certain destiny, either to

happiness or unhappiness.

So that gives us some idea of the thrust of *kamma*. It's the ethics. So if the first law was about just the physics of the universe, the chemistry of it, and the second one is hereditary, and the third one all to do with our psychology, and the fifth one to do with the spiritual practices, the spiritual laws, this fourth one, *kamma*, is specific around ethics. It's about ethics. It's about how and why we behave the way we do.

So this means that it's impossible to grow in wisdom and behave unethically. It can't be that jarring. Can you imagine catching the Buddha shoplifting? It wouldn't work, would it? You'd have to think, well, hold on, he said he was enlightened. It's just there are certain things that just don't fit once we have this image, this archetype of a Buddha, of somebody who's completely purified.

And then the last thing really is to understand that nothing is set. So that when we do an action and we can see it wasn't particularly good, we can always stop the consequences of it. So remember, an action will have its consequences. As soon as you act, you're putting an energy of force into a matrix and you don't know how it's going to happen. I think I mentioned it before, I couldn't remember the physics for it, but I'm sure you've heard of the theory of chaos, where one small action with supporting conditions can just go out of proportion.

So the thing you're always given is always dramatic – a butterfly wing in South America, huge storm in North America because of the surrounding conditions. But I think we can also see it in a slightly more optimistic light – that one small act of kindness done somewhere could bring peace in some other part of the world, because you don't know what the effect of that will be. Just like, again, on the negative side, the straw that broke the camel's back. Just a little small act of goodwill put into a particular situation can have these wondrous effects.

So, on the positive side, that's why we should obviously do good things. On the negative side, when you do something, you know it's going to have an effect. Something negative, you know it's going to have an effect. So just very simply, often with friends at work or in other situations, we might say something which has been taken wrongly. We might not even have meant it to be an insult. It doesn't have to be that you actually mean to do something. It could have been something that wasn't quite meant, or wasn't the right thing to say at that time.

So remember that when the Buddha talks about right speech, he talks about it being kindly, being honest, but also a suitable time. You have to choose your time to say certain things. And of course that can create a lot of upset, a lot of animosity, even worse, and it can reverberate back on you. So it's a case of as soon as we know we've done something, is to do something to bring that process to an end. Often a simple apology will do.

We had a wonderful case here, so I'll come towards an end on this. We had an oak tree, and it used to overhang the back of the garden here. And we had to get rid of it, unfortunately, because of the oil tank.

There were all sorts of health and safety reasons around oil tanks. And I had this expert come, who used to be in competitions in Colombia, chopping trees down. And he really was quite an expert.

Anyway, one of our neighbours saw this and he came over. I was in the kitchen, I was just coming into the kitchen, and sounded this awesome row – I mean really a lot of anger. So I go out there, and of course I'm terribly peaceful and equanimous, because I'm not involved. So I can play the peacemaker. And I'm saying, what's going on?

And basically, he'd come over and had questioned the fact as to whether we could take down an oak tree, because some of them are guarded. There was a neighbour here who knocked an oak tree down – he was fined 2,000 quid. And he somehow got it wrong in his head that it wasn't our oak tree. It was all a bit funny.

But anyway, the lumberjack, who was okay, by the way, he said something that was really upsetting. And he came out with this stunning phrase, which must go into the annals of great phrases. He says, "I'm from Liverpool and I'll have you shot." So I thought, that is absolutely brilliant.

So anyway, as it happened, I was able to calm him down to some spot. This lumberjack, by the way, who wasn't a particularly big man, but he had a couple of big young fellas with him. So the neighbour's still raging. And eventually the lumberjack said to him, "Look," he said, "you just threatened me, you just threatened my life, and I've got witnesses." So he said, "So finally," he said, "look, just a simple apology will do."

And finally, the neighbour, when he'd all calmed down, he said, "Sorry," and went out with his tail between his legs. It was a wonderful occasion. I wish it had been filmed.

So, in that case, you've got a neighbour who knows nothing about Buddhism. He was a million miles away from it. But he recognised that at some point he'd gone overboard. He'd lost his equanimity, we can say. And just by that simple, very simple apology, that was it. I'm sure they don't meet for a drink now and again, but at least the consequences of that were just brought to an end.

So, just to summarise there, just so that we're clear about what the Buddha's teaching about *kamma*. Not everything that happens to us is to do with our personal *kamma*. And even if something happens to us, it may only be a part of that which is our personal *kamma*. It may only be a small part of it.

So, I mean, in terms of our neighbour, the fact that he got involved in that was part of his original goodness – trying to save trees, for heaven's sake. I mean, that's where he was coming from. But it got him into this embroilment. And the fact that the lumberjack didn't take huge offense and cut his legs off with his chainsaw was good. Could have got pretty nasty.

There are different laws which we're accustomed to – the physical and the hereditary and the psychological and the spiritual laws. All these things are almost in every moment of our lives. If you take

any moment, you'll see that there's a physicality to it, there's a mentality to it, there's a hereditary part of it. It's not as though these things are either not there – they're always there. These laws are always there. And even if we're not aware of the spiritual laws, we're probably going against them and creating havoc because of it. And one of them is this law of *kamma*. It's just brought out of the spiritual laws because it's a very specific avenue of teaching.

And then the idea that we don't live in a predestined universe. Nobody knows what happens. The Buddha said if you try to work out your *kamma*, you'll drive you mad. So we don't know what's going to happen next in any absolute sense. But that gives us creativity. It gives us destruction. Everything is destroyed and then created.

It's interesting that in Hinduism you have Brahmā the creator. But then you have Śiva the destroyer. And Viṣṇu, the one who creates. I think that's it. I'm not sure now. But anyway, it's that business of there's always an ending and then there's a beginning. An ending and a beginning. Something has to be destroyed for something to be born. And that's just part and parcel of it.

And our process, our spiritual process, is this process of purification. And you can come... The Eightfold Path starts off with right understanding, which affects our attitudes, which affects the way we speak and what we do and our livelihood. But remember, it can also come back on itself as feedback.

So there are many livelihoods which have in themselves the potential for compassion. In fact, all livelihood, apart from those which are obviously unwholesome, have the quality of service about them. And I'll probably say more about that tomorrow. And it's this quality of service that's coming through the heart, through the attitude, which then becomes a wisdom.

So the distinction between compassion, love and wisdom is just they're two sides of the same coin. You can't have wisdom without the expression of compassion. And you can't have compassion unless you've got the wisdom. So compassion is wisdom in action.

So everything in that sense is connected. So there's a part of us which is investigating, but also the part of us which is doing things is crucially important to this whole process of purification, liberation, and the awakening, the process of awakening.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you by your severe practice attain full liberation from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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