The Kamma of Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:24

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa (three times) — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

It would be nice to talk a little bit about *kamma*, which is one of the central doctrines of the Buddha, at least his particular interpretation of it, because in those times there were various interpretations of *kamm a*. But I thought since it was Christmas and this is a Christian feast, I'd tie it in with the work of Jesus Christ because here we have a man who in three years had an enormous effect on the world eventually. And he said something which resonates very well with the Buddha, I think: as you sow, so you shall reap. He was very clear on that.

When I was in Sri Lanka once, I asked the person who used to attend to our monastery — we were talking about this and that — and I said to him, "Why do you think Jesus Christ was crucified, died such a death?" He said, "Well, he must have done something terrible in his past life," which I thought was a very Buddhist way of looking at things.

Of course, what he didn't understand, or what this person didn't seem to grasp, is that sometimes you do something out of compassion where you get a backlash. In fact, even if you're the most peaceful, loving person on this earth, somebody will hate you for it. All these people like Martin Luther King, Gandhi — they all get shot in the end. So the manner of our death is not necessarily a direct karmic consequence of our actions. And really that's the distinction I think we have to be very clear about.

When the Buddha is talking about *kamma*, he's talking specifically about that which is to do with our liberation. And he has this very simple law which underpins the whole of the law of *kamma*. It's called "this-that," the this-that law, in the Pali. And it goes something like this: because that happened in the past, this happens now. And because that didn't happen, this doesn't happen — or this does happen, depending how you want to interpret it.

So that's basically the way most people would think of *kamma* in the sense of cause and effect: something you did in the past and you get clobbered by it somewhere in the future. And obviously there is such a thing. But if you think about that, then you tend to get into fate. And the problem with fate, of course, is that you lose your free will. I mean, why make decisions? Because it's going to happen anyway.

There was a sect in the Buddha's time who actually believed that it didn't really matter what you did, because your *kamma* was set. So the teacher said if you went down one side of the Ganges performing great acts of compassion and love and all that and came up the other side murdering, thieving, doing all

terrible things, it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference because your *kamma* is set. So we have to be very careful about thinking about our *kamma* as something which is only a product of past action. But of course, there are products of past actions — not to deny that, it's just that's not the overarching effect upon our present life.

The second part — oh, by the way, if you did only believe in that, it's difficult to see where creativity would come in. It would be repetitive, wouldn't it? Now the other side of that equation is: if this happens now, this happens now, and if this doesn't happen now, this doesn't happen now, or something else happens. So here we have a very direct creative moment right here, right now.

One example would be us. All of us have come here through different karmic past lines, but we've all arrived here to create this particular situation. This situation would not be the same if one of you hadn't arrived. So, for instance, Jean Stewart, who was supposed to be here, got caught up in the snow and is not here. Therefore, this situation is different because of that — she didn't come. If she suddenly arrived, then we'd have a different situation.

So if you can grasp that situation where you've got one line of action which is coming from the past into the present and things happening in the present because things are meeting in the present moment... If this universe were only about things happening in this present moment without any connection to the past, then one can only presume it'd be rather chaotic. Can't see where order would come. So the past gives us the order. The past gives us some sort of order, but the present gives us the sense of chaos. So when you put the two together, what you get is a very creative situation because you've got that fundamental line and something happens to it because things meet — things meet within the universe.

Keeping that in mind, just consider when you do something. In science they have this theory of chaos, don't they? Where something happens and with supporting conditions — that's important, the supporting conditions — a little butterfly wing or something turns into a storm further up the line. And in fact I suppose that's happening all the time. How does turbulence happen? If you only look at the world of politics, you see suddenly you've got mayhem out of nowhere. It just arises very quickly out of supporting conditions. But it also disappears just as quickly too when the supporting conditions also disappear.

And I'm always amused how we always have to, at least Westerners anyway, have to think of the most dire consequences. Why we can't put a positive spin on it, such as a little act of kindness done at Satipanya in White Grit Day with supporting conditions changes the whole world and everybody becomes enlightened in no length of time. Not that it will happen, but even so it's a nice way to put a positive spin on the theory of chaos. And in a sense that's very close to the Buddha's teaching. I mean, I can't see much of a difference to that.

Now when we do an act, it goes out into society. No matter what you do, it goes into a set of conditions which are also moving. They're also dynamic. It's not as though you're putting something into a still place and moving it. Everything's in this state of dynamism. And you throw something into the pot and who

knows what will come out. Who knows what will come out. And it may be wonderful — like say all these people who buy tickets on the lottery. They're all spending all this money on the lottery. Somebody wins. Somebody hits the jackpot and comes away with millions of pounds. Why should that happen to that person, nobody else? So you might say, "Oh, it's good *kamma* — in the past life he gave lots of money away." But I think we can also now see that it doesn't quite work like that. It's more in the sense of you put something into a situation and you may or may not receive something wonderful, and may or may not receive something terrible. You just don't know.

Things happen to us which are completely outside our control. There was a lovely man — it's funny I should forget his name — he was in charge of the building, that guy at our house. And while I was there he developed asbestosis, cancer through asbestos in the lungs. A remarkable man, a remarkable way that he worked with that disease. It was truly spiritual, actually. It was very moving. I mean, he wasn't into meditation or anything, but he seemed to be at ease with the whole situation and died peacefully.

Now, this fellow was only in his 50s, I think, if I remember rightly. And when he was a young worker, a boy — 18, 19 — doing apprenticeship with Costain, the builder, they were throwing snowballs of blue asbestos at each other, which is the worst of all asbestos, I believe. And years later, he dies of this painful disease.

So now, what we begin to understand is that things happen to us which have nothing to do with us. It's just other people's ignorance, other people's carelessness, other people's, sometimes, genuine mistake — just not understanding. Things happen to us quite out of the blue. And so when we look at the universe like that, it gets a bit scary. Because anything can happen, my goodness. And that's, of course, why when we touch upon that, there's this rush to make everything very secure, make sure you've got your insurance policies and all that.

So the world is not something we can control, and it's not something that we particularly make. You put your pennyworth into the pot, and you don't know what you're going to get out. Generally speaking, society tries to make it so that if you put something good in you get something good out. You put your work in and you get a pension and you can live happily in old age, unless you drop dead too early to enjoy the fruits of your life.

It's understanding that there are other laws apart from *kamma* — that are obviously the physical laws. Look at all these people that were killed by the tsunami a few years ago. Now, that struck the east coast of Sri Lanka, and the south, wasn't it? And it just wiped out a load of people. And I'm sure they — because in the folklore of Buddhism, you will get people drowned because in the past life they must have done something terrible. To support that, unfortunately, there are passages, especially in the commentaries, which support that almost in a very direct way.

There's a lovely story which goes to one of the Dhammapada verses, where a ship was crossing the ocean, and it suddenly stopped, even though the wind was up, and they didn't know what was happening. So the

captain wondered what to do, and luckily, of course, there was a group of monks on board — Theravādins amongst the good. And he asked them to think about it and consult it. So they went into deep meditation, and when they came out, they said, "Who is your wife?" He said, "In the past life, she drowned all the dogs," so the ship won't move until you throw her overboard. So, of course, the captain, who no doubt was very sad — he might have been a ploy, of course, to get rid of his wife, but we'll put that one aside — he chucked her overboard and lo and behold, the ship sailed on.

So when you get these little stories from the scriptures which support a very mechanical type of *kamma*, you can see that it becomes impossible to sustain. So there are all the physical laws of the universe. And you could say in a very broad sense that you've been born here, you've been born here in this situation, so whatever happens to you in this situation is part of your *kamma*. But it's not personal, it's not direct. You didn't cause the tsunami, for instance.

Then, of course, we come to this rather interesting place: it's biology. These days, reductionists take it right down to your genes. Everything that you are now is caused by your genes, for heaven's sake. So in which case, of course, where does free will come into that? It's all in my genes. I'm an idiot because it's in my genes. I'm a totally foul person because it's in my genes. I just happened to become a complete wonderful saint because it was in my genes. So when you start investigating that, it's just a bit off. Not that I'm sure reductionists take away the effects of society on the genes. Obviously what comes to us from our genes we know is from past generations, so what we have is the body we have is the body we're given. You're stuck with it — that's it. You might have preferred to look like a film star, but unfortunately you've ended up with this one.

The actual gene pool that we're abstracted from, which creates this body — in Buddhism it doesn't create the mind, the mind is of another order — but the body is definitely given. If we're born with physical problems from our forefathers, or mothers as well, it's something we have to handle, but to talk about it as my personal *kamma* would seem to stretch it a little bit.

Now I do have my own peculiar little theory about this, so I can labour you with it. The body comes with its history, with its genetic history, and the mind which enters into it also comes with its history, with its psychological history. And when the two meet, somehow the strains within the mind, the turbulences within the mind, must locate themselves. And I often wonder whether the mind searches for a weak part of the body where it locates itself, and if there is a genetic weakness in there as well, then the effect could be even worse than the mind can do to the body.

So, how do we know the mind affects the body? How do we know the mind does damage to the body? Well, here in your meditation, you know. I mean, every time some anger comes up in your meditation, you can feel the conflagration in the body, the heat that it's causing. And these mental effects on the body is having a direct effect on the cells. And it's interesting that something — I read a figure, I don't know how scientific it is — but 80% of cancers happen after a trauma. So there's some link there between that

disease or some similar diseases and mental states that we get into.

So whether, if you're born with a very good constitutionally strong body, but you have a terrible mind, then it may be that you live long and happy. But if you have a constitutionally weak body and an awful mind, then you might find that your life is shortened for it, because just the physical frame can't handle the turbulence.

But that, of course, gives us our third law, which is the law of the mind. Just to go back to the body, remember that awful incident with Hoddle — and what was his name? Glenn Hoddle — and when affected by Hinduism, he made this real... I think it was the reporter really who said that people born with genetic diseases and stuff was their personal *kamma*. And it just wasn't politically correct. It would have been in India — it would have been hailed in India — but in the West it's just not politically correct. And I don't think it is correct myself.

Because we now have this — the law of the mind, and then we have the law of *kamma*, and then the final law are the spiritual laws. So *citta*, the mind, which in Buddhism is difficult in English — in Buddhism refers to the whole heart-mind complex, it's your emotional thought life. You'll see it translated often as heart-mind, which is a bit awkward in English. I mean, the old word was soul in English. It was body, soul and spirit. So the soul was pointing to your psychological life, your emotional thought life. And then I think it became confused with spirit as being everlasting or something. But I think we can thank Descartes for the split between the body and the heart. So we've ended up with a language that we don't have a word which combines for us these two things anymore.

But in the East, I think you may find people saying that when they say, "I think," they actually point to the heart, they don't point to the head. So there's still that understanding that our thoughts and our understanding arise out of attitudes, attitudes which are really based in the heart, an emotional feel about things.

So, the psychological law of the Buddha, of course, that in Buddhism is talked about, is the dependent origination. So, the Buddha doesn't have a total, complete description of human psychology. I mean, there's no developmental psychology, there's no psychology in Buddhism that I know of as to how a child develops, for instance. And there doesn't seem to be that much understanding of very severe psychological states, like schizophrenia and stuff like that. And because that's not where the Buddha places himself. He's very firmly placed in this whole area of how we create suffering. And dependent origination is really about that.

In the Abhidhamma, of course, it tries to finesse on that, trying to talk about mind moments, seventeen mind moments in every material moment. It tries to describe how moments of cognition build up to a conscious moment and all that. But even so, it's still about how do we create suffering.

The psychology that emerges from dependent origination is the Buddha's own explanation, and it would

seem that there was nothing like it before him. There's no intimation of that sort of psychology before the Buddha. In his awakening, there were three things that he saw.

The first thing was about karma. Throughout his past lives, he saw how his ethical decisions, his moral decisions—both the beautiful and the negative—had affected his rebirth, had affected moment to moment his life. And then he saw how beings moved from one place to another dependent on such actions, so that what was a personal law for him then became a cosmic law.

But the inner insight, the actual insight that came to him as he sat there, was that he realised he had destroyed all the defilements within him. Something had completely disappeared out of his psychology. Now he talked about that later—delusion, greed, hatred, the three roots, the three unwholesome roots. But that was in his victory verse, which we chant in the morning: "I have attained the unconditioned *citta*. I have attained a consciousness which is no longer part of this world of conditioning, which is the world of kamma."

So that psychological law is embedded; it really expresses itself mainly through dependent origination. And it's up to us, of course, to investigate that.

When it comes to kamma, this is the teaching around cause and effect, which we talked about before in large terms about "that having been, this becomes," and so on. But within us, we're talking really about the role of will. This is absolutely core to the Buddha's teaching. He says it quite distinctly. He says, "It is the will that I call kamma." And when he talks about kamma, he's talking about an act. He's not talking about karma as we would use it today, meaning your comeuppance. He's talking about an act. And remember, once an act is done—whether it's a thought in the mind or an act of speech or an act of the body, an action—it has an effect. It's an energy which goes either in the mind, it goes into the psyche itself, or through speech and action out into the world. That's an action. And the proper word for your comeuppance is *vipāka*.

But it's very clear how he says that. Now in dependent origination, you'll see that there are little moments there as we perceive something. As we perceive something—say a flower—there's a feeling arises with that perception. Perception and feeling arise together. So not only do I say to myself, "flower," I have a feeling of pleasantness, contentment, joy when I see a beautiful flower. Now, at that point, that's what happens to the Buddha. There's no distinction there between us and somebody who's liberated.

But then something kicks in which says, "I want that." And the first thing comes: want, want. There's something else comes into the equation that wants the flower. And then there comes the identity: "I want it." So it's the reverse of our language. "I want" is actually "I, want, want, I"—that's how it happens psychologically. And at that point of identification, the next moment is very difficult to stop because psychically it's very empowered. And that moment is the grasping of the flower and ripping it off and running away with it. And that action is the becoming.

So becoming, that action, is the same as the empowerment of will, is the same as kamma, is the same as an action. So these three words really are all pointing to the same thing: will, how we use the will, how you actually empower something.

Now this is really very important to understand because don't confuse an idea which is laced with wanting—that we call a desire or a craving—with an act of kamma. Nothing's happened. So if you, for instance, walk into the kitchen and you think, "I'll have a cup of tea," that's still at the level of desire. But as soon as you move even a nanometre of a finger towards the pot, you're empowering that desire, and in empowering that desire, you're reinforcing your conditioning.

So the will is the engine or the empowerment of something. The kamma refers to the act that has been done, and the *bhāva* refers to the self that continues its self-existence through this action. Every time it does something, it says, "Oh, it's me, me again! I've done that, so I must exist." So those three things meld together in any action, whether we are thinking or whether we're speaking or whether we're doing in the world.

We're always acting. I mean, it's only when you sleep that you're not actually acting in some way. And the same can be said of the Buddha. So the Buddha woke up and he thought, "Well, it's time to do a bit of meditation." He did it for his own benefit, he said, and for the benefit of others—that's a good example. And then he thought, "Well, I'm a bit hungry now," so he'd get his bowl together and go off on *piṇḍapāta*. Somebody would stop him on the way and say, "How are you doing, Bhagavan?" And he'd say, "Oh, I'm doing fine, how are you?" Little pleasantries—he wasn't above the ordinary little pleasantries of life. On his alms round, people might ask him in and have a chat with him about the Dharma or something. So he's acting perfectly normal in the world, like we do, but somehow we end up suffering, or we end up unsatisfied, or we end up unfortunate.

So there's something special. The Abhidhamma tried to create a new word to describe the actions of a Buddha, and they came up with this word *kriyā*, which means functional. And what they're trying to point to is the fact that although the Buddha was making decisions, although he was acting, there was no perpetuation of this delusion of "I," this self.

Now, we were talking yesterday about how we can come out of these levels of self—the body self, the emotional self, the thought self—into just this quite distinct feeling of a self-awareness. And it's the association with that, of course, when it dives into these other parts of our becoming or existence, as it dives into the thought life and emotions and whatnot, it manifests through that. This self manifests as somebody who speaks, somebody who feels, somebody who does.

So that process there is the core of the kamma that the Buddha's talking about when he's talking about that which is going to liberate us from suffering or otherwise. And all he says is: if you do something harmful to others or to yourself, harm will come of it. And if you do good, good will come of it.

Now, as we say, on the outside of things, it doesn't often turn out that way. You do something good and somebody hates you for it. You do something bad and you get away with it. But internally, it's not possible. That's the point. Internally, when we do something unwholesome, it creates an unwholesome habit within us which creates a turbulence and often finds its way out in speech, in actions. And eventually, of course, you do get some comeback. I mean, if you're an angry sort of person, in the end you do begin to wonder why nobody's calling around and nobody makes a phone call. Whereas if you've got onto the idea that if you're very open and kind and generous, people hang around. You think, "Oh, that's a good thing." Of course, it becomes a big ego thing then, but at least it tends to be a bit happier than being a grump.

So internally, we're creating this internal world. And that's exactly what we come across when we sit in meditation. This is our creation. Nobody's created the inner world for us. This has all been done by our act of will.

Now, of course, there are catalysts. If you happen to be with people who are coarse and vile and all that, it's very difficult to maintain a purity of mind. But if you're with people who are good, generally speaking, then it's easier. All the surroundings, all the culture that we're in, people we meet, the jobs we do—all that, sure, they're there as catalysts. But it's always an internal process which is actually creating this internal psychology.

And that's, at first, that might come as a bit of a disappointment because it's always nice to blame somebody else for our problems and try and get compensation. But there's also a liberation there because obviously if my happiness is dependent on you—fundamentally dependent on you—and you're making me unhappy, then I don't have much of a choice. I've just got to get rid of you, and I've got to get rid of anybody whom I don't like. But if I am the one who's creating my own unhappiness, then this means that it's just me I've got to work with. It's just me that I have to find the answer within.

And that comes as a liberation really, because it liberates me from the world out there and throws me back into myself and makes me want to inquire as to what am I doing? What decisions am I making? What thought patterns am I constantly reproducing to create this unhappiness?

Even if I'm doing things which are actually making me very happy—helping people and art and going to the cinema and all the things that we can do to generate a sense of well-being and goodness within us—even that can become painful when the stuff begins to disappear or when we fall ill.

I have a friend at the moment who likes to walk and he likes the country, likes to visit places. And through an accident, he's gone and done something to his Achilles heel or something. He has to hobble. And whenever I am in contact with him, I can see he's very frustrated with it. He's very angry, and the NHS should do something about this. And he's finding it very difficult because it's curtailed his happiness, which was dependent on all this stuff.

So when we really want to know about the kamma—the real kamma, which is to do with our liberation

from suffering—then it's always inward. It's always looking inward to see exactly what it is we're doing that creates the world that we are living in. And that's the real thing we have to grasp.

It doesn't deny the reality of the outside world. It doesn't deny the reality of other people and so on and so forth. But what it does say is that the world I'm living in is the world I'm creating. Even at the basic level of the senses. If I'm colourblind, then I see things that other people don't see. And I see the universe differently, just even at that level.

And when we recognise that, then we actually take on that responsibility, the full responsibility of trying to do something about our situation. And that's why we're all here. We wouldn't be here if we hadn't taken on that responsibility.

Now, one thing that might be said is, "Oh, well, this is very selfish. It's very self-centred. What about love and other people and all that?" Well, of course, what we begin to realise is that there is this interconnectedness. Before, when we were reacting to people, we were reacting from some self-centredness, some ego-centred—I don't particularly like using the word ego, but there we are—some selfishness, only self-regard, so that everything has to fit in with what I want, how the world fits in with me. As we begin to undermine that, of course, the magic is that suddenly you begin to experience other people and the world and nature differently because this kink in the way we're looking at things has been taken away, slowly being drained out of the system.

I had a lovely incident once in a car with my parents. My mother was Italian and she could get a little bit depressed at times. And we were driving along and we hit this beautiful scenery. And I can't remember whether it was my brother in the car, but somebody said, "Oh, look at that, Mum, isn't it beautiful?" And she says, "Oh, what? I can't see anything." And my father said, "Oh, cheer up, Rosa." And she said, "You shut up." It was a brilliant little party. And here you've got someone who completely mishears something because of her own grumpiness. She did cheer up, by the way.

So you get this: every time you're in a mood, every time a mood comes up, it puts a colouring on the world, puts a colouring on the world around you, and you can't stop that.

Now that's the second thing that we come to about this psychology, about the real kamma which is to do with our liberation. Past conditioning, you can't just get rid of. You can't just say, "Well, I'm not going to be angry anymore, full stop," and it just doesn't work.

What we realise is that this conditioning is not me. This is the funny thing. It's not me, it's not mine. I've created it through these acts of will, but it's not me, it's not mine. It has its own engine, it has its own power, it has its own obstinacy. And so what we find ourselves having to do is to sit patiently, to endure all the conditionings that we've created through these delusional thinkings, delusional actions, delusional speech.

And that's really the hard bit of the practice. I mean, that in a sense is why the Buddha calls them

hindrances, because were it not for those, we would very quickly attain liberation, we would attain enlightenment. What's actually dragging us down, making it very difficult for us, is our past conditions.

So this demands this patient endurance that the Buddha often talks about. The highest form of ascetic practice is patience. And when we sit and we are allowing the kamma, the *vipāka*—this is the product of past actions, the product of past decisions, the product of past kamma—we are allowing it to manifest in its fullness and beginning to die out. And then we are changing that energy into its opposite through the practice of goodwill.

And even if we don't do the practice of goodwill as a specific practice, the fact that energy which has manifested as anger or grudges or depression—all that stuff—that naturally manifests outwardly begins to manifest rather in a positive way. Because remember, what's changing in this process is our view of things, and our view of things changes our relationship to things. And therefore just by sitting with whatever negative states come up within us, even that is part of the process of changing our understanding of the world.

And finally, you could say we come to that deep delusion which is creating all this obvious kamma, which is the initial mistake that's also our fundamental kamma in terms of liberation: this fundamental mistake of seeking happiness in the sensual world. And by sensual world we mean the whole caboodle, we mean the whole cosmos, we mean other people, we mean everything that can be felt, sensed. That's the sensual world.

And by seeking real happiness there, confusing pleasure, confusing the joys of life—see, the Buddha's not saying he doesn't enjoy life, he enjoys life, he enjoys the things that life brings—but confusing that with real happiness is where the problem lies. And that's why I say, when your meditation is very calm and you've got just a general peaceful state, and you are in that place of the observer, you just ask yourself, "What is the state of the observer?"

And just to finish off: when Sāriputta is asked, "You talk about the bliss of Nibbāna, you talk about the joy of Nibbāna, but there's no emotions in Nibbāna," he says, "Well, it's the very absence of emotions which is the bliss of Nibbāna." You get your head around that one.

The law of kamma, really, in terms of the spiritual laws, which is the fifth law. So we had the physical laws, the biological laws, the psychic laws, psychological laws. The law of kamma, which is the law of morality, really—the ethics. And finally, we have this law of the spiritual laws, in which we can include our *vipassanā*, the Four Noble Truths, and so forth. And so kamma holds this specific place of action.

Every time we do something, we have to remind ourselves that it's going to have some effect. So we have to be very careful not to get neurotic about it. And remember that an act of attention is an act of intention. That's really, really important to grasp. As soon as you attend to something, there's an act of intention there.

So every time you're sitting on a bus and you're passing these billboards and you look at them, and you attend to them, it's affecting you. It's a passive state. We're not doing it on purpose, but it's going in, because to put your attention somewhere demands an act of intention.

So our aim is to keep pointing our attention at what is wholesome, what is good for us. And eventually, I'm sure you've all felt a turning, a movement within yourself.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all your *kamma* and achieve full liberation sooner rather than later.

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