Kamma and Rebirth

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 17:25

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa.
Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble, and fully self-awakened one.

We're celebrating the moon night. Actually, I think it's on Wednesday, but we have to bend the rules a bit for our culture, so we're doing it tonight. The topic is on *kamma* and rebirth.

So just going through the basics, really, just being sure as to what we mean by personal kamma. In other words, the kamma that leads to liberation. We understand in Buddhism that there are five laws, the first one being called the law of heat. That's how it translates. But it's really to do with what we would call physics and chemistry, just matter. So those are laws which are separate from personal responsibility.

What I think this is really pointing to here is things like the tsunami. In the East, if you were a victim of the tsunami, they would tend to think that was because in some past life, you must have drowned somebody or something worse. So it gets a bit far-fetched. We have to be clear that the Earth matter has its own properties, and we happen to be born at this time. Now, there is this connection, of course, with climate change, but that comes later.

The next one is hereditary. You can't, if you're born with a disease coming from your parents and their parents and back all the way, that's not your personal kamma. That's to do with being born with that certain genetic makeup. Now, what is your personal kamma is how you relate to it. And again, we'll come to that in a minute.

So it's wrong to think of somebody who is born, say, with Down syndrome and to think that they therefore must have been some sort of animal in the past life and that they're born at the same level of intelligence. That wouldn't be correct. Even they have their own kamma to work out.

The next one would be *citta*. So this is our psychology. We're born with a certain set of psychological rules. And that's as simple as that. A simple one would be just the way we learn language. And that's all to do with the mind, the wake up of the mind and the brain. Remember, in the Buddha's teaching, the mind and the body are two separate energy systems. And when we're reborn, it's the mind that leaves the body. We'll come to that again when we have just a quick reminder of what rebirth is. So again, you have to be very careful when we're talking about personal kamma, the kamma that leads to liberation or not.

This leads us to the problem of social kamma. A lot of people might talk about social kamma, meaning the kamma of, say, being born in British culture or in another culture. And again, that wouldn't be quite the way that the Buddha would see it. He would see it more as a collection of individuals. And the collection of

individuals have agreed to certain rules and regulations, certain cultural norms. Most of this is passed on to us, whether we like it or not, when we're children. But it's not as though it's something that is out there as a social or as something separate from individuals.

Whatever is passed on to us through our societies is passed on individually through our parents, through the media and so on and so forth. So, again, it's about individuals. And it's the same when you think about, say, thousands of deaths from famine or thousands of deaths from all these conflicts that are going on, all that really is individuals who are dying. And some will die very peacefully. Some will not have suffered greatly. And others, of course, will have died in agony. But again, it's all very individual.

It's our universe. If you think about it, everything that we're experiencing is coming in through the senses and through our own particular conditioning. And what we're experiencing now is our own little universe. And we're always at the center of it. So when somebody steps into that universe and does us harm, that isn't our personal kamma. That's coming from their decision-making. Our personal kamma is how we react to it.

So that takes us into the next section about kamma itself, the law of kamma. And this is all about ethics. You could say that the Buddha really, you could reduce all his teachings to ethics and transcendence. And the reason for that, remember, is that because of this delusion that we are suffering from, we enter into a wrong relationship. So when we look at our ethical, moral behavior, that will be a measure of our wisdom or lack of it. So there's a connection there between the process of liberation and ethics.

There's always this purification has to go on at the same time as insight. You can't have insight and still go around murdering people and robbing from them and getting wild on drugs. You can't. It's not possible because of the connection between the delusion and how it manifests and the process of beginning to undermine that delusion through the process of ethical behavior. And that's all put out, of course, in the eightfold path: right speech, right action, right livelihood. And the more we work on that, the more it feeds back into the way that we understand the world.

So when we talk about the law of kamma, we're talking really about ethics. And that's now beginning to be where our core work is, you might say.

The final one is to do with Dhamma. And these are, of course, the basic teachings of the Buddha: the Four Noble Truths, the Law of Kamma itself, and the Wheel of Dependent Origination, Dependent Origination itself too. So all that teaching of the Buddha comes under the Law of the Dhamma. The Dhamma itself is the truth that when we take it on, will lead us to the end of our own personal inner suffering.

Remember, the suffering we're talking about is to do with wrong understanding. So it doesn't include physical suffering. So long as we have a body, it's going to give us pain. It's just the way it is. But the heart, once cleansed of all its negativity, of all its unwholesome habits and understandings, begins to be in a state of one of the four great illimitables, one of the four *Brahma Vihāras*. It's in some state of love or some state

of compassion, some state of joy or just peaceful equanimity. So that's the Buddha heart. But don't confuse that with the Buddha itself, with the Buddha within, which is this pure awareness.

Remember, the awareness is within this psychophysical organism. And it's through this organism that it's manifesting its delusion or its wisdom. So that's the Dhamma. So the point here is to be very clear as to what is our personal kamma, the kamma that leads to either continued rebirth or to liberation. And it all comes back to the dependent origination and to the point of reaction to what we're experiencing.

So dependent origination, what it's saying is that this *taṇhā*, this wrong relationship to things that we call attachment, indulgence, aversion, fear, all these reactions to what we are experiencing is the cause of our unsatisfactoriness, our suffering and our continued suffering. And it's when we undermine that, that we begin to roll that wheel backwards upon itself. And we come down to the root problem, which is about our sense of identity. That's where the root is.

Remember, his victory verse is that he had discovered the house builder. And he's broken down, he's found the house builder, he's broken the house, he's broken this and he's broken that. It all sounds very violent. And he's liberated himself. He's found the *citta*, that knowing which is the Buddha within. So that's the root problem as to what we identify with. And remember that when you are practicing *vipassanā*, you've pulled yourself out of this organism into this observer. And that observer really recognizes it as a place of untouchability. Once you're established there, nothing can harm you. Really grasp that because that's very close to our liberation.

So when it comes to something like rebirth, it's not within our culture. It's a bit difficult for us to get our head around that. The fact that we might be reborn into another place, another time, take on a different personality. And yet through that personality, whatever unwholesomeness and wholesomeness we have in terms of the way we look at things will again begin to manifest.

Really, for those that find it just difficult to accept, it's a case of just putting it on the back burner. There'll come a point when we'll know for sure. And that's when we leave the planet. So there's no point in rushing the decision. The decision will be made for us when we die. And if after all, it's just annihilation, we just disappear. Well, there's no problem in that at all, is there? I mean, there's no suffering involved in that whatsoever. So it's best not to come to a decision about that. There's no need, for instance, to come to a conclusion.

If we don't have that information, and we're talking about information which is experiential, this is not science. We're never going to prove it with a thermometer or something. It's just something which is beyond our ability to know in that sort of way. But there are people who have come out of the body and have gone to such places, and they stand as witness to that possibility. So really, it's just a case of keeping it as a possibility.

In the fullness of the teaching, it gives you some idea of the grand moral laws that go right through the

cosmos, through all the different levels of being. There is this law of kamma, which is basically saying, if you're coming from a wrong place, you're going to end up unhappy. If you're coming from a deluded place, you're going to keep finding yourself in an unhappy situation. And slowly it's going to come through to you that maybe you're the problem. It isn't the other person who's making you angry. The world doesn't make you depressed. There's something within us which is causing it. And there's some resolution, you might say, to the whole problem of moral behavior. But again, it always comes down to the individual.

So whether saṃsāra will ever come to an end is anybody's guess. As individuals keep reappearing, they themselves are their own little universe working out their own plan. And eventually, in Buddhist understanding, again, liberation is something which has to happen. It's within the process. It's something which is set into the process because that part of us which is deluded is not naturally deluded. Itself is clear of delusion. What it is is a simple not knowing. So in itself, it is absolutely pure and whole. But because of this misunderstanding, it finds itself creating this bad kamma, these bad consequences, unwholesome consequences, the suffering. And it can pull itself out and return to its original purity. Otherwise, there'd be no escape.

So that's what the Buddha says in one of these little verses about the process. There is an unborn. There is an undying. There's something that doesn't die. There is an unconditioned. And then he says, if it were not so, there would not be an escape from what is born and dies and is conditioned. So there's hope for us all. This is the big message. So no matter how miserable we become, there is an end. So we have to accept that. He's up there on his pedestal and he's definitely teaching us that.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused any confusion, and that you will, by your careful ethical behavior, release yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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