On Upāli: The Primacy of Mind in Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:55

On Upāli: The Primacy of Mind in Kamma

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-awakened one.

This little talk is around a discourse called "On Upāli." The Buddha meets this Jain who is called Upāli, and it links in with the previous talk about cetanā, about will—and what comes first in terms of creating kamma: the body, the mind, or speech.

I would like to start with the verses that open the Dhammapada, this collection of verses by the Buddha:

All experience, all actions are preceded by the mind, led by the mind, made by the mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of an ox.

And the opposite:

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind, a wholesome mind, and happiness follows like a never-departing shadow.

So here we have this discourse. For those of you who want to know, it is in the Majjhima Nikāya, number 56—the Middle Length Sayings, number 56.

The Buddha is at Nālandā, which was a big town and became a very important university town, a centre of study. At the same time, the Jain leader had turned up with his group of monks and nuns. You will know the Jains—you will know the great Kumbh Mela that they have every twelve years in India, where, according to some figures, a hundred million devotees gathered on the Ganges. And you have seen those naked ascetics, the Digambaras, the "sky-clad" or "space-clad." They are Jain monks, but there is also a section of Śvetāmbaras, which means they are dressed in white.

So this Jain turns up. The text does not say whether he is a Digambara or not. By the way, they appear grey because they rub ash into their bodies, which serves as an antiseptic.

This fellow called Dīgha Tapassī turns up and goes to have a chat with the Buddha, just out of interest. The Buddha asks him, "How many actions does the Jain leader Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta describe for the making of evil kamma, the production of evil kamma?"

Tapassī replies, "Friend Gotama, the Jain leader is not used to using the word 'action.' He uses the word

'rod.'"

Now, a rod was obviously used as an instrument of punishment, apart from anything else. What the Jain leader was saying was that every time you did something unwholesome, you were basically beating yourself.

So the Buddha asks, "Well, how many rods does the Jain leader describe?"

He says, "There are three rods: the bodily rod, the verbal rod, and the mental rod."

"And is the bodily rod one thing, the verbal rod another, and the mental rod another thing still?"

"Yes, they are all three different things."

"Of these three rods," says the Buddha, "thus analysed, thus differentiated—which rod does Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta describe as the most greatly blameworthy for the making of evil kamma, the production of evil kamma: the bodily rod, the verbal rod, or the mental rod?"

The Nigaṇṭha replies that the bodily rod is the most greatly blameworthy for the making of evil kamma, the production of evil kamma—not so much the verbal rod, not so much the mental rod.

Now you get this little bit of repartee. It seems that in those days, you had the person repeat what they said three times so they could not later claim, "I did not say that."

"Did you say the bodily rod, Dīgha Tapassī?"

"I say the bodily rod, friend Gotama."

"Do you say the bodily rod, Dīgha Tapassī?"

"I say the bodily rod, friend Gotama."

"Do you say the bodily rod, Dīgha Tapassī?"

"I say the bodily rod, friend Gotama."

I should think there was perhaps a little more to this exchange—something like, "Are you sure it is the bodily rod?" "I am absolutely sure." "Is this what your teacher told you?" "It is." And so on.

Now, having stated his position, Tapassī asks the Buddha, "Well, what about you, Gotama? How many rods do you describe?"

The Buddha replies that the Tathāgata does not use the word "rod"—he uses the word "action."

"Well then, which of these actions does friend Gotama describe as making evil kamma, the production of kamma?"

"There are three actions: body, speech, and mind."

"And is bodily action one thing, verbal action another, and mental action another still?"

The Buddha says, yes, this is so.

"And of these three actions, thus analysed, thus differentiated, friend Gautama, which action do you describe as the most greatly blameworthy for the making of evil karma, the production of evil karma? Is it bodily action, verbal action, or mental?"

The Buddha replies, "Of all these three, it is the mental action which is the most greatly blameworthy for the making of evil karma."

"Did you say mental action, friend Gautama?"

"I said mental action."

"Did you say mental action, friend Gautama?"

"I said mental action, Digha Tapasi."

"Are you sure you said mental action, friend Gautama?"

"I did say mental action."

So at this point, the Jain leaves. He's had enough. He can't take any more. He goes back to the Jain leader and explains what happened. The Jain leader praises him, saying, "You've rightly understood the message of the teacher." And then he makes fun of the Buddha, saying, "What does the trivial mental rod count in comparison to the gross bodily rod?"

Now, there's a certain Upali who's listening to this. He's a householder. I couldn't quite find out what he did, but he obviously lived in Nalanda and had some sort of huge mansion because he has servants. So I'm presuming he's either a landlord or a merchant, because merchants were becoming quite rich at that time.

He says to Nigantha, "Look, I'm going to go to the Buddha and I'm going to overthrow Gautama the contemplative's teachings on the ground of his position." Then he gives these wonderful similes about how he's going to treat the Buddha. He says, "Just as a strong man seizing a long-haired ram by the hair would drag him to and drag him fro and drag him all around, in the same way, I, statement by statement, will drag Gautama the contemplative to and drag him fro and drag him all around." He gives more and more similes of how he's going to treat this poor person, Gautama the Contemplative.

So the Jain leader says, "Yes, you go and refute his argument." But Digha Tapasi says, "Oh, I'm not so sure it's right that the householder Upali should try that," because, he says, "Gautama the contemplative is a magician and he knows a converting magic by which he converts disciples of other sects."

So the Buddha has this magic whereby he can convince you that he's right. By the way, Moggallana, who was one of the two chief disciples—if you remember, Moggallana and Sariputta—he was actually murdered, seemingly, by a sect for converting their members to the Buddha Dharma. He died in Rajgir, I think it's Rajgir today, yes. He died just shortly before the Buddha. He was killed before the Buddha.

Anyway, off Upali goes to see the Buddha. When he meets the Buddha, the Buddha says to him, "Householder, if you will confer taking a stand on the truth, we might have a discussion here."

"Lord, I will confer to stand on the truth. Let us have some discussion here."

"So what do you think, Householder? There might be a case where a Nigantha, a Jain, is diseased, pained, severely ill, refusing cold water and taking warm water. He, not getting cold water, would die. Where would the leader describe his reappearance?"

Now, exactly why he should die because he doesn't get cold water, there's no explanation for that. So Upali replies, "He would be born amongst the gods attached in mind. He reappears there."

"Why is that?"

"He is bound by mind when he dies."

So the mental state determines where he will be reborn. The Buddha says, "Oh, householder, pay attention. Answer only after having paid attention. What you said after isn't consistent with what you said before, nor is what you said before consistent with what you said after."

So there's a little bit of argy-bargy there. Then the Buddha gives him a second example: "There might be a case where a Nigantha is constrained by the fourfold constraints."

So this is the four precepts of not harming, not stealing, not being unchaste, and not lying. And then he says "constrained by all the constraints"—so this refers to all the rules and regulations of the order of Jains.

And as he walks to and fro, he brings many small beings to destruction. What karmic result would the Jain leader describe for him?

"What is unintended, Lord, the Nigantha Nataputta does not describe as greatly blameworthy."

But if he intends it, asks the Buddha?

"Greatly blameworthy, Lord."

And under what does the Nigantha Nataputta classify intention?

"Under the mental rod."

"Householder, pay attention. Answer after having paid attention. What you said after isn't consistent with what you said before, nor is what you said before consistent with what you said after."

So then he gives a couple of examples, which are a bit difficult for us. He asks Upali, for instance, if a man with a sword were to go into Nalanda, would he be able to kill everybody in that city? And Upali says no, this is not possible. The Buddha then says, but supposing he had through the power of mind, through the mastery of mind, superhuman power—could he do it then? Upali said yes, he could. So then the Buddha says, "Ah, see what comes first in terms of importance, the mind or the body?"

He gives another example about wildernesses, which we don't need to go into. Anyway, with the last example, Upali gives in and confesses:

"Lord, I was gratified and won over by the Blessed One's first simile. But wanting to hear these very artful ways of handling questions from the Blessed One, I thought I should treat him as an opponent. Magnificent, Lord, magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms—in this way the Blessed One, through many lines of reasoning, made the Dharma clear. I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, to the Sangha. May the Blessed One remember me as a lay follower who has gone forth to Him for refuge from this day forward for life."

What the Buddha said next really impresses Upali, because he says, "Look, make a careful scrutiny, householder. It is good for well-known people like yourself to make careful scrutiny." In other words, don't make up your mind until you've delved a little more into the teachings. This impresses him greatly.

But the next statement is even more impressive, seemingly for that time: "Householder, your family compound has long been like a waterhole for the Jains, and you should consider that alms food should be given to them when they come for it."

Now, there's an occasion in the scriptures where the Buddhist monks and nuns are in the shrine, these big parks where they had their shrines, and there's lots of food left over after the lay people have offered. Ananda says to the Buddha, "What should we do with all this food?" The Buddha says, "Well, offer it to these other sects." But when the lay people heard this, they were very angry. "We don't feed people who are Jains. We don't do that. We fed you—we don't want you to feed them with our food." So there's a rule: you can't offer food or a cup of tea to a priest, or to a Muslim mullah, or anybody who belongs to another sect. That's how it was in those days.

So this obviously impresses Upali—that the Buddha should say, "Look, you should continue to feed the Jains."

Then the Buddha gives him what's known as the graduated talk. He talks about generosity. He talks about virtue. He talks about what happens when you die with a virtuous, generous heart—you're born into a heavenly place. He then talks about the drawbacks of being devoted to sensuality and the rewards of

renunciation.

And then, when the householder was of ready mind, malleable mind, unhindered mind, exultant mind, confident mind, the Buddha proclaimed to him the distinctive teaching of the awakened ones: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

And right there, there arose in Upali the householder, in that very seat, the dustless, stainless Dharma eye: whatever is subject to arising is subject to disappearing. In other words, he saw impermanence deep enough for him to become a stream-enterer, which is the first rung of awakening.

So now he's very happy. He goes home. And of course, the news gets back to the Nigantha, to the Jain leader, that Upali has now become a disciple of the Buddha. Well, he can't believe it.

"It's not possible," he thinks. So off he goes to see Upali.

He arrives at the household, but Upali has instructed his gatekeeper not to let them in. The Nigantha says to the gatekeeper, "Look, you go and tell Upali that I'm here and I want to talk to him."

Eventually Upali gives in, and he arranges the middle gate hall for the meeting. I presume there was a wall around the mansion or whatever he had, this large place. And when you came in, there was some sort of sheltered area where mendicants were invited in and fed. In it there would be a seat—a proper high seat for the leader.

Well, Upali takes the high seat. The Niganthas come in, the Jains, you see. And this is what the Jain leader says to Upali the householder:

"You've gone mad, householder. You're an arrogant fool. Having gone saying, 'Lord, I am going. I will overthrow Gotama the contemplative's teachings,' you've come back tied up in a web of his doctrine. It's just as if a man, having gone to remove someone else's testicles, comes back with his own removed."

That's good, isn't it?

"Or it's as if a man, having gone to gouge somebody else's eyes out, comes back with his own gouged out. In the same way, having gone saying, 'Lord, I am going to overthrow Gautama the contemplative's teachings,' you've come back tied up in the web of his doctrine. You've been converted, householder, by Gautama the contemplative's converting magic!"

And Upali replies, "Oh, auspicious, venerable sir, is the converting magic. Admirable, venerable sir, is the converting magic!"

At this, the Jain leader becomes so upset he spews blood, it seems. And so they leave. On this occasion, Upali goes on to create lovely verses in which he praises the Buddha.

So this whole story brings us back to the position that the Buddha articulates: nothing happens unless it

has first happened in the mind. It is within the mind that we have this will, this *cetana*, and it is these decisions we make that produce our actions—in this case, unwholesome actions. It all begins in the mind.

As soon as we become aware of something unwholesome arising in the mind and we allow it to arise and pass away without grasping it, then it cannot express itself through our words, our speech, or our actions.

I would like to finish by repeating those opening verses from the Dhammapada:

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind, a wholesome mind, and happiness follows like a never-departing shadow.

I can only hope this little discourse has been of some assistance, that it does not cause confusion, and that by your practice of the Dharma you will be liberated from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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