Social Conditioning or Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 13:52

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

This evening I thought I'd tackle the thorny problem of social karma.

According to the Buddha, the karma that we own consists of the actions we have performed. These can be thoughts, speech, or physical actions, and they are all products of the will—it is the will that manifests them. Some of these are automatic; we are habitually thinking and doing things. Speech tends to be spontaneous or, unfortunately, impulsive. But then there are times when our responses are measured, when we have to think about what we're going to do, and those often have the greatest force within our personality. What matters in the process of liberation is the ethical value—or lack of it—of these actions. These mental states, these sankhara, are created by our decisions, moment after moment, whether they are habitual or considered.

Given this understanding, it might be confusing to talk about social karma. I think it's better to talk about social conditioning—that makes more sense.

The fact is that we're embedded in our culture. I was visiting my brother on the Isle of Wight, and I was watching a grandfather and grandmother taking their grandchild for a walk. The child stopped, turned around, and lifting her arms in the air was obviously asking her grandfather to lift her up. I could hear him saying, "And?" She was probably saying, "Lift me up," and he would respond, "And?" This went on for a little while. Unfortunately, my attention was drawn away, but I presume the grandmother cut in, unable to bear her husband's unwillingness to respond to the child's pleas, and prompted her with that magic word: "please."

Right there, he took it upon himself to teach the child that you have to say please. Usually, as children, we totally accept this conditioning. It's only when we become naughty teenagers, and later in life when we can reflect, that we begin to see the conditioning we carry.

We also pick up our prejudices. I remember my niece and nephew playing hospital. My nephew was two years older than my niece, but they were both under seven—perhaps six and four. Of course, he said, "I'll be the doctor and you'll be the nurse." Afterwards, I thought to myself: if she had been the elder, would she have chosen to be the doctor?

The same is true of racial prejudice. I was traveling home and had to get from Liverpool Street to Waterloo, which really is a pain. Unfortunately, I ended up in Canary Wharf, thinking it would be easier,

and I hadn't a clue where I was. Everyone told me I should take the Jubilee line, so I was stuck, and everybody had disappeared apart from one black man. I asked him how to get there.

As I asked him, I could feel a sort of anxiety arise—that he might reject my request in some way, based on my assumption about how he might feel about white people. As it happened, I was fortunate. He worked near the Jubilee line, which was something like a fifteen-minute walk away through I don't know how many streets, and he was very glad to take me there. But I was interested in my own experience, in that idea that arose as I was asking him. I actually go out of my way to ask people of colour for directions.

Another example: we've just celebrated the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. There's no doubt she has fulfilled the role of monarch admirably. But have we ever actually considered the institution of monarchy itself? I have to confess, I am a lifelong republican—you'll have to forgive me for that. The monarchy as an institution is the preserve of nobility and privilege, the House of Lords and all that.

And it has an influence on us. It shapes how we see ourselves in society. How would you feel if you met her?

Then, of course, something I've been emphasizing these past couple of weeks is neoliberal ideology and what it's done to us—made us much more selfish. For instance, in the NHS, instead of being patients, we were told that we were clients. This meant that we moved away from an attitude of gratitude to one of entitlement. The amount of suing of the NHS went up enormously—last year it stood at £2.4 billion. Now, it's not that we shouldn't be compensated for poor treatment. That's not the problem. It's where we're coming from: the indignant entitled, as opposed to the injured patient.

So how do you feel when you go for a service and the bus doesn't arrive? My parents would have just felt grateful. There's even now, I don't know whether you know about this, defensive dentistry. Dentists won't do anything on your teeth unless they have proof of something wrong. They're absolutely scared of being sued for anything they do. There have been some really bad cases because of that.

At a deeper level, of course, it's our race. How do we feel if we're black, living in a white-dominated culture? Jews with their unrelenting history of persecution. And then there are whites who, at the moment, are being encouraged by extreme Brexiteers with their shining luminary Boris, projecting us as British, special, and so on. All this will be there within us.

I came across real prejudice when I became a monk. One time I walked into a shop and the assistant simply turned around and walked out. I was left standing there until I realized she wasn't going to come out to serve me. And then there was a quite nasty occasion in Dubai. I was flying back from Sri Lanka when a drunken Englishman just went on and on about how stupid and ridiculous I looked.

So it's worth catching how we are personally conditioned—not just societal conditioning, but personal conditioning. Although we've had little choice in that conditioning, the fact of the matter is, it's us. We are an expression of our culture, and it's our duty, our responsibility, to accept that and to do something about

it when it's unwholesome.

I have stressed the unwholesomeness within society, but obviously there's beauty too. Just mentioning the NHS—it's a product of a society of care. Everything around us is influencing us, and we are influencing everything and everybody around us. So there's a certain responsibility to make sure we know where we stand with all these issues.

The Buddha has lots of advice for lay people in the Sigalavāda Sutta, where he talks in detail about relationships within the family. It's very patriarchal, of course, but then he was a man of his time. The monks were allowed to wander as they wished, but during the rainy season they had to come together and reestablish the fact that they were a community.

And of course, he goes on to say how good companionship is the whole of the spiritual life. Ānanda had come to the opinion that it's only half the holy life. And the Buddha replies, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the spiritual life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

And there's the advice he gave to King Ajātasattu, who wanted to attack the Vajji Confederacy, pointing out that the nation's welfare was dependent on frequent meetings, that assemblies assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord, that they do not enact new decrees or abolish old ones and proceed in accordance with ancient constitutions. That they respect, honor and esteem their elders, refrain from abducting women and maidens of good families, show respect and veneration to shrines, and look after their Arahants.

You can retranslate that for our own times. But here the Buddha is actually saying that the society we are in shapes our conditioning. We are dependent on it for our conditioning. We are responsible. Once we know our conditioning, we are responsible for it. And where we can, we develop right conditioning. In so doing, we affect the people around us.

So that's about as far as social conditioning goes. We can't really talk about social karma. We can only talk about our social conditioning within ourselves and then how we work with it, how we deal with it, and hopefully clear our hearts of anything that's negative.

or in some way brightened up this little dark area, which I don't think many people talk about.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that you will, by your endeavor to overcome all negative social conditioning, arise into the glory of Arahatship sooner rather than later.

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