

Conditionality and Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 7 min read

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A Basic Introduction.

The law of kamma (karma in Sanscrit) is fundamental to the teachings of the Buddha. We find it right at the point of enlightenment, enveloped within the Three Knowledges (tevijja) that came to the Buddha on liberation. The first was that his heart and mind were clear of all defilements; the second, that he could review his countless rebirths and see they were driven by his ethical decisions; and third, was his ability to see beings moving from one plane of existence to another driven by the same law.

What was at first a law that pertained to him alone became a universal law. And the law was inexorable.

But before we go into this area of ethics, we must understand the Buddha's explanation of why things happen the way they do. This is the Law of This and That Conditionality (idhappaccayatā). Just as a five-letter equation, $e=mc^2$, belies enormous scientific knowledge and potential, so these simple propositions explain at the fundamental level how things come to be:

When this is, that is.

When this is not, that is not.

From the arising of this, that arises.

From the cessation of this, that ceases.

The first two propositions tell us why things happen simultaneously by way of immediate contingency. For instance, at Satipanya, people come from various trajectories to form a group. The opposite of this is that if they didn't come, there would be no group. This is an immediate interdependency. Our bodies are alive because certain functions work together at the same time. If we stopped breathing or the heart stopped, then the body would stop.

If we take these propositions at a universal level, then we have a situation where everything happens only because it arises or doesn't arise in this present moment. Presumably, it would be quite chaotic: where would order come from save in the occasional, haphazard arrangement? From a kamma viewpoint, thinking that good arises from good and bad from bad would be no use. There would be no perceptible consequences from actions, since every happening would be entirely random. The reason for a moral code or ethical understandings would be missing. We would live in an amoral society.

The final propositions tell us that events now happen because of an effect coming from the past, no matter how near or distant. It has some original beginning. A group forms at Satipanya because various people have made a decision in the past to come here. Their arrival is a present consequence

of past decisions and consequent actions. And the consequence of the ensuing present actions will have some effect on future actions. This is a linear cause and effect law. Our bodies are alive because of past feeding and caring for them. If we stopped feeding the body, at some point it would stop functioning.

On a universal level, if everything happened as a direct consequence of something in the past, then the future would be pre-destined. In this scenario, how would creativity manifest? Presumably, the universe would be repetitive. Again from a kamma viewpoint, we would experience everything as fate. If everything is fate and pre-determined then again there would be no need for ethical laws and moral standards. Indeed a teacher in the Buddha's time, Ajita Kesakambali, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajita_Kesakambali)

said that if one were to go down one side of the Ganges creating mayhem and up the other performing great acts of compassion, it would not make the slightest difference. We would again be living in an amoral society.

The Buddha says present contingency and past conditionality operate in unison. So we have some order within creativity, some creativity within order. In art the order is represented by technique which underpins all creative arts. It is much the same in sport.

Apart from the basic Laws of Conditionality, we are embedded in more obvious laws of nature. These Niyama come together to create any given moment. There are five which equate fairly well with our modern way of seeing the world. The first is the Law of Heat (utu). Heat or Fire was understood to be the primal energy of the world. It equates to our physical sciences. The Law of the Seed (bija) equates to our biology. The Law of the Mind (citta) equates to our psychology and from this we can infer sociology which is but a society of minds. Then there is the Law of Kamma. Finally there is the Spiritual Law which equates to the Buddha's teaching on the end of suffering and the transcendent state of Nibbana.

These Laws tell us that not everything that happens to us is our personal kamma. We don't 'deserve' everything that happens to us. When it comes to natural disasters, to be caught up in a tsunami or earthquake doesn't mean we deserved to have all our property destroyed or lose our lives. If a person is born with a hereditary disease, it doesn't mean they did something terrible in their past life. Our genetic history is governed by our forebears. When it comes to the mind, our intellectual abilities don't mean that we did something wonderful in the past life to end up a genius or something terrible because we were always bottom of the class. When we enter the Path of Dhamma impersonal laws of kamma and all the teaching implied in the Four Noble Truths govern our progress towards liberation. So what does the Law of Kamma refer to? In terms of the process of liberation from suffering it has little to do with the consequences of our actions as they affect the world. Our goodwill actions support the process of purifying the heart and leading us to liberation, but they may not have their desired effect on the world. For that we need to know the matrix into which our action is being thrown. And we can never know that in its entirety. A charity that collected clothes to send to a poor country

unwittingly destroyed the local tailor trade which in turn had a knock-on effect. They had to stop sending clothes. Many people argued and still argue against the Iraq war. But perhaps in the fullness of time, it might be seen as a catalyst that released the Arab Spring: a country could be free of its dictator and could move towards democracy.

So the kamma that pertains to liberation is that which pertains to our interior life. In Pali, the language of the Theravada scriptures, the word, kamma, strictly refers to the intentional act, and the consequence is properly termed vipaka. As used to Kamma refers to a conscious act, whether by a deliberate act of will or by way of habit, which occurs when it has an ethical dimension. The intention can be either wholesome or unwholesome. And when we empower such an intention, an act is performed. It can be a mental act of interior thought and emotion such as when we get lost in an angry or exciting daydream, or it can be an act of speech or a deed. (This is to be distinguished from the present day meaning of karma which signifies fate.) Now once an act, a kamma, is completed, it will go on to have an effect, vipaka. Vipaka is not unalterable fate, for on recognising the consequences of an act, a person can change them. For instance, if we upset someone, we can apologise.

So when we allow the mind to wander into unwholesome daydreams, we are developing the attitude that drives it. Anger will drive hateful scenarios; love, affectionate scenarios. When thoughts are expressed in the spoken word, the same is happening. And when an angry thought leads to banging doors, shouting and worse, the underlying attitude of anger is being developed. In the same way, a caring action will develop love and compassion. Such kamma of thought, word and deed, are creating, because they are willed, our volitional conditioning, saṅkhāra. This is where we store all our wholesome and unwholesome attitudes.

It is important here to make a distinction between what we might term moral behaviour as a contrast to unskilful behaviour. When we talk of immoral behaviour we usually refer to actions that are grave such as stealing or hurting someone, no matter how small. But there are actions which come from attachment, that cannot be called 'evil', but nonetheless cause suffering. For instance, the attachment a parent has to their child is 'natural'. It would be difficult to imagine otherwise. But this attachment is a cause of suffering for the parent and a catalyst for the suffering of the child. How do we know when attachment is manifesting? Whenever we feel disappointed, angry, overly fearful for the child, and so on. Such reactions are good indicators.

It is also important to understand that we do not know fully the consequences of our thoughts, words and deeds on our internal life, since we don't know the strengths and weaknesses of our own conditioning. In certain circumstances, heroic actions can come to people who would never have thought themselves especially courageous. And the opposite is true, of course. Road rage, computer rage and other such rages often take people by surprise. In other words, as we do not know an action's outcome when performed in the matrix of the world out there, we don't know what an intentional act of thought, word or deed, will have upon the internal matrix of our heart and mind.

So, from the laws that express conditionality, we can see that we will never know the consequences of our decisions. Even in the Buddha's case, he had to sometimes adjust rules that he had previously made because of an unforeseen consequence. We live both outwardly and inwardly in an uncertain world. But the Law of Kamma tells us that the effect of a goodwill action whether of thought, word or deed, will have wholesome effects. Inwardly, we will be rewarded with wholesome habits and a growing beautiful heart. The opposite, of course, should we behave unwholesomely. This tells us we can change ourselves. The Buddha does not deny the self. He simply says it has no intrinsic reality. It is dependent on inner and outer circumstances. So we can begin to change the self away from one that is unhappy and lacking in self-esteem to one that is happy and high in self-esteem. It is from the basis of a beautiful self that spiritual progress, which includes the loss of this very sense of a separate self, can be realised. For our unwholesomeness is a measure of our delusion. Wisdom arises as purity of heart grows. This leads to a compassionate engagement with oneself and the world. All this is the result of understanding and accepting the Law of Conditionality (*idhappaccayatā*) and the Laws of Nature (*niyama*) within which the Law of Kamma is embedded.

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