

On Upāli: Mind as the Source of Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 21:55

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhodassa.

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

This little talk is around a discourse called On Upali. The Buddha meets this Jain who's called Upali, and it links in with last moon, although it's not necessary to have listened to the last moon one, about *cetanā*, about will, and what comes first — the body, the mind or speech — in terms of creating *kamma*.

I'd like to start with the verses that open the *Dhammapada*, which is 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 or a wholesome mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.

Here we have this discourse. For those of you who want to know, it's in the *Majjhima Nikāya* number 56, the Middle Length Sayings number 56. The Buddha is at Nalanda, which was a big town and became a very important university town, a big study town. At the same time, the Jain leader had turned up with his group of monks and nuns.

You'll know the Jains — you'll know the big Kumbh Mela that they have every 24 years in India, where, according to this figure, 100 million devotees gathered on the Ganges. You've seen those naked ascetics, the Digambaras — they're the sky clad or the space clad. They are Jain monks, but they've also got a section of Śvetāmbaras, which means they are dressed in white.

This Jain turns up. He doesn't say whether he's a Digambara or not. By the way, they're grey because they rub ash into their body, which is an antiseptic. This fellow called Dīgha Tapassī turns up and goes to have a chat with the Buddha out of interest.

The Buddha asks him: How many actions does the Jain leader Nātaputta describe for the making of evil *kamma*, the production of evil *kamma*?

Tapassī replies: Friend Gotama, the Jain, our leader, isn't 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 which was unwholesome, you were basically beating yourself.

The Buddha asks: Well, how many rods does the Jain leader describe?

He says: Well, there are three rods — the bodily rod, the verbal rod, and the mental rod.

Is the bodily rod one thing, the verbal rod another, and the mental rod another thing more?

He says: Yes, they are all three different things.

All these three rods are, says the Buddha, thus analysed, thus differentiated — which rod does the Nīgaṇṭha-nātaputta, that's his correct name as the Jain leader, 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 Nīgaṇṭha 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, which it seems in those days, you've got the person to repeat what they said three times so they couldn't say, "I didn't say that."

So: 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 bodily rod, friend Gotama.

Do you say bodily rod, Dīgha Tapassī?

I say bodily rod, friend Gotama.

I should think it was just a little bit more repartee like: Are you sure it's the bodily rod? I'm absolutely sure. Is this what your teacher told you? It is.

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* doesn't use the word rod, he uses the word action.

He says: Well, okay. Which of these actions does friend Gotama describe as making evil *kamma*, the production of *kamma*?

Well, there are three actions — the body, the speech, and the mind.

Is bodily action one thing, verbal action another, mental action still another?

The Buddha says: Yes, this is so.

Of these three actions, thus analysed, thus differentiated, friend Gotama, which action do you describe as the most greatly blameworthy for the making of evil *kamma*, the production of evil *kamma*? 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 *kamma*.

Did you say mental action, friend Gotama?

I said mental action.

Did you say mental action, friend Gotama?

I said mental action, Dīgha Tapassī.

Are you sure you said mental action, friend Gotama?

I did say mental action.

At this point, the Jain leaves. He's had enough. He can't take any more, and he goes back to the leader, the Jain leader, and he explains what happened. The Jain leader praises him. He says: You've rightly understood the message of the teacher.

Then he makes fun of the Buddha. He says: What does the trivial mental rod count in comparison to the gross bodily rod?

Anyway, 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 he had some sort of huge mansion because he has servants. I'm presuming he's either a landlord or a merchant, because merchants were becoming quite rich at that time.

He says to the Nīgaṇṭha: Look, I'm going to go to the Buddha and I'm going to overthrow Gotama, the contemplative's teachings on the ground of his position.

Then he gives these wonderful similes on 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 Gotama the contemplative to and drag him fro and drag him all around.

Then he gives more similes of how he's going to treat poor Gotama the Contemplative.

Now the Jain leader says: Yes, you go and refute his argument.

Dīgha Tapassī says: Oh, I'm not so sure this is right that householder Upali should try that, because Gotama the Contemplative is a magician and he knows a converting magic by which he converts disciples of other sects.

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

Anyway, off he goes to see the Buddha. When he meets the Buddha, the Buddha says to him: If householder, 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 Nīgaṇṭha, 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?

Exactly why he should die because he doesn't get cold water, there's no explanation for that.

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.

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 after consistent with what you said before, what is consistent with what you said after.

There's a little bit of argy-bargy there.

Then he gives him a second example. There might be a case where a Nīgaṇṭha is constrained by the fourfold constraints — this is the four precepts of not harming, not stealing, not being unchaste and lying — and then he says constrained by all the constraints, all the rules and regulations of the order of Jains.

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 Nīgaṇṭha-nātaputta does not describe as greatly blameworthy.

But if he intends it, asks the Buddha?

Greatly blameworthy, Lord.

Under what does the Nīgaṇṭha-nātaputta 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 what is what you said before consistent with what you said after.

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?

Upali says: No, this is not possible.

He said: 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.

He said: 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 he 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 *Saṅgha*. May the Blessed One remember me as a lay follower who has gone forth to Him for refuge from this day forward for life.

The next thing the Buddha said 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. But the next one 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.

There's an occasion in the scriptures where the Buddhist monks and nuns are in the shrine, these big parks where they had these shrines. There's lots of food left over after the lay people have offered. Ānanda says to the Buddha: What should we do with all this food?

He 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.

There's a rule that I 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.

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 the 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.

When the householder was of ready mind, malleable mind, unhindered mind, exultant mind, confident mind, he 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.

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 entrant, which is the first rung of awakening.

Now he's very happy. He goes home, and of course, the news gets back to the Nīgaṇṭha, to the Jain leader — Upali has now become a disciple of the Buddha.

He can't believe it. It's not possible. Off he goes to see Upali. He gets to the household and Upali has told his gatekeeper not to let them in.

The Nīgaṇṭha says to the gatekeeper: Look, you go and tell Upali that I'm here and I want to talk to him.

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

He takes the high seat. Upali takes the high seat and the Nīgaṇṭhas come in, the Jains come in.

This is what he 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 is it that 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.

Upali replies: Oh, auspicious, venerable sir, is the converting magic. Admirable, venerable sir, is the converting magic.

Seemingly then, the Jain leader gets so upset, he spews blood or something like that. They leave, and there's an occasion here where Upali goes on to create this lovely poem to the Buddha, these lovely verses in which he praises the Buddha.

This whole story is really coming back to this position that the Buddha says that nothing happens unless it's, first of all, happened in the mind. It's within the mind that we have this will, this *cetanā*, and it's these decisions that we make that produce our actions — in this case, unwholesome actions. It all begins in the mind.

As soon as we're aware of something in the mind which is unwholesome and we allow it to arise and pass away, then it cannot express itself through our words, through our speech and through our actions.

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

All experience or actions 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, wholesome mind, and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.

I can only hope my 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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