

The Second Noble Truth — Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 21:10

Kamma, more commonly known in its Sanskrit form as karma, another language the Buddhist scriptures are written in, has become part of our language ever since the hippie sixties. But unfortunately the meaning of the word has been overloaded with Hindu and Western ideas. In Buddhism, the law of *kamma* is understood within the framework of the Four Noble Truths, and without this law, the truths would not make sense.

The Buddha taught there were fundamental laws that governed our lives, and if we were able to perceive them, we would be able to understand why we suffer and how we could rid ourselves of suffering. Nowadays the word karma tends to be used when something bad happens to us, but actually it refers to everything that happens to us, good, bad and indifferent.

Strictly speaking, *kamma* means what we actually do. The results of our actions is properly termed *vipāka*. These two words then mean cause and effect, action and result: *kamma*, *vipāka*.

The law of cause and effect is accepted without question in western science. Nothing happens without something having caused it. There is nothing that just appears out of nowhere, so to speak. Everything is caused by something else. At its most obvious, the seed is the cause of the plant and the plant of the fruit, which in turn produces the seed. Buddhism takes this law of causality, of causation, and places it firmly within the moral sphere of human existence.

Here we need to stand back a minute and consider what human beings are in relationship to each other and the world. I am autonomous in the sense that I have my own apparatus, body, senses, mental abilities and so on, which perceive the world and make sense of it. In this sense, I'm an individual unit. However, this unit is in a state of total relationship with the world, not just other human beings, but animals, plants and minerals. I have a relationship with the stones in the street. I kick them. In other words, although I in myself have my own understandings, thoughts and so on, as soon as I speak or act, I form a relationship with something or somebody, and this relationship in turn affects the way I think and understand. In a way, I can say I am my relationships.

For instance, when Jim goes to work, he always sits at the same table, in the same chair. He has a relationship with these two objects, little do they know, whereby they are singled out from all the other tables and chairs in the room, singled out by him as his, belonging to him. He knows this is true for him. The chair and table don't, but it does affect them because no one else uses them. Their use, their relationship, is limited to Jim, and everyone else who works in that room agrees with that relationship. It's all very reciprocal and harmonious, since everyone else in the room has their own table and chair.

One day Jim walks in, and lo and behold, someone is sitting at his table. This person is new to the place. She doesn't realise. In fact, she's only there temporarily to do a quick jotting, but her posture suggests that she owns the table and chair. She's pulled the chair right up, and is sitting comfortably and squarely at the table. She's taken his space. What is Jim's reaction? Anger. He might clothe it with sarcasm. "Being promoted then?" "Sorry," she says, collects her things and shoots off with an angry glance.

You can see that in this little scene, Jim's relationship to that chair and table has been an underlying factor in making an enemy of someone who in all innocence was just using them temporarily. These attitudes we have within ourselves, our inner dispositions, affect our relationship to the world, both good and bad.

Here is the Buddha firmly placing the centre of all our relationships: "In this fathom-long body, I declare, is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world." This is another formulation of the Four Noble Truths, but from the point of view of *kamma*.

As far as I am concerned, this me in myself, my existence, my sufferings, my joys, my birth, my death, is the world, the world as I know and perceive it, the world as I experience it. That world is me. I make divisions between me and myself and me with others, and also between me and the world. But actually this me in the world is just the me in myself portrayed upon the world affecting it, and the me within myself is the world portrayed in me affecting me. The division of subject and object is very much needed in ordinary daily life, but we think of them as two totally separated things instead of realising their intimate interrelationship.

The table, chair and woman in the office have their own existence in the world, their relationship to the world. But when Jim enters the scene, their existence in the world, their relationship to the world, includes him in it. When he entered the office, he fell into an immediate relationship with these three. What matters to Jim is exactly this interrelationship. The way he understands, perceives others, also includes the way others perceive and understand him. The way Jim understands and perceives things is very much affected by the way things affect him.

When Jim doesn't see this, he lives in a dual world of me and them. Me, the isolated being in a world of things and others. But in actual fact, everything is interdependent, interrelated. It's like a huge folk dance. Each one of us are only individuals in that we have a specific role to play within the whole dance. How we play that role is up to us, though our decisions will be affected by the other dancers.

We say it takes two to start a quarrel, but you can bet your last penny the protagonists will blame each other. They won't see it as an interrelationship. If the woman was sitting at another desk, Jim might have barely noticed her. If the woman had been a friend, he would have greeted her. So you can see, within this fathom-long body is the whole world, with all its suffering, and of course the path leading out of suffering too. This whole world is the whole of the interdependent interrelationships we are.

Now, within this world of interdependent interrelationships, when we think or do something which is *ka*

mma, we create a result, *vipāka*. In our minds, we either create a different way of thinking or we reinforce an old way of thinking. In other words, we are conditioning ourselves.

Every day, when Jim gets to work, he has a cup of coffee. As soon as he walks into the office, his first thought is coffee. Why? Because for the past few years, that's what he's always done. He sometimes looks forward to the coffee, even on the way to work. His thoughts keep reminding him of delicious coffee awaiting him. His mind and his body are conditioned to wallow in the taste of hot coffee before he settles down to work.

One day, Jim gets to work. No coffee! He's so angry. Whose turn was it to buy the coffee? He's so embarrassed about his anger when other staff tell him it was his turn.

Now where does this desire, anger and embarrassment come from? The desire, virtually obsession, has been cultivated by Jim in himself over the years. Every time he gets to work, he's satisfied his desire, his wish for coffee. The coffee didn't make Jim do it. The coffee did not create his obsession. He could have decided to have coffee only if he felt tired to pep him up. The coffee is a passive object. Jim's used it as he's wanted to, and it is Jim himself who is totally responsible for his obsession.

Did the coffee cause Jim's anger? Did the lack of coffee cause Jim's anger? Of course not. Anger was Jim's internal learnt response when he doesn't get what he wants. When Jim has to suffer the pain of not satisfying a craving, he gets angry. Worse, the angry mind looks for a scapegoat. Jim wants to blame someone. As it turned out, it was his own fault. And he feels embarrassed about his display of anger and petulance.

Did his colleagues make Jim embarrassed? Or the coffee? Or the lack of coffee? Of course not. Embarrassment is what Jim feels, what he's taught himself to feel when he makes a fool of himself. It is the mind which suffers from its own internal conditioning.

Next day, Jim reads in the papers an article about the harmfulness of caffeine. He decides he won't have any more coffee. But the smell of coffee keeps distracting him. He feels angry, depressed. His body, for lack of coffee, feels uncomfortable. But Jim holds out. Within a week or two, he's dropped the habit. He's off the drug.

Reading the article influenced his opinion, his understanding of coffee. He ponders, he decides, it's better not to drink it. This decision leads to action, to avoiding coffee. Although Jim has to suffer the consequences of past conditioning, his past obsession with coffee, he reconditions himself. Jim purifies his mind of that obsession. In the end, he's lost it. He doesn't care whether he has coffee or not. Jim has reached a state of perfect equanimity about it.

The importance here is to realise that he's conditioned himself, that he's responsible for his own mind, and that he can no longer blame his parents, colleagues, friends, politicians, the system, or whatever, for his state of mind. In other words, Jane can blame bad management for the collapse of the firm and her

eventual redundancy, but not the ensuing depression and so on. The mental reaction is her own self-imposed conditioning.

This is extremely hard for most people to understand and accept. Our whole vocabulary and use of language is based on the understanding that others make us angry or happy. Others make the anger in me, not me. One of the insights of meditation is to see that states of mind from the darkest to the lightest are our own personal conditioning. That's why what angers one person may bring joy to another. One person's delight is another person's poison.

In the Buddha's teaching, this understanding is crucial if we are to cleanse the mind of all its negativity, to purify it. If Jim thinks his wife Jane is the cause of his depression, he'll have to change her or leave her. If Jane says John is always making her angry, she'll have to change him before she gets any relief. This point of view, which presumes that somehow I will be perfectly happy and life perfectly wonderful for me if only the world, especially the people in it, would change, is one of the causes of our great unhappiness and frustration.

When we realise we are the makers of our own mental states, suddenly we have real power, real opportunity to change. If I make me angry and depressed, I can make me unangry and undepressed. When we accept this, we can now look for the kernel agent that produces this conditioning. The Buddha isolated that agent: "Volition, O disciples, is what I call *kamma*. It is through will that a person does something in the form of thought, word or action."

So, an idea comes to mind. At that point, I decide to stop it or develop it. If I decide to develop it, I will produce a train of thoughts which may translate into words and actions. From a mental development point of view, it is so necessary to decide whether the initial thought or idea is good in terms of being right. However I react, whatever I do will reinforce the conditioning in my mind or undermine it.

This leads us to the next law of *kamma*, that of reciprocity. Like produces like. The Buddha taught very clearly that wholesomeness produces wholesomeness and unwholesomeness produces unwholesomeness. I use wholesomeness, another possible word is skilful, rather than good and bad, to get away from any idea of supernatural forces of good and evil or a rewarding and punishing deity.

The Buddha taught that everything that happens to us is the product of past and present conditions. There is no concept of punishment in Buddhism. Everything that happens to us are consequences. Punishment, as such, is something human beings have produced for themselves. It's something human beings do to each other out of revenge or a sense of so-called righteousness. Yet another result, another consequence of unwholesome conditioning in the mind.

An objection is usually raised here. How is it people get away with murder, literally? How is it that people who are good end up suffering? The point is that a person's action has a two-fold effect. When a person does something two stones drop into two pools.

The first pool is the outside world setting up a chain of reactions that affects the me in the world. Since I am in relationship with the world as soon as I do something it affects it. These effects go on and on until they come back to the original doer. In other words the initial action changes the world. As the world changes so it affects the doer of that action. When Jim got angry about his coffee, others formed new opinions of him. These opinions of theirs now affect his relationship with them. If his boss was involved, they may even affect his career prospects.

The second stone drops inward into the pool of the mind, setting up a chain reaction which affects the me in myself. Jim's anger over the coffee goes to reinforce this disposition of anger. When he goes home and finds there's no coffee there too, his angry response, now just that little more developed, makes for a great explosion and Jim finds himself flinging the empty coffee jar out of the window.

In other words, the unskilful person and the skilful person are simply developing different minds within themselves and they are also developing different worlds around themselves. At some point, the consequences of their actions will be experienced. Even if a murderer gets away with it in the world, his mind won't. The Buddha said, "According to the seed, so the fruit is reaped."

There is no escaping these karmic results in Buddhism. Penance, prayer, offerings to a god of *kamma* won't help in the least. However, there are ways to assuage, to soften the effects of unwholesome results, the *vipāka*. Jim's display of petulant anger upset his colleagues. They were surprised and disappointed. The next morning, Jim brings two jars of coffee and leaves a note of apology. Old relationships are re-established, but of course, it will take greater proof to convince them that Jim is not the angry type.

The next question normally asked is, how does Buddhism account for mass suffering, especially seemingly innocent suffering in earthquakes or civilian war casualties? The first point is that the law of *kamma* is only one of the laws that govern the universe. When we are born, we have to accept the whole package. Not everything that happens to us is the result of our personal past or present actions. When Jim threw that jar out of the window, it landed on the head of a poor old man. He died there and then. And Jim went to jail for manslaughter. Now, he didn't make the man walk under the window just as the jar came down. So you see, we have to be careful with what we do or say. There are other factors abroad that can maximise or minimise the effects of what we do. Wholesome actions, for instance, may not mature since the conditions are not there to support.

The second point is that suffering is a state of mind. In meditation, when pains come from the sitting posture, we try to see these so-called pains for what they really are. Calling them pains puts a value judgment on them. They are bad, terrible. We react with fear and aversion. But in meditation, if we concentrate just on the sensations, the pains as sensations, the mind will empty of its normal reaction and we will suddenly experience what we thought of as pain as just sensation. When we experience just sensations, what is the state of mind? Peaceful and calm. Not suffering.

So in a disaster such as the Mexico earthquake of 1987, thousands of people suffered pain. Some died

instantly, with very little pain indeed. Others died slowly in great pain and in great anguish. Others died in great pain, but equanimously. How each individual reacted to their tragedy was determined to a large extent by their conditioned state of mind. From the outside, from the TV pictures, we're filled with horror at so much suffering. From the inside, there are only individuals, each suffering their own lot according to their self-developed conditioning. That is why some trapped but not physically suffering may have been screaming with fright. Others, in terrible physical agony, may have been calm and died peacefully.

So, to recap. Firstly, the law of *kamma* states that everything we suffer or enjoy belongs to the moral sphere which is governed by the law of cause and effect, as is the world of atoms and molecules. Secondly, that there is a direct reciprocity in that wholesome, skilful thoughts, words and actions produce wholesome, skilful thoughts, words and actions, and that unwholesomeness and unskilfulness produce unwholesome and unskilful results.

Thirdly, that the root cause of *kamma* is to be discovered in our own volition, our wills. This means that through the power of our own decision-making, we can change our personality, the way we are and act, and so we can change the world about us.

Fourthly, that the results of any intentioned thoughts, words and actions are inescapable, but we can affect the outcome of unskillfulness in the present with present skillfulness.

Vipassanā insight meditation allows us to see our present conditioning of mind. In the clearing of awareness, the mind displays itself. By not joining in, not indulging, not developing, we can allow unwholesome states of mind to burn themselves out. With the practice of loving kindness, *mettā* meditation, we suggest to ourselves more skillful ways of thinking and behaving. In our daily life, we constantly try to behave in skillful ways. In this way, the meditative life changes us, moves us away from unwholesome states of mind towards the wholesome, from darkness to light.

The Dhammapada is often referred to as the Buddhist Bible. It is a collection of many of the Buddhist sayings under different headings. Here are three verses on *kamma*.

"Even a wrongdoer may still find happiness, so long as his unskillful behaviour does not bear fruit. But when his unskillful behaviour does bear fruit, he will meet with their unwholesome consequences. Even a good person may meet with suffering, so long as his skillful behaviour does not bear fruit. But when that skillful behaviour does bear fruit, he will enjoy the benefits of that skillful behaviour. If there is no cut on the hand, a person can handle poison. The poison won't affect someone who does not have a cut. There are no unwholesome consequences for one who did not intend to act unskillfully."

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *nibbānic* peace within.

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