

Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 27:49

It is very important to remember when we are talking about *kamma* and talking about how we suffer or enjoy things, not to make the mistake of believing that everything that happens to us, good or bad, is because of past actions we have done. The Buddha taught there were five general laws that govern the universe.

Briefly, the arising and falling of all material things, nature itself, is governed by the caloric order, caloric here meaning energy. This law approximates to what we would call physics, chemistry and biology. Secondly, there is the law of germinal order, which is really part of the caloric order, but refers to the vegetable kingdom. Thirdly, there is the moral order, and this is the kamma we're going to look at more deeply. Fourthly, there is the psychical order, which equates today with the whole area of psychology. And finally, the order of natural phenomena, both physical and mental, which points to a deeper level, the absolute truths of the universe, such as the inherent transitoriness of all things.

In other words, human beings are born into a set of circumstances of which only one is the result of personal past and present moral actions. But the important thing is that our states of mind and wrong understandings are very much dependent on this law of kamma. In other words, if we seek happiness and liberation from all suffering, it is the understanding of this law of kamma that will give us the key.

It would be more accurate to say that all these laws are working all the time and that within them is the effect of our own decision making. Remember, the Buddha said, "Volition, O disciples, is what I call kamma." Furthermore, it is because of these other laws plus the effects of all other people's actions that it is impossible to say what the effect of any one action will be. Often a person will mean well, but it all turns out wrongly. A surgeon means to cure the patient, but the patient dies. Sometimes we wish to do harm and something good turns up. We speak badly about someone and get the promotion.

Here we shall be looking at the different classifications of kamma and what they mean in our practice. We shall go further into understanding the mechanisms and see how and why people seem to get away with things or strike lucky. This will take us into the Buddhist cosmology, the six realms where rebirth can take place. But we shall see they are also just states of mind. And finally, we shall dig a little deeper and see how all this fits in with the idea of there being no self.

Even though we do not have much control over the effects of our actions in the outside world, we can come to have total control of the world of the inner mind. This is a very important point to grasp. The Buddha taught that our personal suffering, the suffering within the mind, all its negative states, was caused by desire and attachment and the ensuing decisions that lead from these wrong views. In other

words, if we want to end our suffering, the problem lies within us, not outside us. The task is to change our decisions towards the wholesome, and allow the mind to purify itself through the practice of *vipassanā* insight meditation.

So although we intend to do good, but unfortunate results arise, although we intend to do harm, but fortunate results arise, the fact is that these intentions go to condition the mind, and this mind keeps on acting in that conditioned habitual way. Eventually, circumstances around a person will begin to mirror the internal state of the mind. However, because of the complexities of any given situation, we can never tell what the result of any particular action will be.

The Buddha says this very clearly in the Achintaya Sutta, Discourse on the Unthinkable. "The results of an action are unthinkable, nor are they to be thought about." Trying to work out the results would lead one to madness or frustration. Having said this, because of this internal mechanism in the mind, this self-conditioning through acts of will that keep on creating the same sort of actions, so it is that eventually situations build up around us. It is also taught that the effect of any action will eventually reach us.

At this point, the teaching of kamma does not make sense unless the concept of rebirth is introduced. Without this concept it would seem that people really do get away with murder and people really do suffer unjustly. Rebirth simply states that the mind which is constantly seeking satisfaction for its desires goes on doing so even after the physical death of the body. In Buddhism the body is one thing and the mind is another. The body is sustained by the mind and other physical factors such as food. When the body dies, the mind itself leaves and seeks elsewhere to be born.

This discarnate entity, a rather ugly expression used these days by scientists to describe what happens in near-death experiences, is not a permanent soul or self or integral entity at all. It is all the five aggregates the Buddha talks of. It is an energy which needs the physical world to satisfy its desires. As we shall see later, there are realms of existence in Buddhism where there is just pure mind, but such minds are purified if only for a time of sensual pleasure.

In the Mahā-kamma-vibhaṅga-sutta, the discourse on the great exposition of kamma, the Buddha answers questions that arise out of four types of situations. There is the wrong-doer who ends up badly, and the wrong-doer who ends up happily. There is the good-doer who ends up happily, and the good-doer who ends up badly.

In his day there were those who took up certain positions. Some said all wrongdoers ended up badly and eventually in hell. The same with the good doers, saying that they went to heaven. Now this actual discourse came about because a young monk, Samiddhi, got it all wrong and so misguided another ascetic of a different beliefs, a certain Potaliputta. The questions had centered on what happens after death. Here is the Buddha making his teaching clear to Ānanda, who brought the tale to the Buddha.

"Now Ānanda, there is such a person who has killed living beings, taken what is not freely given,

misconducted himself in sexual desires, spoken falsely, spoken maliciously, spoken coarsely, gossiped, was covetous, was ill-willed and had wrong view." These, of course, are the ten wrong actions. "On the dissolution of the body after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. But the unwholesome kamma producing this suffering may have been done by him earlier, or the unwholesome kamma producing this suffering may have been done by him later, or wrong view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of death. And this is why, on the dissolution of the body after death, he appeared in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. Since he has committed one of the ten wrong actions, he will feel the results of that here and now, or in the next rebirth, or in subsequent existence."

So what the Buddha is saying here is that the effects of unwholesome deeds can be felt in subsequent lives after this, that indeed we may now be suffering consequences of deeds done in previous lives. One of the important points here is wrong view taken at the time of death.

This brings us to the classification of kamma according to function. The last conscious moment of this life will be the first consciousness of the next, and will, according to Buddhist psychology, be the main mental disposition throughout the next life. If someone dies with hate on the mind, that hateful state of mind will constitute the subconscious flow of the next life. Conversely, if one dies in peace or in joy, that will be the next life's subconscious stream. More important, it is that last thought that sets the place of rebirth.

That last thought is not a haphazard thing, but will be the thought that carries the most karmic energy in the mind. If, for instance, you look back over today, you will see you will remember one or two distinct events. If you look back over the past week or month, you'll see there'll be just one or two memories that stand out. At death, it is believed that one memory will arise that will be the one action or event that is most important to the person. This last thought then sets a particular disposition in the mind which underpins a person's personality and character.

Running along with this karmic vein are two other types of kamma known as supportive and counteractive. So it is not as though the mind is totally dominated by this last thought. What is more, there may be what's known as destructive kamma, which is a very strong force, previously lying latent, but which may arise once the conditions are conducive. This destroys the reproductive kamma itself.

A person, for instance, may in this life be generally happy, have a good job, a happy family. Her happy state of mind, her positive virtues outnumbering her vices, may all be a result of the underlying reproductive kamma that may be one of peace. She has died in her last life in a peaceful way. In this life, this reproductive kamma is supported by happy circumstances, such as born into a well-to-do family in a rich western country. The counteracted kamma is that the prevailing sexism in society stops her from realizing her potential, stops her from building a successful career. Suddenly, in the midst of life, she is struck by a debilitating disease or fatal illness. Such an unfortunate happening may very well be the product of an earlier life's unwholesome deed now maturing in this fashion. Obviously such destructive

kamma does not arise for everyone, in fact for the majority.

So from this classification of kamma by function into reproductive, supportive, counteractive and destructive, we can see that it makes unravelling one's kamma very complicated indeed. We simply don't know whether what we suffer or enjoy now is the kamma coming to fruition which was done in the past life or lives, or whether it is the fruit of this life's endeavour.

So it is that the Buddha in the discourse of the great exposition of kamma goes on to say that an evil doer on the dissolution of the body may reappear in a happy destination. So with the good doer such a person may end up upon death either in a happy or unhappy situation depending on the death moment consciousness.

For meditators this is a point to ponder. We may now be in a happy situation but things might change. How are we going to react? Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves every day that there may be karmic debts to pay, and that if it is so, we should remind ourselves of the law of kamma and accept things just as they are, knowing that the debt will be repaid the quicker, the more we accept it. Knowing that the debt will be repaid, and we shall be freed of that karmic debt, and we will no longer suffer from the effects of that past unwholesome action. Indeed, there will come a time when all the sour fruits of past unwholesome actions have been suffered, and we are left simply with the results of our continuing wholesome deeds.

Another way that kamma is classified is by the different effects, and this leads us to understand the more psychological aspects of kamma. Here, the reproductive kamma is called death-proximate kamma, and as already mentioned, determines the subconscious stream.

Secondly, the Buddha taught that there were actions which produced certain results, and these he called weighty kamma. On the negative side, which will surely lead a person to states of perdition or hell realms, are four actions: to kill one's mother or father, to kill an arahat, a saint, to wound a Buddha, or to create a schism in the Saṅgha. As far as lay people go, since Buddhas and Arahats are in short supply, and it's very difficult for lay people to create a schism in the Saṅgha, the message is, don't kill your mum and dad. On the wholesome side, any of the higher states of concentration, known as *jhāna*, or any of the paths of insight, will effect a happy rebirth.

The third type of kamma is very important for meditators to grasp. It is known as habitual kamma, all our habits of thought, speech and action, those things that are second nature to us. It's mostly these we struggle with in ordinary daily life and in our meditations. Habits have a lot of force within them. They are very difficult to break and root out, as anyone who has tried to break one knows, whether it's smoking or giving up the morning cup of tea. Our work is to make sure that we are undermining unwholesome habits and reinforcing wholesome ones. This is, in fact, the right effort on the Noble Eightfold Path.

In the context of long-term kamma, meaning future rebirth, this now becomes even more important, for

after weighty kamma, it is usually this sort of habitual thought that we grasp for when life begins to pass from us. You can see there is a vast difference of mind between one that is in confusion demanding alcohol after a lifetime devoted to the bottle, and one demanding peace or friendships of good companion, or dare I say the quiet of a meditation room. Of course, ideally, now we are meditators, we should maintain our mindfulness, alert and awake, even unto that dying moment. That's what all this practice is about, to be able to die in meditation.

The final classification is really potluck. It's known as stored-up kamma. It includes light or rarely performed actions. However, depending on what one does, the force of such kamma could be very great. That one explosion of anger that leads to a murderous blow. That one insight into the suffering of another that led to giving away a fortune.

In daily life we must be wary of any new unwholesome thoughts, speech and action, for such things can grow into habits. Therefore we need to be ever vigilant, not to reinforce anything unskillful. We go out for a drink, we're invited again, and again, suddenly we're in the company of drinkers. Before we know it, we've got a problem.

So now we've looked at kamma in terms of a wider field. We see that the Buddha teaches not simply in the perspective of one life in which we either sink or swim, but a sequence of lives in which we hopefully become more and more aware of our ultimate purpose, more and more aware of the trap we are in and of the way to escape it. We see there are forces at play outside our personal kamma. We see our own kamma to be a very complicated thing. Different forces of kamma may be playing different functions, sometimes supporting, sometimes counteracting the basic kamma we were born with. We can see that what we have done and what we do has had and will have certain results.

In this very complicated picture can we reduce everything to an easier view that will eventually bring us the desired results of happiness and liberation, such results that will lead to situations conducive for training and insight and the realization of the ultimate truth?

The first is to ponder the fact that we own our own kamma, we reap its results. There is a verse of the Buddha from the *Dhammapada* which brings this home to us: "I am the owner of my kamma, heir of my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma. I abide supported by my kamma. Whatever I do, be it wholesome or unwholesome, I shall be heir to the results of that action."

Kamma is usually read as bad. We must correct this lopsided view. Kamma is good so long as we behave skilfully. No matter how I read that verse, however, because of the preconceived idea that kamma is some predetermined hard-to-bear fate, it's hard to see that in fact it is a message of hope. What it's saying is that we are in control. All right, the Buddha is no saviour that's going to let us off the hook. All right, the Buddha declared there is no merciful God we can appeal to with mitigating circumstances to alleviate our problems. But there is an obvious ending to all our suffering once we cotton on to the fact that all we have to do is do good.

If we were to do good and only good, from now on, to live in a completely harmless way from this instant onwards, we can say that what we suffer now and in the future is just the results of past unskillful action, and that they are in fact burning out. They are all coming to an end, and we can look to a future where the fruits of our good actions will ripen.

So it is that the Buddha enjoins us to gladden our hearts in the midst of our sufferings. He says, in fact, we are extremely fortunate to be born as human beings, for it is in this very human realm that we are most able to see the way out of our mess.

This brings us to the teaching of the different realms of existence in Buddhism. The realms are divided into four divisions: the happy states, the unhappy states, the realms of form, and the formless realms. The last two we can deal with quickly. They are realms into which beings are reborn who have achieved the higher states of mind brought about by concentration meditation. They are highly blissful realms and life seems to be astronomically long. But like all realms in Buddhism they are impermanent and at some time or other beings fall from that existence into lower or maybe higher ones. Because life is so pleasurable in these realms beings are said to find it hard to train spiritually so content and happy are they.

These realms need not concern us here, since to practice the *jhāna* meditations is often beyond the ability of meditators who are too busy trying to earn a living. But if you really want to develop these states, you'll have to give yourself totally to the job, or join a monastery.

It is the other two states, happy and unhappy, that concern us most. There are four unhappy realms. They are the different hell states, the animal realm, the hungry ghost states known as the *petas*, and the *asura* realm, which simply means that beings don't shine, a glum existence. Because of our unwholesome deeds, then, a being can be reborn in states of fierce suffering, or as an animal, or as a discarnate entity, wandering about looking for satisfaction. The *petas* are said to live on this earth and approximate to our idea of ghosts.

The happy realms include six different heavenly states, all of which are said to be most delightful, and life there seems to be very long. But most interestingly, the human realm is classified as happy. To understand this, we have to remind ourselves that all these realms refer also to states of mind.

Whether or not to believe that other realms exist is left up to the individual in Buddhism. I met a Sri Lankan scholar who said he had proved beyond doubt that they were all metaphor symbolic for states of mind, that they didn't really exist. But my own reading of the scriptures leads me to believe that the Buddha did teach such realms as real. Of course, belief in such things is not necessary for insight, and anyway, all these realms suffer from the same problem of transiency. Even so, if doubt comes to the mind, it's simply best to give it the benefit of the doubt until proved otherwise. There's no harm either way, believing or not believing, and it may just turn out to be true.

Since these states are all states of mind, they can be experienced here in the human realm. When a person

suffers from a deep depression or indeed a mental illness, this is akin to a hell state. When a person is drunk and his intelligence and will are very much reduced, it is akin to an animal state. When a person is controlled by an obsession, this is a *peta*, a hungry ghost, often portrayed with a big belly and a tiny mouth to suggest their inability to achieve satisfaction. When we are generally unhappy, we are *asuras*, lacking gladness. When we are happy, joyful, excited and so on, we are in the heavenly realms. Inhabitants there are known as *devas*, usually translated as gods. We can also experience all the realms of form and the formless realms through concentration meditation.

In other words, as humans, we have the capacity to experience all states of mind. That's why this earth is a very special place to be, and Tibetan Buddhism calls it a precious birth. Here we are not crushed by unhappiness, nor is our intelligence dulled, nor are we lost in pleasure and happy states of mind. In fact, we experience them all. We experience the despair of hell and the joys of heaven. This mental wandering about can bring us great wisdom once we begin to see things with right understanding. In the human realm we can experience that characteristic of all existence more keenly: the transiency and the endless unsatisfying search for happiness and contentment.

Of course there are human beings who are living in desperate circumstances, some who are born with very low intellectual capacity, others who live like gods, but the vast majority have the ability to see the ultimate truths within all this becoming. Knowing this, we must take advantage of this life to develop in virtue and wisdom.

I've covered a great deal here, so I'd better recap. I started by recalling the law of *kamma*, the importance of the will, and the reciprocal nature whereby good returns good and harm returns harm. However, we can't put everything that happens to us in the world down to our own personal past and present actions. There are other laws and other people. But essentially, when it comes to the third noble truth, the end of suffering, we're talking about the world within us. However, even if this is true, our actions do have effect. We will reap sweet or sour fruits in future rebirths, if not in this present life.

Talking of rebirth, we saw the mechanisms of reproductive *kamma* and death proximate *kamma* to show how actions in the past life condition the last death consciousness, which in turn is a subconscious stream of the next life. This karmic strain is either helped by supportive *kamma* or undermined by counteractive *kamma*. This doesn't mean that counteractive *kamma* is always unwholesome. It depends on the death proximate *kamma*. For instance, there was a great Buddhist leader in India, Dr. Ambedkar, who was born in very undesirable circumstances as an untouchable. But the Maharaja took interest in him — counteractive *kamma*. He ended up with high degrees from Oxford and being called the father of the Indian constitution. Finally, there is the destructive *kamma*, which explains why catastrophes can happen to us. This is how *kamma* functions.

The classification by effect pointed out that there are certain actions which bring sure results either to be born in the realms of dire suffering or in the realms of form or formless realms. There is stored up *kamma*

which indeed may contain the destructive *kamma* mentioned above. Most important for us meditators is habitual *kamma* for these tend to be most troublesome to us if unwholesome and most beneficial if wholesome. This led to the different realms in Buddhism with the accent firmly on the importance of the human realm as being the place most conducive for our liberation.

Finally, I would like to go a little deeper and point to the importance of *vipassanā* insight meditation and the meditative lifestyle in general. When we are meditating on the breath and noticing its passing nature, we are also beginning to grasp that other characteristic of the human being, namely that this body and mind, this *kamma*, do not constitute a complete entity, a substantial ego, a soul, a person or a self. The human is a collection of parts.

When pain comes to us in the meditation, this should be greeted with open arms, for what pain does most wonderfully is concentrate the mind. When pain arises in the knees from the posture, for example, how easy it is for us to keep our attention on it, but we must observe it with wisdom. We have to catch all the passing reactions to it, the fear, the aversion, and we must keep bringing the awareness back to observing the sensations. At some point, the pain will be experienced as just sensation, pure sensation. All the labelling will have gone. The meditator knows only the arising and falling of minute moments of sensation.

With this sort of concentrative awareness, the meditator comes to realize that the sensations, the so-called pain, are one thing, and the consciousness that knows it another. In other words, the sensations are not the consciousness. This consciousness itself does not suffer. At such deep points of concentration, there is not even the awareness of someone, or a person, or a soul, or a self that is knowing. Whenever that knowing faculty identifies with the labeling, "it is pain," then it becomes the aggregate of perception, an ego is born. When that knowing faculty identifies with all the reactions, "I'm afraid, I'm anxious," it becomes the aggregate of volitional formations, and an ego, a self, a person, is born. So long as there is an iota of a self, or a feeling of somebody observing, so long is there an ego, a person, a soul, or a self.

This, of course, has to be experienced. No words can catch this experiential knowledge. It's like trying to describe the taste of a mango to someone who's never even seen one. But such experiences undermine a lot of wrong understanding, and the more we come to experience such things, the more the Buddha's teaching of *anattā*, non-self, becomes clear. As it becomes more and more clear, there is a growing realization that *kamma* is just a force that manifests as the five aggregates, the *khandhas*, the human being — that in fact humans are nothing but this karmic force, that is, form and energy, that the whole world is in fact just this form, this energy, this *kamma*, that none of it constitutes anything substantial.

In *The Path of Purification*, the spiritual classic written by Buddhaghosa, he says in a verse:

There is no doer of a deed, nor is there anyone who reaps the deed's effects. Phenomena alone flow on and on. No other view than this is right.

We can slowly come to realize all this in our meditation and daily life. When we know this totally, when we have this insight into all things, then, of course, we shall be enlightened. For what is it the Buddhas know we don't, if it isn't exactly this? That anything that arises and passes away does not constitute a person, a soul, a self, or any substantial being.

Then wherein lies our liberation, the taste of freedom? It is in the discovery, the realization for oneself, of that unborn, that unbecoming, that uncreated, that uncompounded, that makes this realization.

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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