

# Karma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · International Talks · 51:31

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Before I begin, I'd like to explain what will happen in the next few days. The course will end after breakfast on Saturday, so we need to start cooling down a bit. I think the strict regime will end on Friday afternoon. I'll probably finish on Friday morning, and Friday afternoon I'll do my special New Age exercise - healing. Then we'll have some concluding exercises. So this was a kind of introductory ceremony - a concluding ceremony. We do concluding ceremonies on Fridays. And then we'll have questions and answers. So please keep bringing questions, and if there's any question that relates directly to meditation, we'll answer it then.

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*

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Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Before I give some explanation of *kamma*, I'd like to clarify something. There seems to be some confusion about the term spiritual. I try to use words that don't mix Buddhist teaching with Freud, so I don't want to use words like ego and such. I try to find a word for mind and heart.

In Eastern cultures, and I think especially in Thailand, there's only one word for mind and heart. When they think, they don't think it comes more from here than from here. The Greeks also had this idea. A human being consisted of three parts: *soma*, the body; *psyche*, mind and heart; and *pneuma*, spirit. This was taken over by Christian philosophy, and in Latin it's *corpus, animus, spiritus*. In English, and I'm sure you have Czech words, we say body, mind and spirit. In Czech you say body, mind and spirit.

The problem is that in our culture, through Cartesian philosophy, he separated emotions from thoughts. So now we think everything happens here in the head. But what we discover in meditation is that everything basically starts here in the heart. It begins with a kind of longing, either joyful or anxious, which seeks some object. So when the sun rises, joy somehow causes us to grasp that it will be a nice day. Depression says it's too hot.

In Buddhist teaching we have the same thing. The word *citta* can be quite clearly translated as psyche - the combination of mind and heart. So when I said yesterday that the Buddha said you can draw the mind from the body like a sword from its sheath, this wasn't about something spiritual. It's still about the world of phenomena. This is the subtle body, known in the texts as the *citta* body. It suffers the same characteristics as the physical body - it arises and passes away. It's composed, created, made up of various energies. And it's not an entity, not the self.

So when we understand, or when we say I've understood that I'm not the body when the body dies, we must also be able to say that I'm not emotions, because emotions die more quickly. And I can't be thought, because thoughts arise even more quickly. Which emotion do I want to be? Which thought am I?

What meditation brings us is that it begins to show us that the various parts that make up a human being - the body with all its organs, liver, stomach, head, sadness, morning; the heart with all its emotions, sadness, happiness; and the mind with all its perceptions and images and ideas - cannot create any entity, any "I", any person. This is the way we conceptualise ourselves.

When you look at a tree, it looks like one object, one tree. But we know it's made up of individual leaves, branches, roots and so on. And when we begin to look at a person in this way, we begin to realise what it is that is observed, what observes. This is why the Buddha asked us to see everything we experience as arising and passing away, not-self.

We begin to understand what quality is in this knowing. When these qualities of knowing become clear to us, these are spiritual truths. The Buddha points to this in various quotations. His most famous quotation is when he told us what isn't. He says there is, there is, there is the unborn. What does this mean? There exists.

In Pali there are two words for "is". One is what we call a simple copula - I say "this is a bowl" just so you understand. The other word he uses here is "exists", to exist. Here exists the unborn, the undying, the uncompounded and the unconditioned. And he said if this were not here, there would be no escape from birth and death, from composition and conditioning.

So this is what we must discover - the unborn, the undying. And we can say this is precisely the experience of *Nibbāna*. I'm using the word *Nibbāna* here as a kind of glimpse of truth. When we become the observer of, say, some emotion, and look at it as if it were not-self, where is the suffering?

He also said something that gives us a very positive idea. But I must warn you that this is a quote that the Theravāda tradition doesn't like. And the Theravāda tradition loves it. The translation is that there exists consciousness uncoloured by the six senses - the five ordinary senses plus mind and heart. So there exists consciousness where there is no sight, smell, no thought. Without boundaries - and you can only have boundaries if you have phenomena - and full of light in all directions. Awakeness.

So I call this, you know - all this is psychology and physiology, the body. This is spiritual, but everything else is just body, emotions and psychology. That's all.

So I hope this clarifies any confusion about the words I was using yesterday.

Now I'd like to say something about *kamma*, so you should have a clear idea of what the Buddha meant by it. Of course, there's a folk understanding of this and a spiritual understanding.

The first thing is that in the Buddhist tradition there are five laws of the universe. The first is the same as

our physics, chemistry and so on - in other words, the material world. It's known as *utu*, which is basically the fire element. In other words, the material energy of the universe. I wouldn't equate this entirely with contemporary science. It somewhat resembles subatomic particles, but it was simply the idea that the entire universe is based on fire energy. Fire here is of course a metaphor. And I think I'm correct that this was all nature - the Greeks knew this too.

Now, the physical world is, for the most part, unpredictable. We can imagine storms that come, earthquakes that crush people to death, meteors that come from space and destroy all life on Earth. This happened a few million years ago. From our perspective as human beings, this causes great suffering. But do we deserve it? When you're crushed in an earthquake, does it mean that in some past life you deliberately stepped on a thousand ants? If you were swimming in the sea and got caught by a current and drowned, does it mean that in a past life you drowned your son?

Unfortunately, you get this kind of argument from traditional Buddhists. Unfortunately, this kind of reasoning is found in traditional Buddhism. I've already told you the story of the ship that stopped in the ocean for no reason? It's in one of the stories in the texts. So we shouldn't confuse this with the Buddha's teaching. But the ship suddenly stopped in the middle of the ocean. The captain and crew were completely mystified. Luckily there was a group of monks on board, so they asked the monks to meditate and find out why this was happening.

They went into deep concentration and came up with an answer. It was because of the captain's wife. In her past life, she had drowned too many dogs. The only way the ship could continue sailing was if they threw the woman overboard. So they threw her overboard and the ship continued sailing. So as you can see, there can be a lot of confusion around *kamma*.

The next law is the law of something we would call genetics. The word used here is *bīja*, meaning seed. Now think about this. The body we're born in came to us through generations of parents, through generations of animals, all the way back to simple organisms. The same genetic line. So we can hardly deserve this body. We simply received it. Now imagine someone is born with a genetic defect. Is it because in a past life they killed someone? Or tortured? Or did something horrible? You can't say that. For me it would be a terrible thing to say this.

It's quite clear that the body is the result of many different causes. If we believe in Buddhist teaching about how a person is born, it's generally understood that at the moment the egg is fertilised, as soon as conception occurs, this psyche enters this embryo. That's the general understanding.

So the body came from this side and the mind that is to be reborn from this side. And of course you have to be careful about current scientific knowledge, because one day they'll prove to you through experiments that fish cannot feel pain, and a few weeks later they'll tell you they have experiments confirming that fish can feel pain. Scientists seem as confused as anyone else.

But if we believe that little research, it would be that when parents become obese, this should affect the genes so that grandchildren would have a tendency toward obesity. So we could say that when a person is born with a genetic defect, it could be due to the bad behaviour of some past parents, or a genetic mutation that went wrong. Who knows?

But the question is, does such a person deserve to be born in a painful body? When I stayed at a monastery called Amaravati near London - some of you may have met Sister Candasiri who was here, she lives there too - I stayed there for a year. During that year, a young man came who suffered from a progressive genetic defect.

When I met him, he was almost paralysed and all his limbs were bent like this. We had to carry him everywhere. He was a very happy person. He completely accepted his condition. He was very interested in spiritual life, and everyone loved him very much. When we were asked who would like to spend an evening with - I don't know what his name was, let's say John - it was a joy to be with him.

Doctors told his parents there was a one in many millions chance that their next child would also suffer from the same defect. And they had another daughter. But unfortunately she developed exactly the same defect. And from what I heard, because I never met her, she was somehow like a teenager and was very angry. The same disease, but a completely different state of mind.

So where is *kamma*? We cannot say that the body we end up with is due to our personal *kamma*. When we're born into a time and place, we're given certain conditions that we cannot influence in any way: parents, body, society, language, country, culture, history, food. Some people say if you're interested in food, you shouldn't be born in England. But it's getting better.

The next law in the world is *citta*. The next law of the universe is *citta*, which we would translate as our psychology. Here we're talking about the basic way we experience life - our perception, the way we can look at things, our emotional life. And as we know from our psychology, this is very complicated.

The Buddha's own specific interest is the psychology around suffering. We can say that when the entire human mind comes together to create society, everything here is created from mind. Nothing that is human-made exists here that wasn't created - whether it's bread, a jet plane, an mp3 player, it all started in someone's mind. All the books we read, television, music, it all starts in the head.

So, remembered in mind, we can remember our entire society. We start with an idea of mind, and we can extend this idea of mind to the entire society, to the mind of the entire society. And you are born into a particular specific group mind, which is your culture. You can be a bit lucky. I was born to an Italian mother in Italy but ended up in Britain.

So this is the third law, the law of psychology. Or the law of psyche, mind and heart.

And now finally we come to the law of *kamma*. This has particularly to do with our ethical moral life, and

it's firmly connected around dependent origination. Yesterday we said we make mistakes. Said more broadly, it's because we are human beings. We think we must create perfect happiness in this world. And so we enter into craving, into greed, desire. We're in conflict with anything we don't want, and of course we run away from anything we see as dangerous.

So this is our *kamma*. This is what the Buddha meant by *kamma*. Now this then translates - these attitudes translate into actions. You can think as greedy as you want, but when you actually take something, then you reinforce that conditioning.

So let's say you robbed a bank and weren't caught, so you went to prison. In popular Buddhism, the fact that you go to prison is your *kamma*. But what if you're happy in prison? Some people have been in prison so long that they prefer to stay in prison rather than leave. You have your own room, food is served, you can read books, watch television, lots of companions. And it's true, some prisoners become institutionalised like this. Some prisoners, when they were released, deliberately committed some crime so they could return.

So going to prison isn't *kamma* from the Buddha's perspective. It's the mental state that arises when you're caught - the pain of losing personal freedom. So again, the *kamma* that Buddhists talk about, remember, it's the *kamma* of liberation, it's always internal. That's the true understanding of *kamma*.

And sometimes of course the world can be unjust. I'm thinking for example of American peace activists in Palestine. One American in Palestine - maybe you saw it on television - who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer. So just because you do good doesn't mean good will come to you. Actually, you should rather expect the opposite. Gandhi was shot. Martin Luther King was shot. Jesus was crucified. So you never know.

When I was in Sri Lanka, I asked one Sri Lankan who was a Buddhist. I asked him why he thought Jesus Christ was crucified. He said he must have done something terrible in his past life. Something horrible. So if you want to know about Buddhism, don't ask Buddhists.

And finally there's the fifth law, which is the spiritual law, the law of *Dhamma*. And we hope this is what this course is about.

So this was an introduction to *kamma*. I hope you've got the essence of the teaching. And if any question appears about this, put it in those glasses, and on Friday evening everything will be revealed.

Thank you very much. So if you'll do some walking meditation now.