

# Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · International Talks · 55:54

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I have a hot constitution. The East for me was a constant hell realm. The only thing that helped was a fan. Unfortunately, I think I could have said this, unfortunately it sounded like an aeroplane that in moments of cursing I thought was going to improve to higher planes of existence. And in moments of madness I had the impression that it was taking me to higher levels of existence.

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa* - Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So this evening I thought I would go over again for some of you who already recognise the concepts of *kamma*. And obviously for one or two of you it will be a new teaching. So the starting point from which I like to begin is from the way the Buddha actually saw how the universe worked. In Pali it's called *Idappaccayatā* - the conditioning of this and that.

Initially it seems extraordinarily simple, but this explains why things happen in the universe, or rather how things happen in the universe. Remember that the Buddha's question was how rather than a more philosophical or metaphysical why. He wasn't concerned with the question of the origins of the universe. I think as far as he was concerned the origin is right here and now. Because he says somewhere that he does not see a beginning to *kamma*. It's impossible to rationally think that there was a beginning or an end to the constant flow of cause and effect.

As you know, in Buddhist cosmology the systems of various worlds arise and vanish like enormous cosmic inspirations and expirations. So in this *idappaccayatā*, this conditioning of this and that, the first clause is: because this happened, this happens now. So this is how we normally understand the law of cause and effect. So because you didn't pay your bills, you'll end up being thrown out of your house. It's very simple. So one can see a sort of historical line regarding what happens.

And so the opposite also holds - if you don't do this, that won't happen. If you don't buy a lottery ticket you'll never win the lottery. I'm not suggesting buying a lottery ticket. These are innocent things, just examples.

And so the second proposition is: because this happens now, this happens. And so because this doesn't happen, this other thing doesn't happen. So for example, because you all arrived here now, this is creating a special moment. In other words, because you all came here now, this is creating a special moment. If you hadn't come there wouldn't be a talk, and I would be free to go have a cup of tea.

So if you take this first proposition, how people normally think about the law of cause and effect - that

because that happened in the past, this is happening now - then you fall into what the Buddha would judge an error. And so it's the theory of fatalism. Things happen, we have no choice because they were already programmed in the past.

There was a teacher at the Buddha's time who thought exactly like this. He said that if you went down along one bank of the river Ganges doing only benevolent actions, doing good, and then returned from the other bank of the Ganges doing only evil actions, this would make no difference.

So there was this idea of fatalism even in the Buddha's times. This also happens in Christianity with Calvinism. And so Calvin said if God knows everything then he knows if you'll end up in hell or not, so there's nothing you can do, it's all written in God's mind and finally there's nothing you can do. And so in the end it didn't matter if you did good or evil, because you were already predestined. It's properly called the doctrine of predestination.

And because human beings cannot assume this kind of fatalism, so came the so-called Protestant ethic. And so this meant that if you behaved well in this life, this surely would result in entry into paradise. Hence capitalism. This is one of the reasons that caused capitalism if you only take the first proposition.

So if you take only this assumption from a historical point of view, that what happened in the past then reverberates on the present, then you end up with the idea of a universe that simply repeats itself. That nothing changes.

Now, if you take the other proposition, that things happen now because things happen now, in other words, contingency, so, for instance, we all came from very different places and we all came because of our own decision making, but we all ended up in this place to create this course. So in other words we all came from different places with our personal intentions and we all found ourselves together to create this moment in this place. So finding ourselves all here at this moment creates that cause.

So if there's no connection between the present and the past one can suppose that then the universe would be chaotic. These are the two extremes - on one side that everything is predestined and on the other that everything is chaotic. And sometimes it can seem chaotic when there are tsunamis for example or earthquakes. And it seems that there's no reason for them.

So when you put these two concepts together, which is difficult, when you put these two concepts together, then you have an idea from the Buddha's point of view of how the world remains in a state of order and is not created. So if you can put these two concepts together then you understand from the Buddhist point of view how the universe is both ordered but creative.

So for us as meditators this is important because, you see, returning to our practice of noticing intention. If mindfulness isn't there, then it's as if our whole life runs according to the first proposition we made. So we're living, we're going forward like an automaton, according to old conditionings.

When we bring mindfulness into a situation suddenly other possibilities arise. And so we have a choice. Should I do this or should I do that? And so we have that impression of being more in control of our life and more creative.

And so when the self, at that point where the self completely disappears, even in the small actions of our life, this means that the old conditioning is not having a direct effect on the present and one has the impression of spontaneity. For example one practices generosity, but there's always some thought about it. But when we practice rightly, immediately an occasion for generosity arises and we do it without thinking. Then we practice well and the occasion for practicing generosity arises and we do it without thinking, spontaneously. And it's good and wise.

So these two things, this sense of spontaneity and having greater control over our life, are things that grow with us as we develop our practice.

So keeping that fundamental law, you can call that your basic fundamental law of cause and effect. The second thing we can say is that the Buddha didn't say that things happen according to our personal *kamma*. He spoke of five causes for which things happen. These won't come as a surprise.

The first is *Utu-niyāma*. It's the law of heat. And it's how the ancients thought about the physical world. So everything began with heat and everything else appears out of heat. And so this would correspond to our physics. So if by chance you happen to be walking around Mont Santo and an earthquake comes that swallows you into the earth, it's not because in your past life you stepped on a hundred thousand ants. It's because it was time for the mountain to create this earthquake. It was just this creativity of the universe that unfortunately was there at the same moment.

Our present *kamma*, and I'll return to this, in this situation, is not the earthquake, but how we react to this. So our true *kamma*, we'll return to this later, in that situation is not the earthquake, but how we react to that earthquake.

The second law, *niyāma*, is *Bīja-niyāma*. *Bīja* means seed. And here the seed refers to what we would call genetics. Here we have the case, for example, of someone who is born with a genetic disease. And it would be very wrong to think that that person deserves that disease because in a past life they acted in a way to cause that disease. Because as we know, just from our own science, our genetic disease is a compound of hundreds of deaths and deaths that have nothing to do with us. Yes, we ended up with this body. And again, it's our relationship with the body that is our true *kamma*.

When I was at Amaravati monastery in England there was a man who came to do a retreat and he had a genetic disease in which his body was folding in on itself, becoming rigid. It seemed that he was at ease with his situation. He accepted it, worked with it and lived a very beautiful spiritual life. So he came to accept it, lived with it and was conducting a good spiritual life.

So when this happened to him as a boy his parents asked the doctors if it could repeat because they

wanted to have another child. So it would have been a very rare case, one in a million. And so they had another daughter. But unfortunately she too developed this genetic disease. But her relationship with the body in which she found herself was very different. They say, he never knew her, that she was very embittered.

So again we mustn't confuse our genetic constitution with our *kamma*.

The third *niyāma* is *citta* and that is mind. And mind here is our psychology. So we said yesterday that the first part of the wheel of dependent origination - the six senses, contact and the sensations that arise - are just natural in our psychology. They're natural in our psychology. And all sentient beings must have that ability to contact the world and have those sensations.

Then there's all the psychology around our non-understanding, attachment, etcetera. But in this term *citta* we can include everything that we understand by the term psychology, what we mean by psychology.

And some writers, particularly referring to a Thai writer who writes very good books. Payutto is his name. P-A-Y-U-T-T-O. If you go to the Google search engine and put Payutto his site comes up. He connects this *citta* with society, so the society in which we live is really an extension of human minds.

So the society in which we live is an extension of human minds. Remember that the first verse of the Dhammapada begins that everything begins with mind and everything is made by mind. For example, a human being has to think of a road before being able to build it. So it takes a human being to think of a road before actually building it.

In other words we are constantly projecting our thoughts onto the world. Our images, our projects. Even when we speak of a natural forest, it's very rare to find one that hasn't been meddled with by humans. So there's a connection between all the psychology that the Buddha is teaching and the society in which we live. So there's a connection between all the psychology, as the Buddha teaches, and the society in which we live.

There's a part of our way of thinking, of our mind, that is conditioned by the society in which we live. So when we talk about physical laws and genetic laws and our mind, for the most part, all these are given. Regarding physical laws, those of genetics and our mind, these are things that are given to us.

So even at a very basic level there's something like sight. If a person doesn't see colours they see the world in a different way - it's something that was given to them, something they received, they have no choice. But this has nothing to do with the process of liberation, or at least not directly. Not directly. It would be nice to grow up in a society that was more spiritual than ours - then you would have that social support for spiritual training.

The fourth is *kamma*. And here we return to the wheel of dependent origination. So here we return to this idea of the importance of intentions. So we return to this idea of the importance of intentions and so that

we are constantly building a relationship with the world that we perceive and that most of the time we act in an unconscious way.

At least as meditators we are becoming a little more aware of our conditioning, but just enter a supermarket and observe people and you'll see that they're in a dream world and they don't question anything - that's their life. And they don't question anything, that's their life. I don't know if you've seen the film *Matrix*. It's a beautiful metaphor for the way we are, how we're made.

When we create these intentions, remember, we produce an action. So when we create these intentions we produce an action. And these actions produce habits that produce our personality. And it's this personality that guides us to our destiny.

So if we become aware of these conditionings we can shift a little, shift the conditions let's say so as to change our destiny too. Unfortunately human beings need to bang their nose hard before doing this. You have to have a heart attack or a stroke and then you think oh, maybe something is wrong. But maybe there's something wrong, but fortunately we shouldn't wait for something like this to happen because perhaps we've awakened a bit regarding how we're creating suffering for ourselves.

And this can mean that we change our lives, we change our attitudes. So just because we do something good in the world doesn't mean that something good will return to us. Out there human justice doesn't exist. Because when you throw something into the world you don't know what conditions it might create.

So remember that the world is born from different conditions that meet at a given moment. So for example there was a charitable organisation in a small country in the south of England and they thought of sending clothes to Africa. So they sent many, many clothes to this particular country. So they sent a lot of clothes to this particular place.

Unfortunately this ruined the clothing trade in that place, and so the whole economy began to go into crisis. So although the thought was very compassionate, not knowing the conditions of that country, this choice wasn't very wise. So one could say that one is never wise enough, because one never knows the conditions of that particular situation.

Even the Buddha, when he made the rules, didn't know the consequences of his rules, and then he had to put little clauses to correct himself. Even the Buddha himself when he dictated rules didn't know what the conditions were in which those rules would act. He had to put notes to correct those rules.

For example he put this rule because there were some monks who claimed to have spiritual insights when instead they didn't have them. So he put this rule that no one could talk about them. Then the monks complained and said but how do we know if someone has had some spiritual insight? So he had to add unless they were true, in so many words.

This rule is one of our principal rules and if you don't follow this rule you're no longer a monk or nun - it's

called a defeat. So even if they don't leave the robes, within themselves they know they've broken this rule and so they no longer consider themselves monks or nuns.

Actually there's no way in the Buddhist orders to take away the robe - you can't be excommunicated like having the robe taken away, but you can be de-monked unlike in Catholic orders.

What happens is that if the other monks together with the lay people believe that a monk has not respected this rule, they ask him to leave the monastery and then stop giving him food, so you have to remove the robes to have food. But usually if a monk breaks this law, this rule, he leaves spontaneously, but usually they don't say it's for this reason - they give some other motivation, for example they feel they miss the evening meal too much.

But there were also minor rules where the Buddha had to change his mind. Once he sneezed and all the monks around him said something that was equivalent to "bless you". In English they say "God bless you", that's what they say in English. And he asked them, "But does this help me?" and they said no, and he said, "Then don't say it."

The monks then went around and when lay people sneezed they didn't say anything anymore. The lay people went around and complained and said, "But why don't the monks bless us when we sneeze?" And so they went to the Buddha and said, "But all the lay people are complaining." And then he said to me, "Alright, bless them. It doesn't do good, but it doesn't do harm either."

So we have many examples in history where the best people end up in the most tragic ways - not only Jesus Christ but Gandhi, Martin Luther King. So you see, just because you do good doesn't mean good will come to you, but within yourselves you take the benefits of doing good. This is the great heart, the great soul. And this is your *kamma*.

And so, as a last point, there is the Dhamma. So these are all the teachings of the Buddha that have to do with liberation. So here you have the five laws and you can see well where *kamma* fits in. Even though I wanted to emphasise the fact that even doing good doesn't necessarily mean this returns to you, sometimes it does, and the same when you do bad - often the bad returns to you.

So now obviously having discussed this, we've arrived at the problem: if all this happens only in one life and you don't achieve liberation, what a pity. If all this happens in one life and if you don't achieve liberation, it's a real shame. And so we need to know this law of rebirth. And even if it may be difficult for some people to accept, I always feel that there are some things we can keep as if they were in reserve regarding rebirth.

Even if this is a difficult theory for some people to accept, we can always keep it as something in reserve, in the background. You know those old stoves where you put something in - a food warmer, something in reserve, let's say, to keep there in case of necessity. Don't make a decision. So don't make a decision. So keep your mind open to that possibility. Because if you believe in annihilation at death, you might be

surprised - yes, unfortunately, unpleasantly surprised.

There was a cartoon when the Pope died. As he was rising in the clouds of heaven, he found himself in the presence of an enormous statue of the Buddha. Then he said, "Oh, hell!" - "hell" in English is an expression meaning "damn!" - so you never know.

As you know, the last Pope didn't have good feelings towards Buddhists. In fact, he had made the *Sangha* of Sri Lanka so angry that they refused to receive him when he went to visit.

So, even if we don't want to accept the quality of rebirth after death, we must begin to understand that in reality this is what's happening here and now. So even if we don't want to accept this quality of rebirth in successive lives, we must however recognise what's happening here and now.

Take the body, for example. The body we were born with is not the same one we find ourselves in now. They tell us that every seven years every atom of our body is different, changes. So every time you look in the mirror, say to your face: "Seven years ago you weren't there." There's this continuous rebirth within the body - cells that die, cells that are born, a continuous change, continuously being reborn.

And the same goes for the mind. The mind you have now is not the same one you were born with. Every time a new piece of information enters, the mind remodels itself, is changed. So it's understood, in the Buddha's teaching, that when the body removes itself, the subtle body exits from it. So it's understood from Buddhist teachings that when the physical body decays, the spiritual one arises from it. And it's known as the *citta* body, the mental one. And this seeks rebirth somewhere else, either as a human being or in another realm.

As you know, there are people who live certain experiences when they undergo surgery. And there are two out-of-body experiences. One is when the person left the body and sees the mental body separated from the physical body. This is still part of the phenomenal world.

I was in a retreat once where a woman said she was sitting there and she came out of her body and walked all the way around the garden path and came back. I knew a woman in a retreat who said she completely left her body, went down through the garden, then returned. And I had a meditator working with me who said he had this body that continually came out of the physical body. So this is the first type of out-of-body experience.

The second experience you might have heard about is, to use a word - for lack of a better word - when consciousness exits the body. You mostly hear about this as near-death experiences. There are also books about this - I don't know in Italian - "Near Death Experiences."

There was a very good programme on the BBC that, through modern technology, was able to give you a visual representation of what these people had experienced. In one of the interviews with a psychologist, they explained that when this person left the body during an operation, they described things they

couldn't have seen with the person's eyes.

So they demonstrated that this person who, for example, left the body during surgery, then described things along the corridor, for instance outside the operating room, that they couldn't have seen with their eyes from that position. And when they asked this psychiatrist what his opinion was, he told them: "We should redefine consciousness."

So when this awareness exits and is separated from the physical and mental body, this is a spiritual experience, and it happens to people also during meditation.

So, whatever happens, nothing happens at death, except that the physical body fails. So nothing happens at death, at the moment of death, except that the physical body ends, finishes. All the conditioning continues to go forward. And obviously, when we are finally liberated - but when we are finally liberated, then we arrive at a point that goes beyond description. But again we mustn't confuse this with a form of annihilation.

So often the Buddha was asked these four questions. It was known as the tetralemma - dilemma is two questions, tetralemma is four. So at death: does the *Tathāgata* exist or not exist? Does he exist and not exist at the same time? Or neither exists nor doesn't exist? Silent, quiet.

So these things we must discover for ourselves with time.

So, for us, as meditators seeking liberation, it's clear that the process is contained in his very simple words. So for us who seek liberation, we must understand that it's all contained in the Buddha's words - very simple, very simply contained in the Buddha's words.

He teaches only three words, no? He teaches only three words. The laws of relativity are five words, but the Buddha's teachings are enclosed in three words in Pali: "I teach only *dukkha, dukkha nirodha*" - so unsatisfactoriness and the end of unsatisfactoriness. So if our search in the Buddha's teachings goes in this direction, then it will lead us to an answer.

If we sit in silence for a few minutes and let thoughts arise and pass.

So the path to liberation is well outlined. So it's said that we have a choice between doing skilful and unskilful things, but the more we do unskilful and unhealthy things, the more we suffer. So in a certain sense we have no choice. When we see the path, we must simply follow it.

I hope my words have been of some use to you. I hope you are liberated sooner rather than later.

Thank you.

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