

Social Conditioning or Karma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 13:53

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambhudassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambhudassa Namō tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa.

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

So I thought this evening I'd tackle this thorny problem of social karma. Now, according to the Buddha, the karma that we own is the actions that we've performed. So these can be a thought, speech or, of course, actions. And they're all products of the will. It's the will that manifests them.

Now, some of these are automatic. We're just habitually thinking, doing things. Speech, of course, tends to be spontaneous or unfortunately impulsive. But then there are times when our responses are measured, when we have to think about what we're going to do, and those have often the greatest force within our personality. And the importance in the process of liberation is the ethical value, or lack of it, of course. So these mental states, these *saṅkhāra*, are created by our decisions, moment-to-moment decisions, moment-after-moment, whether they are habitual or considered.

Now, from that, it might be a little bit confusing to talk about social karma. I think it's better to talk about social conditioning. That makes a bit more sense, I think.

The fact is that we're embedded in our culture. I was visiting my brother down in the Isle of Wight and I was just watching this grandfather and grandmother taking their grandchild for a walk, and the child stopped and turned around and, lifting her arms to the air, was obviously asking her grandfather to lift her up. And I could hear him saying... she'd probably been saying lift me up and he'd say... and this went on for a little while. Unfortunately my attention was taken away, and of course I presume the grandmother cut in, just unable to bear her husband's unwillingness to respond to the child's pleas, and prompted her by saying that magic word "please."

So right there he took it upon himself to teach the child that you have to say please. And usually, of course, as children we totally accept the conditioning. It's only when we get to be naughty teenagers and later in life when we can reflect that we can see the conditioning that we have.

We also, of course, pick up our prejudices. So I remember my niece and nephew were playing hospital. And my nephew was two years older than my niece, but they were both under seven, six and four. And of course, he said, "I'll be the doctor and you'll be the nurse." And afterwards, I thought to myself, if she'd been the elder, would she have chosen to be the doctor?

The same is true, of course, of racial prejudice. I was traveling to get back home. I had to go from Liverpool Street to Waterloo, and it really is a pain. And unfortunately, I ended up in Canary Wharf thinking it'd be easier. And I hadn't a clue where I was and everybody said I should take the Jubilee line. So I was really stuck and everybody disappeared apart from this black guy. So I asked him how to get there.

Now, as I asked him, I could feel this anxiety that he might reject my request in some way on my understanding of how he feels about white people. I mean, I was lucky he happened to be working near the Jubilee line, which was something like a 15-minute walk away through I don't know how many streets, and he was very glad to take me. But I was interested in that idea that came up as I was asking him. I actually got out of my way to ask people of colour.

The other one, of course, is we just celebrated the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, and it's no doubt that she's fulfilled that role of the monarch admirably. But have we ever actually considered the institution of monarchy? Now, I have to confess, I am a lifelong Republican. You have to forgive me for that. And the monarchy, the institution, is the preserve of nobility, of privilege, the House of Lords and all that. And it has an influence on us. It has an influence on how we see ourselves in society. How would you feel if you met her?

Then, of course, something I've been banging on about these past couple of weeks is neoliberal ideology, and what it's done to us, made us much more selfish. So, for instance, in the NHS, instead of being patients, we were told that we were clients. And this meant that we moved away from an attitude of gratitude to entitlement. And the amount of suing of the NHS went up enormously. And it stands today at, yes, last year at £2.4 billion.

Now, it's not that we shouldn't be compensated for poor treatment. That's not the problem. It's just where we're coming from, the indignant entitled as opposed to the injured patient. So how do you feel when you go for a service, when the bus doesn't arrive? My parents would have just felt grateful.

There's even now, I don't know whether you know about this, a defensive dentistry. Dentists won't do anything on your teeth unless they have proof there's something wrong. They're absolutely scared of being sued for anything they do. There have been some really bad cases because of that.

At a deeper level, of course, it's our race. How do we feel? If we're black, how do we feel being in a white-dominated culture? Jews' unrelenting history of persecution. And then there's, of course, whites who are, at the moment, being suggested by extreme Brexiteers with their shining luminary Boris that we're British, special, etc., etc.

So all this will be there within us. I mean, I came across real prejudice when I became a monk. One time I walked into a shop and the assistant or the shopkeeper simply turned around and walked out. I was left just standing there until I realized she wasn't going to come out to serve me. And then there was a quite

nasty occasion when I was at Dubai, so I was flying back from Sri Lanka, when this drunken Englishman just went on and on about how stupid and ridiculous I looked.

So it's catching how our personal conditioning, not the societal conditioning, how we are personally conditioned. And although we've had little choice in that conditioning, the fact of the matter is, it's us. We are an expression of our culture, and it's our duty, it's our responsibility to accept that, and to do something about it when it's unwholesome.

I mean, I have stressed the unwholesomeness within society, but obviously there's beauty too. And just mentioning the NHS, it's a product of a society of care. So everything around us is influencing us, and we are influencing everybody around us. So there's a certain responsibility there to make sure we know where we stand with all these issues.

I mean, the Buddha has lots of advice for laypeople in the Sigālovāda Sutta, where he talks in detail about your relationship within a family. It's of course very patriarchal, but then he was a man of his time. And the monks were allowed to wander any way they wished, but during the rainy season they had to come together and re-establish the fact that they were a community.

And of course he goes on to say how good companionship is the whole of the spiritual life. I mean, Ānanda has come to the opinion that it's only half the holy life. And the Buddha replies, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the spiritual life. When a monk has admirable friends, people as friends, companions and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

And of course, he has also advice that he gave really to the Duddaba who wanted to attack the Vajji Confederacy, pointing out that the nation's welfare was dependent on frequent meetings, that assemblies assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord, that they do not enact new decrees or abolish old ones, and proceed in accordance with ancient constitutions. They respect, honour and esteem their elders, refrain from abducting women and maidens of good families, show respect, honour and esteem and veneration to shrines, and look after their arahats. So, of course, you can retranslate that for our own times.

But here the Buddha is actually saying that the society we are in, we are dependent on it for our conditioning. We are responsible. Once we know we're conditioned, once we know our conditioning, we are responsible for it. And where we can, we develop a right conditioning. And in so doing, we affect the people around us.

So that's about as far as I think social conditioning goes. So we can't really talk about social karma. We can only talk about our social conditioning within ourselves and then how we work with it, how we deal with it, and hopefully clear our hearts of anything that's negative.

So I don't know whether that's created more confusion or in some way brightened up this little dark area,

which I don't think many people talk about. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that you will, by your endeavour to overcome all negative social conditioning, arise into the glory of Arahathship sooner rather than later.

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