

Narada Thera: Buddhist Theory of Karma

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Buddhist Theory of Karma

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Karma is the law of moral causation. The theory of karma is a fundamental doctrine in Buddhism. This belief was prevalent in India before the advent of the Buddha. Nevertheless, it was the Buddha who explained and formulated this doctrine in the complete form in which we have it today.

What is the cause of the inequality that exists among mankind?

Why should one person be brought up in the lap of luxury, endowed with fine mental, moral and physical qualities, and another in absolute poverty, steeped in misery?

Why should one person be a mental prodigy, and another an idiot?

Why should one person be born with saintly characteristics and another with criminal tendencies?

Why should some be linguistic, artistic, mathematically inclined, or musical from the very cradle?

Why should others be congenitally blind, deaf, or deformed?

Why should some be blessed, and others cursed from their births?

Either this inequality of mankind has a cause, or it is purely accidental. No sensible person would think of attributing this unevenness, this inequality, and this diversity to blind chance or pure accident.

In this world nothing happens to a person that he does not for some reason or other deserve. Usually, men of ordinary intellect cannot

comprehend the actual reason or reasons. The definite invisible cause or causes of the visible effect is not necessarily confined to the present life, they may be traced to a proximate or remote past birth.

According to Buddhism, this inequality is due not only to heredity, environment, "nature and nurture", but also to kamma. In other words, it is the result of our own past actions and our own present doings. We ourselves are responsible for our own happiness and misery. We create our own Heaven. We create our own Hell. We are the architects of our own fate.

Perplexed by the seemingly inexplicable, apparent disparity that existed among humanity, a young truth-seeker approached the Buddha and questioned him regarding this intricate problem of inequality:

"What is the cause; what is the reason, O Lord," questioned he, "that we find amongst mankind the short-lived and long-lived, the healthy and the diseased, the ugly and beautiful, those lacking influence and the powerful, the poor and the rich, the low-born and the high-born, and the ignorant and the wise?"

The Buddha's reply was:

"All living beings have actions (kamma) as their own, their inheritance, their congenital cause, their kinsman, their refuge. It is kamma that differentiates beings into low and high states."

He then explained the cause of such differences in accordance with the law of cause and effect.

Certainly we are born with hereditary characteristics. At the same time we possess certain innate abilities that science cannot adequately account for. To our parents we are indebted for the gross sperm and ovum that form the nucleus of this so-called being. They remain dormant within each parent until this potential germinal compound is

vitalized by the karmic energy needed for the production of the foetus. Kamma is therefore the indispensable conceptive cause of this being.

The accumulated karmic tendencies, inherited in the course of previous lives, at times play a far greater role than the hereditary parental cells and genes in the formation of both physical and mental characteristics.

The Buddha, for instance, inherited, just like every other person, the reproductive cells and genes from his parents. But physically, morally and intellectually, there was none comparable to him in his long line of Royal ancestors. In the Buddha's own words, he belonged not to the Royal lineage, but to that of the Aryan Buddhas. He was certainly a superman, an extraordinary creation of his own kamma.

According to the Lakkhana Sutta of Digha Nikaya, the Buddha inherited exceptional features, such as the 32 major marks, as the result of his past meritorious deeds. The ethical reason for acquiring each physical feature is clearly explained in the Sutta.

It is obvious from this unique case that karmic tendencies could not only influence our physical organism, but also nullify the potentiality of the parental cells and genes – hence the significance of the Buddha's enigmatic statement, - "We are the heirs of our own actions."

Dealing with this problem of variation, the Atthasalini, being a commentary on the Abhidharma, states:

"Depending on this difference in kamma appears the differences in the birth of beings, high and low, base and exalted, happy and miserable. Depending on the difference in kamma appears the difference in the individual features of beings as beautiful and ugly, high-born or low born, well-built or deformed. Depending on the difference in kamma appears the difference in worldly conditions of beings, such as gain

and loss, and disgrace, blame and praise, happiness and misery."

Thus, from a Buddhist point of view, our present mental, moral intellectual and temperamental differences are, for the most part, due to our own actions and tendencies, both past and present.

Although Buddhism attributes this variation to kamma, as being the chief cause among a variety, it does not, however, assert that everything is due to kamma. The law of kamma, important as it is, is only one of the twenty-four conditions described in Buddhist Philosophy.

Refuting the erroneous view that "whatsoever fortune or misfortune experienced is all due to some previous action", the Buddha said:

"So, then, according to this view, owing to previous action men will become murderers, thieves, unchaste, liars, slanderers, covetous, malicious and perverts. Thus, for those who fall back on the former deeds as the essential reason, there is neither the desire to do, nor effort to do, nor necessity to do this deed, or abstain from this deed."

It was this important text, which states the belief that all physical circumstances and mental attitudes spring solely from past kamma that Buddha contradicted. If the present life is totally conditioned or wholly controlled by our past actions, then certainly kamma is tantamount to fatalism or determinism or predestination.

If this were true, free will would be an absurdity. Life would be purely mechanistic, not much different from a machine. Being created by an Almighty God who controls our destinies and predetermines our future, or being produced by an irresistible kamma that completely determines our fate and controls our life's course, independent of any free action on our part, is essentially the same. The only difference lies in the two words God and kamma. One could easily be substituted for

the other, because the ultimate operation of both forces would be identical.

Such a fatalistic doctrine is not the Buddhist law of kamma.

According to Buddhism, there are five orders or processes (*niyama*) which operate in the physical and mental realms.

They are:

1. **Utu Niyama** - physical inorganic order, e.g. seasonal phenomena of winds and rains. The unerring order of seasons, characteristic seasonal changes and events, causes of winds and rains, nature of heat, etc., all belong to this group.
2. **Bija Niyama** - order of germs and seeds (physical organic order), e.g. rice produced from rice-seed, sugary taste from sugar-cane or honey, peculiar characteristics of certain fruits, etc. The scientific theory of cells and genes and the physical similarity of twins may be ascribed to this order.
3. **Kamma Niyama** - order of act and result, e.g., desirable and undesirable acts produce corresponding good and bad results. As surely as water seeks its own level so does kamma, given opportunity, produce its inevitable result, not in the form of a reward or punishment but as an innate sequence. This sequence of deed and effect is as natural and necessary as the way of the sun and the moon.
4. **Dhamma Niyama** - order of the norm, e.g., the natural phenomena occurring at the advent of a Bodhisattva in his last birth. Gravitation and other similar laws of nature. The natural reason for being good and so forth, may be included in this group.
5. **Citta Niyama** - order of mind or psychic law, e.g., processes of consciousness, arising and perishing of consciousness, constituents of consciousness, power of mind, etc., including also

telepathy, telaesthesia, retro-cognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-reading and such other psychic phenomena which are inexplicable to modern science.

Every mental or physical phenomenon could be explained by these all-embracing five orders or processes which are laws in themselves. Kamma as such is only one of these five orders. Like all other natural laws they demand no lawgiver.

Of these five, the physical inorganic order and the order of the norm are more or less mechanistic, though they can be controlled to some extent by human ingenuity and the power of mind. For example, fire normally burns, and extreme cold freezes, but man has walked scatheless over fire and meditated naked on Himalayan snows; horticulturists have worked marvels with flowers and fruits; Yogis have performed levitation. Psychic law is equally mechanistic, but Buddhist training aims at control of mind, which is possible by right understanding and skilful volition. Kamma law operates quite automatically and, when the kamma is powerful, man cannot interfere with its inexorable result though he may desire to do so; but, here also, right understanding and skilful volition can accomplish much and mould the future. Good kamma, persisted in, can thwart the reaping of bad kamma, or as some Western scholars prefer to say 'action influence', is certainly an intricate law whose working is fully comprehended only by a Buddha. The Buddhist aims at the final destruction of all kamma.

What Is Kamma?

The Pali term kamma literally means action or doing. Any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal, or physical, is regarded as kamma. It covers all that is included in the phrase "thought, word and deed". Generally speaking, all good and bad action constitutes kamma. In its ultimate sense, kamma means all moral and immoral volition.

Involuntary, unintentional or unconscious actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute kamma, because volition, the most important factor in determining kamma, is absent.

The Buddha says:

"I declare, O Bhikkhus, that volition is kamma. Having willed one acts by body, speech, and thought." (Anguttara Nikaya)

Every volitional action of individuals, save those of Buddhas and Arahants, is called kamma. The exception made in their case is because they are delivered from both good and evil; they have eradicated ignorance and craving, the roots of kamma.

"Destroyed are their germinal seeds (*Khina bija*); selfish desires no longer grow," states the Ratana Sutta of Sutta nipata.

This does not mean that the Buddha and Arahantas are passive. They are tirelessly active in working for the real well being and happiness of all. Their deeds ordinarily accepted as good or moral, lack creative power as regards themselves. Understanding things as they truly are, they have finally shattered their cosmic fetters – the chain of cause and effect.

Kamma does not necessarily mean past actions. It embraces both past and present deeds. Hence, in one sense, we are the result of what we were; we will be the result of what we are. In another sense, it should be added, we are not totally the result of what we were; we will not absolutely be the result of what we are. The present is no doubt the offspring of the past and is the present of the future, but the present is not always a true index of either the past or the future; so complex is the working of kamma.

It is this doctrine of kamma that the mother teaches her child when she says "Be good and you will be happy and we will love you; but if you

are bad, you will be unhappy and we will not love you." In short, kamma is the law of cause and effect in the ethical realm.

Kamma And Vipaka

Kamma is action, and Vipaka, fruit or result, is its reaction.

Just as every object is accompanied by a shadow, even so every volitional activity is inevitably accompanied by its due effect. Kamma is like potential seed: Vipaka could be likened to the fruit arising from the tree – the effect or result. *Anisamsa* and *Adinaya* are the leaves, flowers and so forth that correspond to external differences such as health, sickness and poverty – these are inevitable consequences, which happen at the same time. Strictly speaking, both kamma and Vipaka pertain to the mind.

As kamma may be good or bad, so may Vipaka, - the fruit – is good or bad. As kamma is mental so Vipaka is mental (of the mind). It is experienced as happiness, bliss, unhappiness or misery, according to the nature of the kamma seed. *Anisamsa* are the concomitant advantages – material things such as prosperity, health and longevity. When Vipaka's concomitant material things are disadvantageous, they are known as *Adinaya*, full of wretchedness, and appear as poverty, ugliness, disease, short life-span and so forth.

As we sow, we reap somewhere and sometime, in his life or in a future birth. What we reap today is what we have sown either in the present or in the past.

The Samyutta Nikaya states:

*"According to the seed that's sown,
So is the fruit you reap there from,
Doer of good will gather good,
Doer of evil, evil reaps,*

*Down is the seed and thou shalt taste
The fruit thereof."*

Kamma is a law in itself, which operates in its own field without the intervention of any external, independent ruling agency.

Happiness and misery, which are the common lot of humanity, are the inevitable effects of causes. From a Buddhist point of view, they are not rewards and punishments, assigned by a supernatural, omniscient ruling power to a soul that has done good or evil. Theists, who attempt to explain everything in this and temporal life and in the eternal future life, ignoring a past, believe in a 'postmortem' justice, and may regard present happiness and misery as blessings and curses conferred on His creation by an omniscient and omnipotent Divine Ruler who sits in heaven above controlling the destinies of the human race.

Buddhism, which emphatically denies such an Almighty, All merciful God-Creator and an arbitrarily created immortal soul, believes in natural law and justice which cannot be suspended by either an Almighty God or an All-compassionate Buddha. According to this natural law, acts bear their own rewards and punishments to the individual doer whether human justice finds out or not.

There are some who criticize thus: "So, you Buddhists, too, administer capitalistic opium to the people, saying: "You are born poor in this life on account of your past evil kamma. He is born rich on account of his good kamma. So, be satisfied with your humble lot; but do good to be rich in your next life. You are being oppressed now because of your past evil kamma. There is your destiny. Be humble and bear your sufferings patiently. Do good now. You can be certain of a better and happier life after death."

The Buddhist doctrine of kamma does not expound such ridiculous fatalistic views. Nor does it vindicate a postmortem justice. The All-

Merciful Buddha, who had no ulterior selfish motives, did not teach this law of kamma to protect the rich and comfort the poor by promising illusory happiness in an after-life.

While we are born to a state created by ourselves, yet by our own self-directed efforts there is every possibility for us to create new, favourable environments even here and now. Not only individually, but also, collectively, we are at liberty to create fresh kamma that leads either towards our progress or downfall in this very life.

According to the Buddhist doctrine of kamma, one is not always compelled by an 'iron necessity', for kamma is neither fate, nor predestination imposed upon us by some mysterious unknown power to which we must helplessly submit ourselves. It is one's own doing reacting on oneself, and so one has the possibility to divert the course of one's kamma to some extent. How far one diverts it depends on oneself.

Is one bound to reap all that one has sown in just proportion?

The Buddha provides an answer:

"If anyone says that a man or woman must reap in this life according to his present deeds, in that case, there is no religious life, nor is an opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow. But if anyone says that what a man or woman reaps in this and future lives accords with his or her deeds present and past, in that case there is a religious life, and an opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of a sorrow." (Anguttara Nikaya)

Although it is stated in the Dhammapada that "not in the sky, nor in mid-ocean, or entering a mountain cave is found that place on earth where one may escape from (the consequences of) an evil deed", yet one is not bound to pay all the past arrears of one's kamma. If such

were the case emancipation would be impossibility. Eternal recurrence would be the unfortunate result.

What is the Cause of Kamma?

Ignorance (*avijja*), or not knowing things as they truly are, is the chief cause of kamma. Dependent on ignorance arise activities (*avijja paccaya samkhara*) states the Buddha in the *Paticca Samuppada* (Dependent Origination).

Associated with ignorance is the ally craving (*tanha*), the other root of kamma. Evil actions are conditioned by these two causes. All good deeds of a worldling (*putthujana*), though associated with the three wholesome roots of generosity (*alobha*), goodwill (*adosa*) and knowledge (*amoha*), are nevertheless regarded as kamma because the two roots of ignorance and craving are dormant in him. The moral types of Supramundane Path Consciousness (*magga citta*) are not regarded as kamma because they tend to eradicate the two root causes.

Who is the doer of kamma?

Who reaps the fruit of kamma?

Does kamma mould a soul?

In answering these subtle questions, the Venerable Buddhaghosa writes in the *Visuddhi Magga*:

*"No doer is there who does the deed;
Nor is there one who feels the fruit;
Constituent parts alone roll on;
This indeed! Is right discernment."*

For instance, the table we see is apparent reality. In an ultimate sense the so-called table consists of forces and qualities.

For ordinary purposes a scientist would use the term water, but in the

laboratory he would say H₂O.

In this same way, for conventional purposes, such terms as man, woman, being, self, and so forth are used. The so-called fleeting forms consist of psychophysical phenomena, which are constantly changing not remaining the same for two consecutive moments.

Buddhists, therefore, do not believe in an unchanging entity, in an actor apart from action, in a perceiver apart from perception, in a conscious subject behind consciousness.

Who then, is the doer of kamma? Who experiences the effect?

Volition, or Will (*tetana*), is itself the doer, Feeling (*vedana*) is itself the reaper of the fruits of actions. Apart from these pure mental states (*suddhadhamma*) there is no-one to sow and no-one to reap.

Classification Of Kamma

(A) With respect to different functions, kamma is classified into four kinds:

1. Reproductive Kamma

Every birth is conditioned by a past good or bad kamma, which predominated at the moment of death. Kamma that conditions the future birth is called Reproductive kamma. The death of a person is merely 'a temporary end of a temporary phenomenon'. Though the present form perishes, another form which is neither the same nor absolutely different takes its place, according to the potential thought-vibration generated at the death moment, because the Karmic force which propels the life-flux still survives. It is this last thought, which is technically called Reproductive (*janaka*) kamma, that determines the state of a person in his subsequent birth. This may be either a good or

bad kamma.

According to the Commentary, Reproductive kamma is that which produces mental aggregates and material aggregates at the moment of conception. The initial consciousness, which is termed the *patisandhi* rebirth consciousness, is conditioned by this Reproductive (*janaka*) Kamma. Simultaneous with the arising of the rebirth-consciousness, there arise the 'body-decad', 'sex-decad' and 'base-decad' (*kaya-bhavavatthu dasakas*). (decad = 10 factors).

(a) The body-decad is composed of:

1. The element of extension (*pathavi*).
2. The element of cohesion (*apo*).
3. The element of heat (*tajo*).
4. The element of motion (*vayo*).

(b) The four derivatives (*upadana rupa*):

1. Colour (*vanna*).
2. Odour (*gandha*).
3. Taste (*rasa*).
4. Nutritive Essence (*oja*)

These eight (*mahabhuta* 4 + *upadana* 4 = 8) are collectively called *Avinibhoga Rupa* (indivisible form or indivisible matter).

(c) Vitality (*jivitindriya*) and Body (*kaya*)

These (*avinibhoga* 8 + *jivitindriya* 1 + *Kaya* 1 = 10) ten are collectively called "Body-decad" = (*Kaya dasaka*).

Sex-decad and Base-decad also consist of the first nine, sex (*bhava*) and seat of consciousness (*vathu*) respectively (i.e. eye, ear, nose,

tongue, and body).

From this, it is evident that the sex of a person is determined at the very conception of a being. It is conditioned by kamma and is not a fortuitous combination of sperm and ovum cells. The Pain and Happiness one experiences in the course of one's lifetime are the inevitable consequence of Reproductive kamma.

2. Supportive Kamma

That which comes near the Reproductive (*janaka*) Kamma and supports it. It is neither good nor bad and it assists or maintains the action of the Reproductive (*janaka*) Kamma in the course of one's lifetime. Immediately after conception till the death moment, this kamma steps forward to support the Reproductive kamma. A moral supportive (*kusala upathambhaka*) kamma assists in giving health, wealth, happiness etc. to the being born with a moral Reproductive kamma. An immoral supportive kamma, on the other hand, assists in giving pain, sorrow, etc. to the being born with an immoral reproductive (*akusala janaka*) kamma, as for instance to a beast of burden.

3. Obstructive Kamma Or Counteractive Kamma,

which, unlike the former, tends to weaken, interrupt and retard the fruition of the Reproductive kamma. For instance, a person born with a good Reproductive kamma may be subject to various ailments etc., thus preventing him from enjoying the blissful results of his good actions. An animal, on the other hand, who is born with a bad Reproductive kamma may lead a comfortable life by getting good food, lodging, etc., as a result of his good counteractive or obstructive (*upabidaka*) kamma preventing the fruition of the evil Reproductive kamma.

4. Destructive (*Upaghataka*) Kamma

According to the law of kamma the potential energy of the Reproductive kamma could be nullified by a mere powerful opposing kamma of the past, which, seeking an opportunity, may quite unexpectedly operate, just as a powerful counteractive force can obstruct the path of a flying arrow and bring it down to the ground. Such an action is called Destructive (*upaghataka*) kamma, which is more effective than the previous two in that it is not only obstructive but also destroys the whole force. This Destructive kamma also may be either good or bad.

As an instance of operation of all the four, the case of Devadatta, who attempted to kill the Buddha and who caused a schism in the Sangha (disciples of the Buddha) may be cited. His good Reproductive kamma brought him birth in a royal family. His continued comfort and prosperity were due to the action of the Supportive Kamma. The Counteractive or Obstructive kamma came into operation when he was subject to much humiliation as a result of his being excommunicated from the Sangha. Finally the Destructive kamma brought his life to a miserable end.

(B) There is another classification of kamma, according to the priority of effect:

1. Weighty (*Garuka*) Kamma.

This is either weighty or serious – may be either good or bad. It produces its results in this life or in the next for certain. If good, it is purely mental as in the case of Jhana (ecstasy or absorption). Otherwise, it is verbal or bodily. On the Immoral side, there are five immediate effective heinous crimes (*pancanantariya kamma*): Matricide, Patricide, and the murder of an Arahant, the wounding of a Buddha and the creation of a schism in the

Sangha. Permanent Scepticism (*Niyata Micchaditthi*) is also termed one of the Weighty (*garuka*) kammās.

If, for instance, any person were to develop the *jhana* (ecstasy or absorption) and later were to commit one of these heinous crimes, his good kamma would be obliterated by the powerful evil kamma. His subsequent birth would be conditioned by the evil kamma in spite of his having gained the *jhana* earlier. Devadatta lost his psychic power and was born in an evil state, because he wounded the Buddha and caused a schism in the Sangha.

King Ajatasattu would have attained the first stage of Sainthood (*Sotapanna*) if he had not committed patricide. In this case the powerful evil kamma acted as an obstacle to his gaining Sainthood.

2. Proximate (*Asanna*) Kamma Or Death-Proximate Kamma

This is that which one does or remembers immediately before the moment of dying. Owing to the great part it plays in determining the future birth, much importance is attached to this deathbed (*asanna*) kamma in almost all Buddhist countries. The customs of reminding the dying man of good deeds and making him do good acts on his deathbed still prevails in Buddhist countries.

Sometimes, a bad person may die happily and receive a good birth if he remembers or does a good act at the last moment. A story runs that a certain executioner who casually happened to give some alms to the Venerable Sariputta remembered this good act at the dying moment and was born in a state of bliss. This does not mean that although he enjoys a good birth he will be exempt from the effects of the evil deeds which he accumulated during his lifetime. They will have their due effect as occasions

arise.

At times, a good person may die unhappy by suddenly remembering an evil act of his or by harboring some unpleasant thought, perchance compelled by unfavorable circumstances. In the scriptures, Queen Mallika, the consort of King Kosala, remembering a lie she had uttered, suffered for about seven days in a state of misery when she lied to her husband to cover some misbehavior.

These are exceptional cases. Such reverse changes of birth account for the birth of virtuous children to vicious parents and of vicious children to virtuous parents. As a result of the last thought moment being conditioned by the general conduct of the person.

3. Habitual (*Accina*) Kamma

It is that which one habitually performs and recollects and for which one has a great liking. Habits whether good or bad becomes one's second nature, tending to form the character of a person. At unguarded moments one often lapses into one's habitual mental mindset. In the same way, at the death-moment, unless influenced by other circumstances, one usually recalls to mind one's habitual deeds.

Cunda, a butcher, who was living in the vicinity of the Buddha's monastery, died yelling like an animal because he was earning his living by slaughtering pigs.

King Dutthagamini of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was in the habit of giving alms to the Bhikkhus (monks) before he took his own meals. It was his habitual kamma that gladdened him at the dying moment and gave him birth in the Tusita heaven.

4. Reserve Or Cumulative (*Katatta*) Kamma

This literally means 'because done'. All actions that are not included in the aforementioned and those actions soon forgotten belong to this category. This is, as it were the reserve fund of a particular being.

(C) There is another classification of kamma according to the time in which effects are worked out:

1. Immediately Effective (*ditthadhammavedaniya*) kamma.
2. Subsequently Effective (*uppapajjavedaniya*) kamma.
3. Indefinitely Effective (*aparapariyavedaniya*) kamma.
4. Defunct or Ineffective (*ahosi*) kamma.

Immediately Effective kamma is that which is experienced in this present life. According to the Abhidhamma one does both good and evil during the javana process (thought-impulsion), which usually lasts for seven thought-moments. The effect of the first thought-moment, being the weakest, one may reap in this life itself. This is called the Immediately Effective kamma.

If it does not operate in this life, it is called 'Defunct or Ineffective' kamma.

The next weakest is the seventh thought-moment. Its effect one may reap in the subsequence birth. This is called 'Subsequently Effective' kamma.

This, too, is called Defunct or Ineffective kamma if it does not operate in the second birth. The effect of the intermediate thought-moments may take place at any time until one attains Nibbana. This type of kamma is known as 'Indefinitely Effective' kamma.

No one, not even the Buddhas and Arahantas, is exempt from this class

of kamma which one may experience in the course of one's wandering in *Samsara*. There is no special class of kamma known as Defunct or Ineffective, but when such actions that should produce their effects in this life or in a subsequent life do not operate, they are termed Defunct or Ineffective kamma.

(D) The last classification of kamma is according to the plane in which the effect takes place, namely:

1. Evil Actions (*akusala kamma*) which may ripen in the sentient planes (*kammaloka*). (Six celestial planes plus one human plane plus four woeful planes = eleven *kamaloka* planes.) Here are only four woeful *kamalokas*.
2. Good Actions (*kusala kamma*) which may ripen in the sentient planes except for the four woeful planes.
3. Good Actions (*kusala kamma*) which may ripen in the Realm of Form (*rupa brahamalokas*). There are four *Arupa Brahma Lokas*.

Questions On The Theory Of Kamma

Question: *Do the kammas of parents determine or affect the kammas of their children?*

Answer: Physically, the kamma of children is generally determined by the kamma of their parents. Thus, healthy parents usually have healthy offspring, and unhealthy parents have unhealthy children. On the effect or how the kamma of their children is determined: the child's kamma is a thing apart of itself – it forms the child's individuality, the sum-total of its merits and demerits accumulated in innumerable past existences. For example, the kamma of the Buddha-to-be, Prince Siddhattha was certainly not influenced by the joint kamma of his parents, King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. The glorious and powerful kamma of our Buddha-to-be transcended the kamma of his

parents which jointly were more potent than his own.

Question: *If the kamma of parents do not influence those of their children, how would the fact be explained that parents who suffer from certain virulent diseases are apt to transmit these evils to their offsprings?*

Answer: Where a child inherits such a disease it is due to the force of the parents' characteristics because of the force of the latter's Utu (conditions favourable to germination). Take, for example, two seeds from a sapling; plant one in inferior, dry soil; and the other in rich, moist soil. The result is that the first seed will sprout into a sickly sapling and soon show symptoms of disease and decay; while the other seed will thrive and flourish and grow up to be a tall and healthy tree.

It will be observed that the pair of seeds taken from the same stock grows up differently according to the soil into which they are put. A child's past kamma may be compared to the seed: the physical disposition of the mother to the soil; and that of the father to the moisture, which fertilized the soil. Roughly speaking, to illustrate our subject, we will say that, representing the sapling's germination, growth, and existence as a unit, the seed is responsible for one-tenth of them, the soil for six-tenths, and the moisture for the remainder, three-tenths. Thus, although the power of germination exists potentially in the seed (the child), its growth is powerfully determined and quickened by the soil (the mother) and the moisture (the father).

Therefore, even as the conditions of the soil and moisture must be taken as largely responsible factors in the growth and condition of the tree. So must the influences of the parents (or progenitors, as in the case of the animal world) be taken into account in respect to the conception and growth of their off-spring.

The parents' share in the kamma determining the physical factors of

their issue is as follows: If they are human beings, then their offspring will be a human being. If they are cattle then their issue must be of their species. If the human being is Chinese, then their offspring must be of their race. Thus, the offspring are invariably of the same genera and species, etc., as those of the progenitors. It will be seen from the above that, although a child's kamma is very powerful in itself, it cannot remain wholly uninfluenced by those of its parents. It is apt to inherit the physical characteristic of its parents.

Yet, it may occur that the child's kamma, being superlatively powerful, the influence of the parent's joint kamma cannot overshadow it. Of course, it need hardly be pointed out that the evil influences of parents can also be counteracted by the application of medical science.

All beings born of sexual cohabitation are the resultant effects of three forces:

1. The old kamma of past existence;
2. The seminal fluid of the mother, and
3. The seminal fluid of the father.

The physical dispositions of the parents may, or may not, be equal in force. One may counteract the other to a lesser or greater extent. The child's kamma and physical characteristics, such as race, colour, etc., will be the produce of the three forces.

Question: *On the death of a sentient being, is there a 'soul' that wanders about at will?*

Answer: When a sentient being leaves one existence, it is reborn either as a human being, a celestial being, (Deva or Brahma), and inferior animal, or a denizen of one of the regions of hell. The sceptics and the ignorant people held that there are intermediate stages – *antrabhava* – between these; and that there are beings who are neither

of the human, the celestial, the Deva or the Brahma worlds nor of any one of the stages of existence recognized in the scriptures – but are in an intermediate stage. Some assert that these transitional stages are possessed of the Five Khandhas (Five Aggregates: they are Matter (*rupa*); Feeling (*vedana*); Perception (*sanna*); 4. Mental-activities (*sankhara*); and Consciousness (*vinnana*).

Some assert that these beings are detached 'souls' or spirits with no material encasement, and some again, that they are possessed of the faculty of seeing like Devas, and further: that they have power of changing at will, at short intervals, from one to any of the existence mentioned above. Others again hold the fantastic and erroneous theory that these beings can, and do, fancy themselves to be in other than the existence they are actually in. Thus, to take for example one such of these suppositious beings. He is a poor person – and yet he fancies himself to be rich. He may be in hell – and yet he fancies himself to be in the land of the Devas, and so on. This belief in intermediate stages between existences is false, and is condemned in the Buddhist teachings. A human being in this life who, by his kamma is destined to be a human being in the next, will be reborn as such; one who by his kamma is destined to be a Deva in the next will be appear in the land of the Devas; and one whose future life is to be in Hell, will be found in one of the regions of hell in the next existence.

The idea of an entity or soul or spirit 'going', 'coming', 'changing' or 'transmigrating' from one existence to another is an idea entertained by the ignorant and materialistic, and is certainly not justified by the Dhammas that there is no such thing as 'going', 'coming', 'changing', etc., as between existences.

The conception, which is in accordance with the Dhamma, may perhaps be illustrated by the picture thrown out by a cinema projector, or the sound of emitted by the gramophone, and their relation to the film or the sound-box and records respectively. For example, a human

being dies and is reborn in the land of Devas. Though these two existences are different, yet the link or continuity between the two at death is unbroken in point of time.

The same is true in the case of a man whose further existence is to be in hell. The distance between Hell and the abode of man appears to be great. Yet, in point of time, the continuity of 'passage' from the one existence to the other is unbroken, and no intervening matter or space can interrupt the trend of a man's kamma from the world of human beings to the regions of Hell. The 'passage' from one existence to another is instantaneous, and the transition is infinitely quicker than the blink of an eyelid or a lightening-flash.

Kamma determines the realm of rebirth and the state of existence in that realm of all transient being (in the cycle of existences, which have to be traversed till the attainment, at last, of Nibbana).

The results of kamma are manifold, and may be effected in many ways. Religious offerings (*dana*) may obtain for a man the privilege of rebirth as a human being, or as a deva, in one of the six deva worlds according to the degree of the merit of the deeds performed, and so with the observance of religious duties (*sila*). The jhanas, or states of absorption, are found in the Brahma world or Brahmaloкас up to the summit, the twentieth Brahma world: And so with bad deeds, the perpetrators of which are to be found, grade by grade, down to the lowest depths of Hell. Thus are kamma, past, present and future were, are, and will ever be the sum total of our deeds, good, indifferent or bad. As was seen from the foregoing, our kamma determines the changes of our existences.

"Evil spirits" are, therefore, not beings in an intermediate or transitional stages of existence, but are really very inferior beings, and they belong to one of the following five realms of existence:

1. World of Men: 2. The Lowest plane of deva-world; 3. The region of hell; 4. Animals below men, and 5. Petas (ghosts).

Number 2 and 5 are very near the world of human beings. As their condition is unhappy, and they are popularly considered evil spirits. It is not true that all who die in this world are reborn as evil spirits; nor is it true that beings who die sudden or violent deaths are apt to be reborn in the lowest plane of the world of devas.

***Question:** Is there such a thing as a human being who is reborn and who is able to speak accurately of his or her past existence?*

Answer: Certainly, this is not an uncommon occurrence, and is in accordance with the tenets of Buddhism in respect to kamma.

The following (who form, an overwhelming majority of human beings) are generally unable to remember their past existences when reborn as human beings: Children who die young. Those who die old and senile. Those who are addicted to the drug or drink habits. Those whose mothers, during their conception, have been sickly or have had to toil laboriously, or have been reckless or imprudent during pregnancy. The children in the womb, being stunned and started, lose all knowledge of their past existence.

The following are possessed of a knowledge of their past existences, viz: Those who are not reborn (in the human world) but proceed to the world of the devas, of Brahmas, or to the regions of Hell, remember their past existences.

Those who die suddenly deaths from accidents, while in sound health, may also be possessed of this faculty in the next existence, provided that their mothers, in whose womb they are conceived, are healthy. Again, those who live steady, meritorious lives and who in their past existences have striven to attain, often attain it.

Lastly the Buddha, the Arahantas and Ariyas attain this gift which is known as *pubbenivasa abhinna* (Supernatural Power remembering previous existences).

Question: Which are the five Abhinna? Are they attainable only by the Buddha?

Answer: The five Abhinna (Supernatural Powers): Pali - *abhi*, excellent, *nana*, wisdom) are:

Iddhividha = Creative power;

Dibbasola = Divine Ear;

Cetopariya nana = Knowledge of others' thoughts;

Pubbenivasanussati = Knowledge of one's past existence;

Dibbacakkhu = The Divine eye.

The Abhinna are attainable not only by the Buddha, but also by Arahantas and Ariyas, by ordinary mortals who practise according to the Scriptures (as was the case with hermits etc, who flourished before the time of the Buddha and who were able to fly through the air and traverse different worlds).

In the Buddhist Scriptures, we find, clearly shown, the means of attaining the five Abhinna. And even, nowadays, if these means are carefully and perseveringly pursued, it would be possible to attain these. That we do not see any person endowed with the five Abhinna today is due to the lack of strenuous physical and mental exertion towards their attainment.

Nature Of Kamma

In the working of kamma there are maleficent and beneficent forces and conditions to counteract and support this self-operating law. Birth (*gati*) time or condition (*kala*) substratum of rebirth or showing attachment to rebirth (*upadhi*) and effort (*payoga*) act as such powerful

aids and hindrances to the fruition of kamma.

Though we are neither absolutely the servants nor the masters of our kamma, it is evident from these counteractive and supportive factors that the fruition of kamma is influenced to some extent by external circumstances, surroundings, personality, individual striving, and so forth.

It is this doctrine of kamma that gives consolation, hope, reliance and moral courage to a Buddhist. When the unexpected happens, and he meets with difficulties, failures, and misfortune, the Buddhist realizes that he is reaping what he has sown, and he is wiping-off a past debt. Instead of resigning himself, leaving everything to kamma, he makes a strenuous effort to pull the weeds and sow useful seeds in their place for the future is in his own hands.

He who believes in kamma does not condemn even the most corrupt of men, for they too have their chance to reform themselves at any moment. Though bound to suffer in woeful states, they have hope of attaining eternal Peace. By their own doings they have created their own Hells, and by their own doings they can create their own Heavens, too.

A Buddhist who is fully convinced of the law of kamma does not pray to another to be saved but confidently relies on his actions for his own emancipation. Instead of making any self-surrender or calling on any supernatural agency, he relies on his own will power, and works incessantly for the well-being and happiness of all. This belief in kamma validates his effort and kindles his enthusiasm, because it teaches individual responsibility.

To the ordinary Buddhist, kamma serves as a deterrent, while to an intellectual it serves as an incentive to do good. He or she becomes

kind, tolerant, and considerate.

This law of kamma explains the problem of suffering, the mastery of so-called fate and predestination of other religions and about all the inequality of mankind.
