



A Glimpse of Kamma in Buddhism

By Ven. S. M.

*One speaks or acts with a harmful thought,
trouble follows him as the wheel follows
the ox that draws the cart.*

*One speaks or acts with harmonious
thought, happiness follows him
as his own shadow, never leaving him.*

(Dhp 1,2)

Introduction

Kamma is one of the core doctrines of Buddhism, yet it can be one of the most complexes. Kamma simply means an action in English language and uses the original word Kamma in Sanskrit form Karma in English vocabulary. In general, it is misused. Such as; if something happens in a bad sense then people used to say, “I guess it’s just my Kamma,” instead of “it’s my vipaka (result)”. In the same way, external power (God?) is given responsibility for good results or your luck. According to Buddhism both good and bad actions are called Kamma.

The concept of Kamma focused on the liberating potential existed before the Buddha and of observing the mind and its was widely practiced in that time, activity with every moment. This article is a part of weekly discussion which will present glimpse of early Buddhist concept of Kamma. In Veda, one was encouraged to offer one’s actions to the Gods and as such, life was predestined. In early Buddhism, there was no concept of a central God like being. Instead, the individual was encouraged to pursue the Eightfold path, the path of righteous action that would lead to liberation. So, the early Buddhist notion of Kamma



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A. Non-Buddhist view

There are three main ways in which Kamma is viewed and understood.

They are:

1. Past-action determinism; believing that all sukha and dukkha are related to past Kamma
2. Theistic Determinism: believing that all sukha and dukkha are related to the will of Gods
3. Indeterminism or Accidentalism: believing that all sukha and dukkha go according to uncontrollable luck, good fortune, or fate.

The first idea emphasizes that everything which happens in this life is a direct result of past Kamma. All daily activities are the outcome of past actions, which took place in previous lives. We are what we planted. From this perspective, there are no opportunities for creating new Kamma, either good or bad. All our daily performances are designed already. The second view is equally deterministic in that all beings are destined by the Gods. All happiness, sadness and suffering are attributed to the will of the Gods. From this standpoint,

there are no opportunities to change or divert ourselves from the wishes of the Gods. It has been created and will remain as it is. Our duty is to fulfill these wishes to achieve liberation. The third concept differs from such deterministic views, and states instead that events are due to luck, or fate. From this view point there is little emphasis on responsibility for consequences of actions, and therefore could be interpreted as potentially harmful for society and human kind.

According to early Buddhist theories of Kamma, the Buddha says that we are going through our past Kammas and creating new Kammas at the same time. Therefore, Buddha encourages everyone to cultivate the mind, perform good deeds, and give up all kinds of unwholesome activities in order to achieve enlightenment. We are the result of past action, but are not a slave of it. Destiny, according to Buddhism, is changeable with our performance in daily life. Therefore, the concept of Kamma should be understood in terms of its origin, result, diversity and way to cessation. It is a product of mind and conditioned energy, in accordance with life-continuum, the flux of coming to be. In addition, mind is the vase of all actions. Bodily and verbal actions are derived from mental action. In the same way, the intention of our mind contact with the bodily

and verbal is the cause of every action which leads to form or generate different systems of existence, which in turn leads to re-birth in different realms and planets. The Buddha says Kamma is experienced in different planets; woeful realms, realms of common animals, realms of the hungry shades, realms of human worlds and realms of heavenly worlds. The most important point however is that wrong view and wrong practice lead to unwilling results.

B. Kamma &

'All conditioned dhammas are subject to cease', 'Every action is conditioned by many causes', says the Buddha. Kamma is one of the dhammas. Although Kamma is the chief cause of the creation of new cycles of birth, Buddhism does not teach fatalism or predestiny since it does not hold the view that everything is due to past action.



Kamma is one of the 24 causes (*Patthana*), or one of the fine orders (*Niyamas*), which are laws in themselves and operate in the world. Therefore, Kamma itself develops depending on many causes. In *Paticca-samuppada* it states that the main factor belonging to previous births is ignorance, which is conditioned and it is summarized as the Kamma process of the past. Kamma is only one part of the process. This Kamma produces consciousness. Depending on consciousness, Mind and Matter and the six sense bases, contact and sensation develops.

This result is known as present effect. It means that physical and mental make up are the manifestations of past Kamma operating in the present as also are the phenomena cognized and experienced through the channels of sense. This means that ignorance or not knowing things as they truly are is the chief cause of Kamma. Similarly, associated with ignorance is its ally, craving (*Tanha*), which is another root of Kamma. In *Nibbedhika* sutta the Buddha

says that contact is the basis of action and in *Nidana Sutta* greed, hatred, delusion are mentioned as the cause of wrong actions. Wholesome actions are the opposite of it. The Buddha says:



‘Greed, O monks, is a condition for the arising of Kamma, hatred is a condition for the arising of Kamma, and Delusion is a condition for the arising of Kamma. Non-greed, Non-aversion and Non-delusion are a cause for the origination of wholesome actions.’

C. Results

Kamma is action, and vipaka, result, is its subsequent reaction. The principle of dependent origination explains the complete process of action and the result of action, starting from the unwholesome tendencies that bring about Kamma to the fruits received. It is the Law of Kamma that governs the results of actions performed by humans; and the principle underlying the nature of the results that follow. The Buddha says ‘as he sows, so does he reap’ or ‘good deeds beget good results and bad deeds beget bad results’. Kamma and vipaka are interrelated within.

According to the law of Kamma, perfect justice characterizes its

operations, since Kamma is a strict system of accountability. Therefore each one gets their exact consequence or outcome, not more or less. However, there are some examples in daily life which appear to challenge this. For example, someone may act or have wrong business but in return, he or she may have a happy life. Alternatively, someone may act or perform good actions, yet have a painful and unhappy life. There are many other anomalies in life that equally need explanation. Timing is an important factor in explaining these anomalies. Results will often not effect the doer immediately because sometimes it is not the proper time for their actions to produce consequences. However, there are no excuses in

the court of Law of Kamma.

According to Buddhism; *Owners of their Kamma are the beings, heirs of their Kamma, the Kamma is their womb from which they are born, their Kamma is their friend, their refuge. Whatever Kamma they perform, good or bad, thereof they will be the heirs.*

With regards to the timing or taking place of the Kamma result (Vipaka), 3 kinds of Kamma are identified, which are classified according to the time of ripening or taking effect;

1) Ditthadhammavedaniya;

Kamma to be experienced here or immediately effective Kamma

2) Upapajja vedaniya; Kamma

to be experienced on rebirth

3) Aparapariyavedaniya;

Kamma to be experienced in some subsequent becoming.

This shows that actions take effect in three different times, yet according to Buddhism it may

be without Kamma result (vipaka), if the circumstance required for the taking place of the Kamma-result is missing or if, through the preponderance of counteractive Kamma and their being too weak, actions are unable to produce any results. In this case, it is the outcome of forgiveness (AhoSi-Kamma). Thus, several causes must be combining to produce a result. Some of these combining causes can strengthen and expedite the result (Upattham bhaka Kamma), while some actions can obstruct and delay it (Upapijaka Kamma). Further still, other actions can completely invalidate it (AhoSi Kamma).



So, the early Buddhist concept of Kamma is divided according to the doer's experience or doer's action in different levels. In Anguttaranikaya, the Buddha says that there are Kamma to be experienced in hell, in the realm of common animals, in the realm of the hungry shades, in the human world, in the world of the devas. This is called the diversity in Kamma.

D. Diversity &

In general, there are 3 kinds of Kammas: bodily, verbal and mental actions. In addition, these actions are classified according to the quality of result of Kamma or the origin of Kamma into two ways; Kusala (Wholesome) and Akusala (Unwholesome). Besides this, the Buddha divided Kamma into another 4 groups according to their cause and result, which should be understood, realized and cultivated.

These are:

1. Kamma that is dark with dark result,
2. Kamma that is bright with bright result,
3. Kamma that is dark & bright with dark & bright result; and
4. Kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of Kamma

There are people born with prosperity that may experience a painful life, but have no motivation to change. So, they will get similar results both in the present life and the next. On the other hand, there are people born with prosperity who may endeavor to cultivate themselves, which in turn will lead to a good life here and the next. Similarly, someone born with difficulty who strives to improve will cultivate for a good life here and hereafter. Therefore, Buddhism inspires us to cultivate and develop ourselves to liberate from this samasarcic cycle of birth and death.

Conclusion

In Buddhism any action with intention or consciousness is called Kamma. Defilement is the base of every action, which arises from body, verbal and mind. Kamma means both wholesome and unwholesome action, either good or bad.

The origination of Kamma or the cause of Kamma is contact (Phassa) through the six senses. It begins from mind, which is a cause for bodily and verbal actions. The result of Kamma either good or bad will be kept in the *Bhavanga* citta (Subconscious mind). After having proper time it manifests a result to the doer.

The cessation of Kamma is cessation of contact (*Passa*). Buddhism does not teach cultivation of the good only for happiness and goodness, but teaches the cessation of both good and bad action for the cessation of all kinds of Kamma. The way of cessation of Kamma is the Eightfold Noble Path. Action without defilement (*kilesa*) is not Kamma but only *kiriya*. This action does not have any result (*Vipaka*) but leads to the cessation of Kamma, or realization of *nibbana*, which is the ultimate reality in Buddhism.

‘Leaving the way of darkness, the wise man will follow the way of light.

*Giving up his security he will
enter into solitude, knowing
the road to be hard.’*

Further readings:

Nagapriya, Exploring Kamma and Rebirth, Windhorse Publication, 2004

Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught.

Peter Harvey (ed), Buddhism, 2001