

Only We Can Help Ourselves

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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

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WHAT IS KAMMA?

Kamma is usually an interesting subject because it concerns everyone and there are many different aspects of it. There are many natural laws that govern our lives but the most important is the law of *kamma-vipaka*. In a discourse (A.N. 6.63) the Buddha said “Intention, monks, is *Kamma* I say. Having willed, one acts through body, speech, and mind”. This means that intentional action is *kamma*, and *vipaka* is the result or effect of it. The result may ripen immediately, later in this life, or in a future life.

Kamma-vipaka is sometimes translated as cause and effect (‘yin kuo’ in Chinese books) but that is not a good translation. This is because there are two types of cause and effect — worldly cause and effect, and kammic cause and effect. The difference can be seen, for example, when you drive a car and suddenly a small boy runs across the road, and you hit the boy and kill him. You did not have the intention to kill the small boy, so you did not create any *kamma*. However, you did knock down the boy and the boy’s family might pull you out of the car when you stop, and beat you up. In addition to that, they might also sue you in court. So there is a result of knocking down the boy, namely, you get a beating and then be sued in court. However, this is worldly cause and effect. It is not concerned with Buddhist *kamma-vipaka* because there was no intention on your part to kill the boy. So we must clearly differentiate between worldly cause and effect and *kamma-vipaka* (intentional action and its result). They are different because one involves action with intention and the other does not.

Then comes the question: how do we create *kamma*? It is created through the three doors of body, speech and mind. Evil body *kamma* is to kill, steal, and commit adultery. Evil verbal *kamma* is to lie, carry tales from one person to another to cause disharmony, speak coarse words and gossip. Evil mental *kamma* is covetousness, malice, and have wrong views. Mental *kamma* is not so much thinking or stray thoughts but thoughts with some kind of intention behind them.

What is wholesome *kamma* and what is unwholesome *kamma*? In other words what is good *kamma* and evil *kamma*? Good *kamma* is that which benefits living beings, helps living beings, and makes them happy. The ten good *kammas* are the opposite of the ten evil *kammas* mentioned in the previous paragraph. Evil *kamma* or unwholesome *kamma* is that which harms living beings, that results in the suffering of some living beings. The ten evil *kammas* are as stated above. In this way the criterion for good and evil in Buddhism is different from other religions.

The effect of *kamma* is also long lasting. For example, in one discourse (A.N. 5.31) a king’s daughter by the name of Sumana came to the Buddha and asked if there is a

difference between a person who likes to give alms to the monks and a person who does not, if both subsequently are reborn in heaven. The Buddha said that the difference between the two of them is that the alms-giver surpasses the non-giver in life span, beauty, happiness, honour and power. Sumana then asked if there would be a difference between the two subsequently when both are reborn into the human realm. Again the Buddha said there would be — the alms giver surpasses the non-giver in life span, beauty, happiness, honour and power. Sumana then asked whether there would be a difference between the two when both renounced and became monks. The Buddha answered affirmatively. The alms giver will get more offerings of food, robes, medicines from the lay people when he is a monk; more people will like him and he will have more places to live compared to the non-giver. So we can see the long lasting effect of *kamma* which can follow us for several lifetimes.

AVOIDING EVIL

The Buddha's teaching is concerned with skilful living so that we can reduce or avoid unnecessary suffering. It is important to know the law of *kamma-vipaka* in order to avoid unnecessary suffering. In life, there are some types of suffering that are unavoidable but there are those that are avoidable. What is unavoidable suffering? It is growing old, becoming sick, and dying. These are the three things that nobody can avoid. However, there are certain sufferings that we can avoid. Unskillful or evil *kamma* which harm living beings bring suffering to the doer as a consequence. So, we abstain from evil actions and avoid unnecessary suffering.

The law of *kamma-vipaka* is like the saying "As you sow, so shall you reap." Depending on what you plant, you'll get its fruit in return. So we should train ourselves to abstain from unwholesome or unskillful *kamma*. For this, the Buddha advised that we uphold the five precepts every day which is the basic training in moral conduct. The first precept is not to kill. The second is not to take what is not given. The third is not to commit adultery. The fourth is not to lie. The fifth is not to take intoxicants. These are the very basic things that are even found in the laws of a country. If you kill a human being, the law will get you; similarly, when you steal, or run away with somebody's wife or husband, or cheat, you will get yourself into a lot of trouble. So these five precepts are the basic things that we have to uphold. Note that these precepts are training rules, not commandments.

In the early Buddhist teachings, it was not taught that we must become vegetarians. If you want to become a vegetarian, that is very good. However, if you do not want to become a vegetarian, you should know when meat is not allowed. The type of meat allowed to be eaten has three conditions: when you do not (1) see, (2) hear, and (3) suspect, that the animal was specifically killed for you. With these three conditions, you do not experience the direct *kamma* of killing the animal because there was no intention on your part to do so, although there may be worldly cause and effect involved. For example, if you buy from the market the meat of an animal which is already dead, that is acceptable. The type of meat that is not allowed is, for example, you select a live chicken and ask the seller to slaughter the chicken for you, or you enter a restaurant and select a live fish to be cooked.

Eating meat does not necessarily mean that one approves of the killing of animals. Whether we are vegetarians or not, we still indirectly contribute to the killing of animals just by living. For example, just because we want to live in houses and use household goods, large forest areas have to be cleared to create housing estates and factory areas, thereby causing the death of much wildlife. Because we want to use electricity, rivers have to be dammed to harness hydroelectric power, leading again to the death of wildlife. Even in using motor vehicles we are indirectly encouraging the motor industry to produce more vehicles, and motor vehicles account for the deaths of about two thousand human beings and a large number of animals every day on the roads.

Eating vegetarian food still indirectly involves the killing of kangaroos and rabbits, squirrels and monkeys, insects and snails, and other 'pests'. Should the whole world become vegetarians, animals would probably still be killed as they would multiply in such great numbers and so quickly as to be a threat to human survival. For example, in some countries, dogs on the streets without license are disposed of. Even the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals kill millions of dogs and cats in shelters every year due to insufficient accommodation — in USA 14 million annually are put to death within a week of being rescued by humane groups.

DOING GOOD

After avoiding evil, we need to do good and create wholesome *kamma* that benefits others, so that in return, we get the benefits too. Thus, the Buddha advised us to do dana. Dana is offerings or charity. Making offerings or charity means sharing with others what we have, and it is the first step on the path to reduce our selfishness. According to the Buddha, when we give, it should not be at the expense of hurting oneself or another (A.N. 5.148). In another discourse (Itiv. 26) the Buddha said: "Monks, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given nor would the taint of miserliness overcome and stay in their minds. Even if it were their last morsel, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having someone to share it with." You should also keep the eight precepts once a week as it is very meritorious. As lay people do not have much time to cultivate the spiritual path like monks, they can set aside one day each week to cultivate the eight precepts. This can be done either in a monastery, Buddhist Society or at home.

The Buddha also explained how good *kamma* can result in a lot of blessings. In the *Mangala Sutta*, a heavenly being (*deva*) asked the Buddha about the highest blessings. The Buddha then taught the deva the ways to obtain the highest blessings. For instance, the Buddha said not to associate with fools but to associate with the wise; to respect those who are worthy of respect such as parents, elders, teachers and monks. To have much knowledge of the Buddha's teachings also brings you blessings. Discussion of the *Dhamma* with others, and having gratitude (which is not common in this world) brings blessings too. Among the first people that we need to show gratitude to are our parents because they have done a lot for us. It is a Buddhist tradition that we support and respect our parents. Another cause for blessings is humility. People sometimes forget about it when they succeed in life. When we become bosses, our ego increases and that is not good for us.

Sometimes we forget these things, but when we read or hear the *Dhamma*, it reminds us to walk the good way. Meekness is another good quality. Even in the Bible, it is said, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.” Forbearance or patience is another important quality. People are sometimes not nice to us. In such cases, we have to be patient and try to see that perhaps we have done something wrong in the past and we are getting the retribution. When we see it in this way, we will learn to bear difficult or trying circumstances. Visiting monks so that we can learn some *Dhamma* is another way we can get blessings.

In a discourse (A.N. 4.4), the Buddha said that there are four types of persons to whom you must conduct yourself carefully because they are the four fields of merit and the four fields of demerit. If you are good towards them, there will be a lot of merit. If you act badly towards them, you will get a lot of demerit.

The first type of person is the Buddha. However, since the Buddha has passed into *parinibbana*, we cannot interact with him. The second type of person is the disciples of the Buddha, namely the monks and nuns. We have to be careful not to create bad *kamma* with monks and nuns because if that monk or nun possesses the right view of the *Dhamma* then our demerit is enormous. Conversely, an offering made for the sake of the *Sangha* (community of monks or nuns) yields incalculable merit — even if the monks or nuns are immoral, of evil character — and it surpasses the merit of giving to any individual person, including the Buddha (M.N. 142).

The third one is our mother, and the fourth is our father. If you serve your mother and father well, you will get a lot of blessings. Some people make the mistake of being not filial towards their parents, and after their parents have passed away, they may get a lot of remorse that trouble their minds. Therefore, we learn from the Buddha’s teachings to be good to our parents while they are still alive. After they have passed away, there is not much we can do for them. To really repay our parents’ kindness, we should teach them to have faith in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*; to uphold the five precepts; to be generous or charitable; and to listen to the Buddha’s discourses so as to have more wisdom.

The first advantage of avoiding evil and doing wholesome *kamma* is that you will get a good reputation. Because you do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery or lie, you will get a good reputation. You will have nothing to be ashamed of when you avoid evil and do good *kamma*, and that is the second advantage. When you are facing a group of people, you would dare to face them without any sense of shame. If you have done shameful deeds, you would not have such confidence. The third advantage of keeping the precepts and doing good is that your wealth would not likely be squandered away. This could happen to someone without precepts, through drinking, gambling, womanizing, etc.

The fourth advantage is that we will have a very clear mind when we grow old because there is no remorse to disturb us. When I lived in Penang a few years ago, I had a very devoted old supporter to whose house I used to go on alms round. This old woman is in her 80s and she is very thin and frail, but her mind is very clear. She has a very good memory as a result of keeping the precepts very thoroughly and practising much charity. She can even remember telephone numbers quite clearly.

On the other hand, there are some people who do not keep the precepts. When they reach their 50s, their mind is often disturbed and troubled, and they become senile and

talk nonsense. This is because they have a lot of unwholesome *kamma* troubling their minds.

The fifth advantage is that we are not afraid to die when we keep the precepts and do good. If we have very good *kamma*, we have the confidence that the good *kamma* will support us when we die. We know that we will be going to a good place. People who have done a lot of evil are afraid of dying when their time comes. They are very scared and some are even terrified.

Lastly, if we have good *kamma*, the Buddha said that it will lead us to a good rebirth. If in addition to doing good we encourage others to do good, or approve of good deeds, or praise the doing of good, then more blessings are generated. And vice versa for doing evil — more demerit is created.

According to a discourse (A.N. 8.36), there are three bases of meritorious action — charity (*dana*), moral conduct (*sila*) and mind development (*bhavana*). A person who practises charity and moral conduct only on a small scale would likely to be reborn as a human being of poor luck. One who practises these two things to a medium degree would be reborn as a human being of good fortune. And one who practises charity and moral conduct to a high degree would be reborn in the heavenly realm. This also implies that people who practise neither charity nor moral conduct would be reborn in the three woeful states — ghost, animal and hell realms — and that would be the majority of people.

EFFECTS OF KAMMA

There is a discourse called *Culakammavibhanga Sutta* where a person asked the Buddha why people in the world are different: some are ugly, some are beautiful; some have short life, others have long life; etc. The Buddha said that beings are born of their *kamma*, owners of their *kamma*, abide supported by their *kamma*.

The Buddha explained that if a person is always angry, then when he is reborn as a human, he would become ugly. If a person is good-natured, and does not have a temper, he would be reborn beautiful. This is because every time we become angry, our face looks fierce and ugly. When we are often angry, we habitually make our face fierce and ugly. So we are reborn with an ugly face. Another person who is good-natured, always smiling and takes things evenly will have a face that is sweet and pleasant. Naturally he will be born beautiful.

Why is a person born sickly? The Buddha said that if a person likes to harm living beings, for example, beat his slaves, or dogs or other animals and make their bodies painful, then the next time when he comes back as a human, he will have a sickly body that gives him pain as a retribution. However, if you do not torture other beings and do not make their bodies painful, then naturally, when you come back as a human, you will be healthy and strong.

If a person does a lot of killing, for example, he likes to go hunting, and fishing - in other words, he enjoys himself at the expense of the lives of other beings - due to the fact that he makes other beings' lives short, in future he will have short life as a result. You see some children suffer from cancer although they are very young. On the other hand, a

person who does not kill, and who allows other beings to have a long life, will naturally have long life as a result.

If you are selfish, never charitable, never helpful to others, in the next life, you are likely to be reborn into a poor family, and have difficulty earning a living. However, if you are charitable, very helpful towards others, you are likely to be reborn into a wealthy family, or if you start a business, people will come and support you, so you become wealthy very easily. You can see this sometimes. There might be two shops selling the same things on the same road, but one might be successful and the other a failure.

Why is a person born stupid? This is because in the past, when he did not know what was wholesome and unwholesome, he did not take the trouble to investigate. Another reason for stupidity could be due to the fact that the person drank too much liquor. Why is a person born intelligent? Firstly, if he did not know something, he took the trouble to ask and investigate. The other reason could be that he avoided intoxicants like liquor and drugs, and he meditated. We meditate to develop our mind, and this brings us wisdom.

Why are some people unknown and insignificant, and others are influential and well known? The Buddha said that the person who is unknown and insignificant was a small-hearted person, who was always jealous of other people, and very spiteful. Conversely, another person who was big-hearted, never jealous of other people, had a lot of goodwill, will be born influential, well known, and powerful.

So *kamma* can explain why people in the world are all different. Due to past life *kamma*, each of us comes into life with different qualities. However, we must remember that we cannot put it all on past life *kamma* alone, because the law of *kamma* does not only concern our past life *kamma* but also our present life *kamma*. If we say that everything is due to past life *kamma*, then we need not do anything — just sit down and wait for *kamma* to bring us everything. Evidently, you can see that it does not work this way.

We take an example of the Form 5 students studying to try to get ten As in their examinations. Let us consider three types of students. The first one does not bother to study, but he goes around praying from temple to “dato kong” (a deity) and everywhere else, trying to get ten As. So, can he get ten As? Definitely not because he does not put in the effort, that is, he does not put in the *kamma*. He relies on past *kamma* only.

The second student studies very hard, but unfortunately, he is born not very intelligent. He stays up late until 12 midnight, sleeps six hours, and studies hard everyday. Perhaps he might get two or three As, but he won't get ten As because he is not very smart. The third student is born very intelligent, and on top of that, he studies very hard. He is the type of person who can get ten As. For the second student who studies very hard, that is his present life *kamma*. However, he did not have the support of past life *kamma* to be intelligent. That is why he will not succeed. On the other hand, the third student has the support from previous life *kamma* to be born very intelligent and he works hard (present life *kamma*). When both the past life and the present life *kamma*s are working together, we can get what we want.

It is because of this reason that the Buddha said that we have to strive. The Buddha said that all Buddhas only show the way. Striving should be done by you. Therefore, we should understand that the *Dhamma* only guides us; we have to make the effort ourselves. That is why some people say that Buddhism is a do-it-yourself religion.

CRITERIA FOR ACTION

In one discourse (M.N.61), the Buddha advised us to reflect on *kamma*. He said that before we do any *kamma*, we should reflect whether it is going to harm somebody. If it is going to harm some being or ourselves, we should not do it. However, if it benefits some other being, or ourselves, then we should do it, and do it again and again.

Even while doing the *kamma*, the Buddha said that we should also reflect. In the midst of doing the *kamma*, we should reflect thus, “Is what I am doing now right or wrong? If it is right, I’ll continue to do it. If it is wrong, I’ll stop immediately.” After the action is done, we should again reflect back and think carefully what we did — yesterday, or three days ago, or a week ago, or a month ago. We reflect on whether the action was correct or not, and whether we should have done it or not. When we reflect on our actions in this way, we will be living our lives skillfully, and we will avoid unnecessary suffering.

Another good criterion for judging whether a *kamma* is good and should be done, or whether it is an evil *kamma* that should not be done, is, according to the Buddha, whether the *kamma* leads to an increase, or decrease in wholesome states of mind; or a decrease or increase in unwholesome states of mind, in yourself and others. If the *kamma* brings about an increase in wholesome states of mind, or a decrease in unwholesome states of mind, in others or oneself, then that is good *kamma* which should be performed again and again.

What are wholesome states? Wholesome states are good states of mind, happy states of mind, e.g. non-attachment, goodwill, tranquility, equanimity. These wholesome states of mind give us peace, give us happiness.

Unwholesome states of mind are states that make us agitated, make us unhappy, e.g. greed, anger, restlessness, jealousy, arrogance. Evil *kamma* or unwholesome *kamma* leads to a decrease in wholesome states or an increase in unwholesome states. We should avoid performing this kind of *kamma*.

WORKING OF KAMMA

In one discourse (S.N. 36.21), the Buddha said that not all suffering is due to *kamma*. Besides *kamma*, there are other factors that can cause us suffering. Suffering could be due to imbalance of wind or bile or phlegm. It could be the weather, perhaps. In Kuching, for example, the air pollution index suddenly shot up to about 1,000 (in the year 1997) and caused a great deal of suffering. Another reason could be our own carelessness. Another possible reason is accident.

However, things mostly happen because of *kamma*. Consider the case of a person who gets involved in an accident, and passes away. If his death is due to carelessness, or accidental occurrence, then it means that his *kamma* as a human being might not be over. He would probably be reborn as a human being. However, if his death is because his *kamma* as a human being has ended, then he would not be reborn as a human being. He

would be reborn in another plane of existence. Therefore, not everything is due to *kamma*.

There are five kammic offenses mentioned in a discourse that are considered as most serious: (1) shedding the blood of a Buddha with evil intent, (2) killing an Arahant, (3) killing one's own mother, (4) killing one's own father, (5) causing disharmony among the harmonious community of monks that results in the community being split. These five offenses will bring one down to hell in the next rebirth, and will make one stay there for a long time.

The working of *kamma-vipaka* is very complex. The Buddha said in one discourse (A.N. 4.77) that there are four things that you should not think about too much. If you think too much about these four things, you could become deranged. The first is the power of the Buddha; the second is the depth and power of *jhana* (meditative absorption); the third is *kamma-vipaka*; and the fourth is speculation about the world.

Why should we not think too much about *kamma-vipaka*? It is because *kamma-vipaka* is very complex. The working of *kamma-vipaka* depends not only on our present lifetime but also on many, many lifetimes of unsettled *kamma* accounts. On top of that, it also depends on the state of our mind at that moment. Moreover, the state of mind of the other being you do the *kamma* to also affects your *vipaka*. For example, when you make an offering to a murderer, or a criminal, or to an evil person, your merit is very small, but if you make an offering to a holy man, then your merit or blessings is great. Conversely, if you kill a holy man, then your *kammic* offence is very great. If you kill a mosquito, the *kamma* is not as bad, but still you are not encouraged to kill it. The working of *kamma-vipaka* is very complex and we may find it hard to understand.

Sometimes we see certain people whom we consider as evil, rough, stingy and offensive, but they are having a good, luxurious life. That could be due to their good *kamma* from past life supporting them. However they are now creating a lot of evil *kamma* which has not ripened yet. This could be due to the fact that people can change. For example, when a man is poor he is humble, industrious, faithful to his wife, frugal, etc. When he becomes rich after several years, he may become arrogant, vain, womanize, drink, gamble, etc. — a completely different personality. Similarly, a good person in a previous life, when reborn under favourable conditions, might become corrupted by his good fortune. Because of this we may find it hard to see fairness in this world. Sometimes we see that good people are not the ones who are happy, but many evil people are happy. The working of *kamma-vipaka* is very difficult to see unless we have the psychic power to look into the past.

ONLY WE CAN HELP OURSELVES

There is one very important discourse (A.N.5.43) where the Buddha said that there are certain things in the world that everybody wants but are very hard to obtain, namely, to be born beautiful, to have happiness, honour, a long life, and a good rebirth after death. The Buddha said that these things are not obtainable by prayers or vows, or even by thinking a lot about them everyday — for if they were, why are beings suffering here? We know that there are countless beings in the woeful planes of rebirth crying out for help in vain.

This is a very important point: if praying and making vows alone can bring us the things we want, then why is there suffering in the world? We mentioned earlier about the student trying to get ten As without studying, and who instead prays and makes vows, and goes from one deity to another deity. This student of course would never get his ten As.

So the Buddha said that we have to walk the path that brings us to what we want. This means that if we want long life, then we must not kill. If you do not kill, then you do not even have to pray because long life will come naturally. If you want to be born beautiful, be good-natured, not angry. If you want happiness, give happiness and you will deserve happiness.

Of course, it's natural for most people to pray when they are suffering, and sometimes when we pray, our prayers are answered — mainly because we have the supporting *kamma*. For example, a person might be very, very rich, and he suddenly gets cancer. He then goes all around the world to get the best specialist doctors but if his *kamma* is not supporting him, even the best doctors from America or Europe will not be able to cure him.

Another person might be very poor, and also have cancer, but if his *kamma* is supporting him, he will be cured even though he does not have the money to go to a specialist centre. Someone might recommend him some suitable herbs to take, or drink his own urine! So the right way to have our wishes fulfilled and have a happy life is to perform skilful *kamma*, avoid unskillful *kamma*, and without having to resort to prayers and vows, all the good effects of the skilful *kamma* will ripen and bring us happiness.

There is another important discourse (S.N. 42.6) where a certain village headman came to talk to the Buddha. The headman said to the Buddha that there is a type of Brahmins in the West that have a peculiar tradition. Besides the tradition of carrying water, bathing in the water to purify themselves and worshipping fire, when their relative passes away, they immediately take the corpse out of the house, and hold the corpse high up to the sky. They face the corpse towards heaven and shout the name of the deceased and direct him to go to heaven. They believe that because the corpse is facing heaven, the deceased can see heaven, and when they call out to his soul, the soul will naturally go up to heaven. Then the headman said that perhaps the Buddha (having psychic power) can bring it about that everyone after dying can be reborn in heaven. This is an interesting question because even in this modern age some people still believe that the Buddha can help us be reborn in heaven.

So the Buddha replied by asking the headman a question first. He said that suppose a man came to the edge of a deep lake, and held up a rock in both his hands, and threw it into the middle of the lake. Now as the rock was sinking into the water, all the people came together and shouted at the rock, and praised the rock, and asked the rock to float up to the surface, and float towards the shore. The Buddha asked the headman whether the rock would float up. The headman answered that it is not possible because the rock is heavy; naturally it would sink into the water. So the Buddha said that in the same way, suppose a man has done a lot of evil, he has killed, stolen, committed adultery, lied, etc. When he passed away (and his heavy *kamma* was pulling him down), people came together and shouted to him to go to heaven; is it possible that he would go there? The headman said that it is not possible because he had done so much evil, so like the stone, he would sink into a bad rebirth.

Then the Buddha said that suppose another man came to the edge of the deep lake. He took a cup of oil and threw the cup of oil into the middle of the lake. The cup would sink but the oil, being light, would float to the surface. As the oil was floating up to the surface, people came and shouted to the oil to sink into the water. Is it possible for the oil to sink? The headman said that it is not possible because oil is light, it will naturally float up. The Buddha then said that in the same way, suppose a person had done a lot of good, had not harmed living beings, and he passed away. If a lot of people were to come and shout, and curse him to go to hell, is it possible that he'll go to hell? The headman said that it is not possible because he is a good man. Naturally he will go up to heaven, being lifted by his good *kamma*.

So by answering these questions, the headman understood what the Buddha meant, that is, the Buddha cannot help us. Whether we rise, or sink, depends on our *kamma*. That is why Buddhism is unlike other religions in the sense that the Buddha does not say that by becoming a Buddhist, you are guaranteed a place in heaven. There is no favoritism. Whether you go to heaven, or elsewhere, depends on your own *kamma*. We cannot bribe heaven to open the door for us — this is fair.

In the Mahayana Sixth Patriarch Sutra, someone asked the Patriarch whether it is true that when people recite Amitabha Buddha's name, they can be reborn in the Western Pure Land. The Patriarch replied that the Pure Land is very near for those of superior wisdom but very far for those of inferior roots. He added, "The deluded person recites the Buddha's name seeking rebirth there, while the wise person purifies his own mind." From this it is obvious that our mind (or heart) is very important.

In the Buddha's teaching the world is the creation of consciousness or mind. A pure mind creates a happy world, an evil mind creates a woeful world. So purifying the mind is most important for rebirth into a happy world, not chanting or praying or making vows.

This is another important principle of *kamma* we should remember. No one can change the working of the natural law of *kamma*. All beings are subject to the law of *kamma-vipaka*. The Buddha explained the Truth or Reality of the natural laws of existence to us, but they exist all the time, whether we understand them or not.

KAMMA AND CONDITIONS

The result of *kamma* is different for different people (A.N. 3.99). Besides the factor of intention, it also depends on the person who does the *kamma* and the person the *kamma* is done to. For instance, a small evil deed done by a person who is undeveloped in moral conduct, mind and wisdom, i.e. one who constantly does evil *kamma*, can possibly bring him to hell. The same evil deed done by one developed in moral conduct, mind and wisdom, i.e. one who constantly does good *kamma*, is expiated in this very life and not a bit of it is seen hereafter.

To give a simile: suppose you are cooking at the back of your house, and a beggar comes to the front of your house to ask for money, and he sees nobody. So he walks into the front hall and he finds ten dollars or a hundred dollars on the table. He sees nobody around still, pockets the money, and walks out. Just at that time, you come out from the back and see the beggar walking away, and notice the money missing from the table.

Most likely you would shout, and try to catch the beggar, or phone the police to have the beggar arrested. Finally, the beggar ends up in jail.

However, suppose a very famous man, perhaps a well-known politician, pays a visit to your constituency, and seeing no one similarly enters your house. As before, you are at the back of the house, and come out just in time to see him walking away, and your money missing. Recognizing him, most probably you would not call the police since a lot of hassle can be expected from this powerful person. And he might get away scot-free.

As you can see from this, although two persons do the same *kamma*, the result of their actions can be different. Therefore it is important that we do a lot of good *kamma* — it will support us so that even when we do some evil deed, the consequence of the evil deed becomes minimized, just as for the powerful politician. On the other hand, those who have done a lot of evil *kamma* — one poor in blessings, just like the poor beggar — will suffer drastically the reverse effect.

OVERCOMING EVIL KAMMA

How do we overcome our past evil *kamma*? To overcome past evil *kamma*, the Buddha said that we have to do a lot of good deeds now. The Buddha gave a beautiful simile of salt and water (A.N. 3.99). During the time of the Buddha, there was no fine salt like the kind we have, but they had lumps of salt. So the Buddha said that suppose a man took a lump of salt and put it into a cup of water, stirred the water, and drank it. The water would definitely taste salty. However, if the person took the same lump of salt, and put it into the river, and stirred the river water, and drank it, it would not taste salty because of the large amount of water in the river.

The Buddha said that the water represents good *kamma* and the salt represents evil *kamma*. So a lot of good *kamma* dilutes the effect of the evil *kamma*. Therefore it is very important that we do a lot of good to overcome our past evil *kamma*. What is past, we cannot change; we can only take care of the present. To take care of the present, we have to do a lot of good (which includes avoiding evil, i.e. keeping the precepts).

All *kamma* that we do have the potential to ripen. However, not every *kamma* will ripen. The Buddha said that if every *kamma* has to ripen, then we cannot get out of samsara (round of rebirths). This is because our *kammic* account is so great due to our uncountable lifetimes of *kamma*.

A good example is Angulimala, the bandit who killed hundreds of people. He lived in the forest, and he was so strong, powerful and quick that he killed many people who passed through the forest. He had the habit of cutting the thumbs and fingers off the people whom he had killed, and make them into a garland that he wore around his neck, which was why he was called Angulimala, meaning ‘finger-garland wearer’. The Buddha knew that the king would be asked by the people to get an army to kill Angulimala because they were afraid to pass through that hill since many people were killed there. Wishing to save Angulimala the Buddha walked up to the hills alone to find him.

The bandit Angulimala saw the Buddha and thought that it would be easy to kill him. So he came behind the Buddha and ran after him with his knife and weapons. He wanted

to kill the Buddha, but although he ran very fast, he found that he could not get near the Buddha because the Buddha was using his psychic power. So Angulimala stopped and asked the Buddha to stop. The Buddha turned around and looked at Angulimala, and said to him, "I have stopped, Angulimala; you stop too." Angulimala thought to himself, "Why does this man say that I have not stopped, but he has stopped?" and he asked the Buddha to explain.

The Buddha said to him, "I have stopped harming all beings, but you have not stopped." The Buddha then taught him some *Dhamma* and after listening to it, Angulimala was changed completely. Angulimala threw away his weapons and asked the Buddha to allow him to become a monk. So the Buddha walked back to the monastery, and Angulimala followed him, and became a monk.

The king who was asked to kill Angulimala was scared although he had the army with him because of Angulimala's reputation as a fierce bandit. So the king went to see the Buddha in the forest monastery, probably hoping to get some blessings from the Buddha. The Buddha saw that the king was in full armour and surrounded by his army, and so the Buddha asked the king where he was going. The king said that he was asked by the people to catch or kill Angulimala, and he was on the way to do so.

The Buddha asked the king if he was to see Angulimala now as a monk, restrained and virtuous, how would he react? The king said he would pay homage to him and protect and support him like other monks. The Buddha then pointed out Angulimala and said, "Great king, that is Angulimala." When the king turned around and saw Angulimala, his hair stood up and he became terrified. The Buddha pacified the king saying, "Do not be afraid, great king, do not be afraid. There is nothing for you to fear from him." The king found it hard to believe, but he did because it was the Buddha who said so. Therefore, the king gave his respect and support to Angulimala.

Then Angulimala strove very hard and became an arahant. Just think of that! He did not have to be reborn in hell for many hundreds of thousands of years to repay his *kammic* debt! The merit of striving in the holy life and attaining *ariyahood* is so great as to free us from rebirth in the woeful planes. So we can see that of the three bases of meritorious actions, development of the mind (*bhavana*) surpasses moral conduct (*sila*) and charity (*dana*).

KAMMA AND REBIRTH

The Buddha said that most beings, after passing away, will be reborn into the woeful planes because of selfishness (A.N. 1.19.2). We want to protect our self-interest, we want to protect those whom we consider as part of ourselves — our family, people of the same race, people of the same religion, people of the same country — so we do a lot of evil deeds.

Of the three woeful planes of rebirth the hell realm is the worst; a little better is the animal realm, and slightly better than that is the ghost realm. The realm of human beings is above them. Above human beings are the deva realms, or the heavenly planes.

Possibly only two or three out of ten people would be reborn as human beings, or go to heaven. Perhaps seven or eight people will go to the woeful planes. Therefore, we have to be careful while living our lives. We should take the trouble to learn the

Dhamma because life is very short. On an average, we only live up to about seventy, and if you are now forty, that means you have only thirty more new years to celebrate. When another year goes by, you have twenty nine left, another year goes by and there is twenty eight left, and so on. Time is very short, so we have to make the most of it.

Is it possible to have the same rebirth as the ones that you love so that you can meet them again in the future? There was an old man and an old woman who came to see the Buddha. They told the Buddha that from the time they were married when they were teenagers, up to the present old age, they had loved each other so much that they never had even a thought of anger towards each other. So they said that they would like to meet again in the next life. They asked the Buddha if it is possible.

The Buddha said that if two persons have these four things in common, they can meet again in the future rebirth. Firstly, they must have the same faith, i.e. same religious beliefs. Secondly, they must have the same moral conduct. This means that their morality is equally good, or equally bad. The third common factor is generosity. They must be equally generous or selfish. The fourth one is wisdom, that is, they have to be equally wise or foolish. If these four things are the same, then they would meet again in a future rebirth.

The fact that we meet now is also due to *kamma-vipaka*. The Buddha said that it is very hard to find a being you meet that was not related to you in the past. We might have been father and child, or mother and child, etc.. There are billions of people in this world, but the number of people that we actually meet or know is not many. Therefore, these people are probably mostly people with whom we have affinity from the past.

Once a cousin of the Buddha by the name of Mahanama came to see the Buddha (S.N. 55.3.1). He told the Buddha that he was thinking that perhaps one day he might meet with a violent death. If he were to die a violent death, would he be reborn into a woeful plane of existence? The Buddha answered by telling him not to worry because for a long time he had practised in faith, moral conduct, (*Dhamma*) learning, generosity and wisdom, and because of that the mind soars aloft.

In other words if one has been practising the *Dhamma* and has lived one's life according to the *Dhamma*, then one's mind is inclined towards the *Dhamma*. Therefore, when one passes away, one's mind will bring one to a lofty rebirth. The Buddha is saying that our everyday mind is very important. If you are a good-natured person, then that is your everyday mind, that is your natural frequency. So when you pass away, you will go to a state where beings are also good natured and peaceful. However, if you are a person who is easily agitated, hot-tempered, angry everyday, and have a tendency towards violence, then that everyday mind of yours will bring you to a rebirth where beings are also hot-tempered and have a tendency towards violence, for example, the animal realm. Therefore, cultivating a wholesome mind everyday is very important. So it is good for us to learn and practise the *Dhamma* so that our minds are inclined towards the lofty (not the base or unwholesome) and that will bring us to a good rebirth.

Is it possible to help our relatives who have passed away? This was a question posed by a Brahmin to the Buddha (A.N. 10.177). The Buddha said it depends on where the relative has been reborn — only if he is reborn as a ghost can he be helped. Although the Buddha did not explain why, it would probably be because ghosts come back to their human relatives hoping to receive some help. They make their presence known in some way or they contact their relatives in the sleep (dream) state. So in the Theravada

tradition, Buddhists usually do charity on behalf of their deceased relative and transfer the merit to him. Offerings of food and clothing are usually made since these two items are what are probably needed most by a ghost.

WORLDLY MERIT AND SPIRITUAL MERIT

In China there was a very famous monk called Bodhidharma who was one of the earliest monks from India who went to China. The emperor of China heard of him and invited Bodhidharma to his palace. The emperor had done a lot of charity, for example, he had built monasteries for monks and nuns, and many orphanages, etc. Hence the emperor thought that he had a lot of merit. So when he met Bodhidharma, he told him that he had done a lot of good deeds, and asked him whether he had a lot of merit.

Bodhidharma, being a virtuous and straightforward person bluntly told the emperor that he had no merit. The emperor was very unhappy when he heard what Bodhidharma said, so he refused to talk to the monk any further. Bodhidharma then left the palace. What Bodhidharma was trying to say is that there is a difference between worldly merit and spiritual merit.

Worldly merit is what the Chinese called “foo ter”, and spiritual merit is “koong ter”. Worldly merit is blessings that leads to a good rebirth, like practising generosity and moral conduct. Spiritual merit is merit that brings you out of *samsara* (round of rebirths), like studying the *Dhamma*, practising meditation, letting go of attachments, etc.. Therefore, we have to differentiate worldly merit from spiritual merit. Doing a lot of worldly merit is good because it helps and supports us. However, if we want to get out of *samsara*, then we have to study the Buddha’s teachings, meditate, and let go of attachments.

CONCLUSION

The Buddha advised us to contemplate five things everyday. Firstly, “I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond ageing.” The second contemplation is “I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickening.” Thirdly, we contemplate “I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying.” The fourth contemplation is “All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.” Lastly, we contemplate that “I am the owner of my *kamma*, heir to my *kamma*, born of my *kamma*, related to my *kamma*, abide supported by my *kamma*; whatever *kamma* I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I shall be the heir.”

In the first three contemplations, we contemplate that we are growing old, will get sick, and eventually die. In the fourth contemplation, we contemplate that those that are beloved and dear to us (including our property), are going to change, and become separated from us. The fifth contemplation is contemplation that *kamma* is supporting us, and that we will inherit the result of *kamma*. We are the owners of our *kamma*, so we have to be careful about our *kamma*. These are good contemplations to make.

Sometimes when we have problems, for example, if we become sick, like having cancer, we would most likely go everywhere looking for a miraculous cure. However,

when we understand the *Dhamma*, we would make the effort to look for a cure, but we would not be unduly alarmed. Most people become alarmed when their time of death is near because they are not prepared for it. Understanding the *Dhamma* prepares us for death. We understand from the *Dhamma* that everything is impermanent; we know that because we are born, we have to die — only the unborn does not die. When we accept that fact, then when death comes, we can accept it calmly. If we do not accept it, we will suffer a lot.

Those people who go here and there, looking for a cure for their cancer, although they may find a miracle and are cured, how much longer can they live? Maybe another five or ten years, but death will come again another day. When they see the face of death, they will shake and tremble again. However, when we understand the *Dhamma*, then we are prepared for death when it comes, and we are able to accept it calmly because we have prepared ourselves for it, having lived our lives skillfully.

Human life is very important compared to other types of life in other realms because in the human realm we create a lot of *kamma*. This is because we use our thinking mind a lot. The word “man” or “manussa” probably comes from “mano” the thinking faculty. When we use our thinking mind to plan and carry out the plans with intention, we are then creating *kamma*. Therefore, as humans create a lot of *kamma*, this life is very important because our actions here determine our next few rebirths.

Furthermore, the human realm is the most conducive for us to strive to end our suffering and the continued round of rebirths. That is why only here can you find Buddha and Arahats (A.N. 10.63) and the *Sangha* of monks. Hence, it is of paramount importance that we live our human life as skillfully and fruitfully as we can so that we avoid unnecessary suffering, and eventually end all suffering.

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“Bhikkhus, suppose a gambler at the very first unlucky throw loses his child and his wife and all his property and furthermore goes into bondage himself, yet an unlucky throw such as that is negligible; it is a far more unlucky throw when a fool who misconducts himself in body, speech, and mind, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. This is the complete perfection of the fool’s grade....

...Bhikkhus, suppose a gambler at the very first lucky throw won a great fortune, yet a lucky throw such as that is negligible; it is a far more lucky throw, when a wise man who conducts himself well in body, speech, and mind, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world. This is the complete perfection of the wise man’s grade.....”

~ *Balapandita Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya 129)*