

What Kamma Is

Kamma is a Pali word meaning action. It is called Karma in Sanskrit. In its general sense Kamma means all good and bad actions. It covers all kinds of intentional actions whether mental, verbal or physical thoughts, words and deeds. In its ultimate sense Kamma means all moral and immoral volitions. The Buddha says:

“Mental volition, O Bhikkhus, is what I call action (Kamma). Having volition, one acts by body, speech and thought.”

—Anguttara Nikaya, Vol. III, Pg 415

Kamma is neither fatalism nor a doctrine of predetermination. The past influences the present but does not dominate it, for Kamma is past as well as present. The past and present influence the future. The past is a background against which life goes on from moment to moment. The future is yet to be. Only present moment exists and the responsibility of using the present moment for good or for ill lies with each individual.

Every action produces an effect and it is a cause first and effect afterwards. We therefore speak of Kamma as the law of cause and effect. Throwing a stone, for example, is an action. The stone strikes a glass window and breaks it. The breakage is the effect of the action of throwing, but it is not the end. The broken window is now the cause of further trouble. Some of one's money will have to go to replace it, and one is thus unable to save the money or to buy with it what one wants for some other purpose, and the effect upon one is a feeling of disappointment. This may make one irritable and if one is not careful, one may allow the irritability to become the cause of doing something else which is wrong and so on. There is no end to the result of action, no end to Kamma, so we should be very careful about our actions, so that their effect will be good. It is, therefore, necessary for us to do a good, helpful action which will return to us in good Kamma and make us strong enough to start a better Kamma.

Throw a stone into a pond and watch the effect. There is a splash and a number of little rings appear round the place where the stone strikes. See how the rings grow wider and wider till they become too wide and too tiny

for our eyes to follow. The little stone disturbs the water in the pond, but its work is not finished yet. When the tiny waves reach the edges of the pond, the water moves back till it pushes the stone that has disturbed it.

The effects of our actions come back to us just as the waves do to the stone, and as long as we do our action with evil intention the new waves of effect come back to beat upon us and disturb us. If we are kind and keep ourselves peaceful, the returning waves of trouble will grow weaker and weaker till they die down and our good Kamma will come back to us in blessings. If we sow a mango seed, for instance, a mango tree will come up and bear mangoes, and if we sow a chili seed, a chilli plant will grow and produce chillies. The Buddha says:

*“According to the seed that’s sown,
So is the fruit ye reap therefrom,
Doer of good will gather good,
Doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed, and thou shalt taste the
fruit thereof.”*

—Samyutta Nikaya, Vol. I, Pg 227

Everything that comes to us is right. When anything pleasant comes to us and makes us happy, we may be sure that our Kamma has

come to show us what we have done is right. When anything unpleasant comes to us, hurts us, or makes us unhappy, our Kamma has come to show us our mistake. We must never forget that Kamma is always just. It neither loves nor hates, neither rewards nor punishes. It is never angry, never pleased. It is simply the law of cause and effect.

Kamma knows nothing about us. Does fire know us when it burns us? No, it is the nature of fire to burn, to give out heat. If we use it properly it gives us light, cooks our food for us or burns anything we wish to get rid of, but if we use it wrongly it burns us and our property. Its work is to burn and our job is to use it in the right way. We are foolish if we grow angry and blame it when it burns us because we have made a mistake.

There are inequalities and manifold destinies for people in the world. One is, for example, inferior and another superior. One perishes in infancy and another at the age of eighty or a hundred. One is sick and infirm, and another strong and healthy. One is brought up in luxury and another in misery. One is born a millionaire, another a pauper. One is a genius and another an idiot.

What is the cause of the inequalities that exist in the world? Buddhists cannot believe that this variation is the result of blind chance. Science itself is indeed all against the theory of Chance. In the world of the scientist all works in accordance with the laws of cause and effect. Neither can Buddhists believe that these inequalities of the world are due to a God-Creator.

One of the three divergent views that prevailed at the time of the Buddha was:

“Whatsoever happiness or pain or neutral feeling the person experiences all that is due to the creation of a Supreme Deity.”

—Anguttara Nikaya, Vol. I, Pg 158

Commenting on this fatalistic view the Buddha said:

“So, then, owing to the creation of a Supreme Deity men will become murderers, thieves, unchaste, liars, slanderers, abusive, babblers, covetous, malicious, and perverse in view. Thus for those who fall back on the creation of a God as the essential reason, there is neither the desire to do, nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed.”

—ibid

Referring to the naked ascetics who practised self-mortification, the Buddha said:

“If, O Bhikkhus, beings experience pain and happiness as the result of God’s creation, then certainly these naked ascetics must have been created by a wicked God, since they are at present experiencing such terrible pain.”

—Devadaha Sutta, No 101

Majjhima Nikaya, Vol. II, Pg 222

According to Buddhism the inequalities that exist in the world are due, to some extent, to heredity and environment and to a greater extent, to a cause or causes (*Kamma*) which are not only present but proximate or remote past. Man himself is responsible for his own happiness and misery. He creates his own heaven and hell. He is master of his own destiny, child of his past and parent of his future.

The Laws of Cosmic Order

Although Buddhism teaches that Kamma is the chief cause of the inequalities in the world yet it does not teach fatalism or the doctrine of predestination, for it does not hold the view that everything is due to past actions. The law of cause and effect (*Kamma*) is only one of the twenty-four causes described in Buddhist philosophy, (See Compendium of Philosophy, P.191), or one of the five orders (*Niyamas*) which are laws in themselves and operate in the universe. They are:

1. *Utu Niyama*, physical inorganic order, e.g., seasonal phenomena of winds and rains. The inerring order of seasons, characteristic seasonal changes and events, causes of winds and rains, nature of heat, etc., belong to this group.
2. *Bija Niyama*, order or 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 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, produces 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 moon and stars.
4. *Dhamma Niyama*, order of the norm, e.g., the natural phenomena occurring at the advent of a Bodhisatta in his last birth. Gravitation and other similar laws of nature, the 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, telepathy, telesthesia, retrocognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-read-

ing, all psychic phenomena which are inexplicable to modern science are included in this class.

—Abhidhammavataara, Pg 54

These five orders embrace everything in the world and every mental or physical phenomenon could be explained by them. They being laws in themselves, require no lawgiver and Kamma as such is only one of them.

Classification of Kamma

Kamma is classified into four kinds according to the time at which results are produced. There is Kamma that ripens in the same lifetime, Kamma that ripens in the next life, and Kamma that ripens in successive births. These three types of Kamma are bound to produce results as a seed is to sprout. But for a seed to sprout, certain auxiliary causes such as soil, rain etc. are required. In the same way, for a Kamma to produce an effect, several auxiliary causes such as circumstances, surroundings, etc., are required. It sometimes happens that for want of such auxiliary causes Kamma does not produce any result. Such Kamma is called Ahosi-Kamma or “Kamma that is ineffective”.

Kamma is also classified into another four kinds according to its particular function. There is Regenerative (*Janaka*) Kamma which conditions the future birth; Supportive (*Upatthambhaka*) Kamma which assists or maintains the

result of already-existing Kamma, Counteractive (*Upapilaka*) Kamma which suppresses or modifies the result of the reproductive Kamma, and Destructive (*Upaghataka*) Kamma which destroys the force of existing Kamma and substitutes its own resultants.

There is another classification according to the priority of results. There is Serious or Weighty (*Garuka*) Kamma which produces its resultants in the present life or in the next. On the moral side of this Kamma the highly refined mental states called Jhanas or Absorptions are weighty because they produce resultants more speedily than the ordinary unrefined mental states. On the opposite side, the five kinds of immediately effective serious crimes are weighty. These crimes are: matricide, patricide, the murder of an *Arahanta* (Holy One or perfect saint), the wounding of a Buddha and the creation of a schism in the Sangha.

Death-proximate (*Asanna*) Kamma is the action which one does at the moment before death either physically or mentally — mentally by thinking of one's own previous good or bad actions or having good or bad thoughts. It is this Kamma which, if there is no weighty Kamma, determines the conditions of the next birth.

Habitual (*Acinna*) Kamma is the action which one constantly does. This Kamma, in the absence of death-proximate Kamma, produces and determines the next birth.

Reserved (*Katatta*) Kamma is the last in the priority of results. This is the unexpended Kamma of a particular being and it conditions the next birth if there is no habitual Kamma to operate.

A further classification of Kamma is according to the place in which the results are produced, namely:-

1. Immoral Kamma which produces its effect in the plane of misery.
2. Moral Kamma which produces its effect in the plane of the world of desires.
3. Moral Kamma which produces its effect in the plane of form.
4. Moral Kamma which produces its effect in the plane of the formless.

1. Immoral Kamma is rooted in greed (*Lobha*) anger (*Dosa*) and delusion (*Moha*).

There are ten immoral actions (Kamma) — namely killing, stealing, unchastity (these three are caused by deed); lying, slandering, harsh speech, frivolous talk (these four are caused by

speech); covetousness, ill-will and false view (these three are caused by mind).

Of these ten, killing means the destruction of any living being including animals of all kinds. To complete this offence of killing, five conditions are necessary, viz: a being, knowing that it is a being, intention of killing, effort, and consequent death.

The evil effects of killing are: short life, illness, constant grief caused by separation from the loved, and constant fear.

To complete the offence of stealing, five conditions are necessary, viz: the object concerned is the property of another, knowing that it is so, intention of stealing, effort, and consequent removal. The effects of stealing are: poverty, wretchedness, unfulfilled desires, and dependent livelihood.

To complete the offence of unchastity (sexual misconduct), four conditions are necessary, viz: the mind to enjoy the forbidden object, the attempt to enjoy, devices to obtain, and possession. The effect of unchastity are: having many enemies, getting undesirable wives, birth as a woman or as an eunuch.

To complete the offence of lying, four conditions are necessary, viz: untruth, intention to

deceive, effort, and communication of the matter to others. The effects of lying are: being tormented by abusive speech, being subject to vilification, losing one's credibility, and stinking mouth.

To complete the offence of slandering, four conditions are necessary, viz: division of persons, intention to separate them, effort, and communication. The effect of slandering is the dissolution of friendship without any sufficient cause.

To complete the offence of harsh speech, three conditions are necessary, viz: someone to be abused, angry thought, and using abusive speech. The effects of harsh speech are: being detested by others although blameless, and harsh voice.

To complete the offence of frivolous talk, two conditions are necessary, viz: the inclination towards frivolous talks, and its narration. The effects of frivolous talk are: disorderliness of the bodily organs and unacceptable speech.

To complete the offence of covetousness (*Abhijjha*), two conditions are necessary, viz: another's property and strong desire for it, saying: "*Would this property be mine*". The effect of covetousness is unfulfilment of one's wishes.

To complete the offence of ill-will (*Vyapada*) two conditions are necessary, viz: another being and the intention of doing harm. The effects of ill-will are: ugliness, various diseases and detestable nature.

False view (*Micchadittbi*) means seeing things wrongly without understanding what they truly are. To complete this false view, two conditions are necessary, viz: perverted manner in which an object is viewed, and the misunderstanding of it according to that view. The effects of false views are: base attachment, lack of wisdom, dull wit, chronic diseases and blameworthy ideas.

—Expositor, Pt.1, Pg 12B

2. Good Kamma which produces its effect in the plane of desires:-

There are ten moral actions — namely generosity (*Dana*), morality (*Sila*), meditation (*Bhavana*), reverence (*Apacayana*), service (*Veyyavacca*), transference of merit (*Pattidana*), rejoicing in others' merit (*Pattanumodana*), hearing the doctrine (*Dhammasavana*), expounding the doctrine (*Dhammadesana*), and forming correct views (*Ditthijukamma*).

Generosity yields wealth. Morality causes one to be born in noble families in states of

happiness. Meditation gives birth in form and formless planes and helps to gain Higher Knowledge and Emancipation.

Reverence is the cause of noble parentage. Service is the cause of large retinue. Transference of merit causes one to be able to give in abundance in future birth. Rejoicing in others' merit is productive of joy wherever one is born. Both hearing and expounding the Doctrine are conducive to wisdom.

3. Good Kamma which produces its effect in the planes of form. It is of five types which are purely mental, and done in the process of meditation, viz:-

- i. The first stage of Jhana or absorption which has five constituents: initial application, sustained application, rapture, happiness and one-pointedness of mind.
- ii. The second stage of Jhana which occurs together with sustained application, rapture, happiness and one-pointedness of mind.
- iii. The third stage of Jhana which occurs together with rapture, happiness and one-pointedness of mind.
- iv. The fourth stage of Jhana which occurs together with happiness and one-pointedness of mind.

- v. The fifth stage of Jhana which occurs together with equanimity and one-pointedness of mind.

4. Good Kamma which produces its effect in the formless planes. It is of four types which are also purely mental and done in the process of meditation, viz:

- i. Moral consciousness dwelling in the infinity of space.
- ii. Moral consciousness dwelling in the infinity of consciousness.
- iii. Moral consciousness dwelling on nothingness.
- iv. Moral consciousness wherein perception is so extremely subtle that it cannot be said whether it is or is not.

Free Will

Kamma, as has been stated above, is not fate, is not irrevocable destiny. Nor is one bound to reap all that one has sown in just proportion. The actions (Kamma) of men are generally not absolutely irrevocable; and only a few of them are so. If, for example, one fires off a bullet out of a rifle, one cannot call it back or turn it aside from its mark. But, if instead of a lead or iron ball through the air, it is an ivory ball on a smooth green board that one sets moving with a billiard cue, one can send after it and at it, another ball in the same way, and change its course.

Not only that, if one is quick enough, and one has not given it too great an impetus, one might even get round to the other side of the billiard table, and send against it a ball which would meet it straight in the line of its course and bring it to a stop on the spot. With one's later action with the cue, one modifies, or even

in favourable circumstances, entirely neutralizes one's earlier action.

It is much the same way that Kamma operates in the broad stream of general life. There too one's action (*Kamma*) of a later day may modify the effects of one's action (*Kamma*) of a former day. If this were not so, what possibility would there ever be of a man's getting free from all Kamma for ever. It would be perpetually self-continuing energy that could never come to an end.

Man has, therefore, a certain amount of free will and there is almost every possibility to mould his life or to modify his actions. Even a most vicious person can by his own free will and effort become the most virtuous person. One may at any moment change for the better or for the worse. But everything in the world including man himself is dependent on conditions and without conditions nothing whatsoever can arise or enter into existence.

Man therefore has only a certain amount of free will and not absolute free will. According to Buddhist philosophy, everything, mental or physical, arises in accordance with the laws and conditions. If it were not so, there would reign chaos and blind chance. Such a thing, however, is impossible, and if it would be otherwise, all

laws of nature which modern science has discovered would be powerless.

The real, essential nature of action (*Kamma*) of man is mental. When a given thought has arisen in one's mind a number of times, there is a definite tendency to recurrence of that thought. When a given act has been performed a number of times, there is a definite tendency to the repetition of the act. Thus, each act, mental or physical, tends to constantly produce its like, and be in turn produced. If a man thinks a good thought, speaks a good word, does a good deed, the effect upon him is to increase the tendencies to goodness present in him, is to make him a better man.

If, on the contrary, he does a bad deed in thought, in speech or in action, he has strengthened in himself his bad tendencies, he has made himself a worse man. Having become a worse man, he will gravitate to the company of worse men in the future, and incur all the unhappiness of varying kinds that attends life in such company. On the other hand, the man of a character that is continually growing better, will naturally tend to the companionship of the good, and enjoy all the pleasantness and comforts and freedom from the ruder shocks of human life which such society connotes.

In the case of a cultured man, even the effect of a greater evil may be minimised while the lesser evil of an uncultured man may produce its effect to the maximum according to the favourable and unfavourable conditions. The Buddha says:

“Here, O Bhikkhus, a certain person is not disciplined in body, is not disciplined in morality, is not disciplined in mind, is not disciplined in wisdom, is with little good and less virtue, and lives painfully in consequence of trifles. Even a trivial evil act committed by such a person will lead him to a state of misery.”

“Here, O Bhikkhus, a certain person is disciplined in body, is disciplined in morality, is disciplined in mind, is disciplined in wisdom, is with much good, is a great being, and lives without limitation. A similar evil act committed by such a person expiates in this life itself and not even a small effect manifests itself (after death) to say nothing of a great one.”

“It is as if, O Bhikkhus, a man were to put a lump of salt into a small cup of water. What do you think, O Bhikkhus? Would now the small amount of water in this cup become

saltish and undrinkable?” “Yes, Lord”; “And why?” “Because, Lord, there was very little water in the cup, and so it becomes saltish and undrinkable by this lump of salt.”

“Suppose, O Bhikkhus, a man were to put a lump of salt into the river Ganges. What do you think, O Bhikkhus? Would now the river Ganges become saltish and undrinkable by the lump of salt?”

“Nay, indeed, Lord”, “And why not?” “Because, Lord, the mass of water in the river Ganges is great, and so it would not become saltish and undrinkable.”

“In exactly the same way, O Bhikkhus, we may have the case of a person who does some slight evil deed which brings him to a state of misery; or again, O Bhikkhus, we may have the case of another person who does the same trivial misdeed, and expiates it in the present life. Not even a small effect manifests itself (after death), to say nothing of a great one.”

“We may have, O Bhikkhus, the case of a person who is cast into a prison for a half penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence; or again,

O Bhikkhus, we may have the case of a person who is not cast into prison for a half penny, for a penny or for a hundred pence.”

“Who, O Bhikkhus, is cast into prison for half penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence? Whenever, O Bhikkhus, anyone is poor, needy and indigent, he, O Bhikkhus, is cast into prison for a half penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence.”

“Who, O Bhikkhus, is not cast into prison for a half penny, for a penny or for a hundred pence? Whenever, O Bhikkhus, anyone is rich, wealthy and affluent, he, O Bhikkhus, is not cast into prison for a half penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence.”

“In exactly the same way, O Bhikkhus, we may have the case of a person who does some slight evil deed which brings him into a state of misery; or again, O Bhikkhus, we may have the case of another person who does the same trivial deed, and expiates it in the present life. Not even a small effect manifests itself (after death) to say nothing of a great one.”

—Anguttara Nikaya, Vol. I, Pg 249.

Lessons Taught by Kamma

The more we understand the law of Kamma the more we see how careful we must be of our acts, words and thoughts, and how responsible we are to our fellow beings. Living in the light of this knowledge, we learn certain lessons from the doctrine of Kamma.

1. PATIENCE

Knowing that the Law is our great helper if we live by it, and that no harm can come to us if we work with it, knowing also it blesses us just at the right time, we learn the grand lesson of patience, not to get excited, and that impatience is a check to progress. In suffering, we know that we are paying a debt, and we learn, if we are wise, not to create more suffering for the future. In rejoicing, we are thankful for its sweetness, and learn, if we are wise, to be still

better. Patience brings forth peace, success, happiness and security.

2. CONFIDENCE

The law being just, perfect, it is not possible for an understanding person to be uneasy about it. If we are uneasy and have no confidence, it shows clearly that we have not grasped the reality of the law. We are really quite safe beneath its wings, and there is nothing to fear in all the wide universe except our own misdeeds. The Law makes man stand on his own feet and rouses his self-confidence.

Confidence strengthens, or rather, deepens our peace and happiness and make us comfortable, courageous; wherever we go the Law is our protector.

3. SELF-RELIANCE

As we in the past have caused ourselves to be what we now are, so by what we do now will our future be determined. A knowledge of this fact and that the glory of the future is limitless, gives us great self-reliance, and takes away that tendency to appeal for external help, which is really no help at all. *"Purity and impurity belong to oneself, no one can purify another"* says the Buddha.

4. RESTRAINT

Naturally, if we realise that the evil we do will return to strike us, we shall be very careful lest we do or say or think something that is not good, pure and true. Knowledge of Kamma will restrain us from wrongdoing for others' sakes as well as for our own.

5. POWER

The more we make the doctrine of Kamma a part of our lives, the more power we gain, not only to direct our future, but to help our fellow beings more effectively. The practice of good Kamma, when fully developed, will enable us to overcome evil and limitations, and destroy all the fetters that keep us from our goal, Nibbana.