

## THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT KAMMA

### Three aspects of Kamma

**Kamma as action and consequences**—Here we will consider that we are heirs of our actions through body speech and mind. We will explore the premier sutta on wholesome and unwholesome actions. We will discuss and the gradual process of discovering the truth of the law of kamma for ourselves and learning how to work skillfully with this law. We will also look at two suttas that classify kamma into four groups.

#### **Sutta:**

- **Five Contemplations, A 5:57**
- ***Dvedhavitakka Sutta*, Two Kinds of Thought, M 19**
- ***Kukkaravatika Sutta*, The Dog-duty Ascetic, M 57**
- ***Mahakammavibhanga Sutta*, The Great Exposition of Kamma or the Greater Analysis of Action, M 136**

**Kamma and rebirth** – Here we will look at a number of suttas concerned with the question of kamma and rebirth . . . that is, that certain behaviors will bear certain fruits; that actions have consequences which are not only felt in this lifetime, but also in future lives; that we cannot know what any given condition is the fruit of; and that kamma is not the only law operating.

#### **Suttas:**

- ***Culakarmavibhanga Sutta*, The Shorter Exposition of Action, M 135**
- ***Vipaka Sutta*, Results, A 8.40**
- **Five Desirable Things, AN 5.43**
- ***Acintita Sutta*, Imponderable, A 4.77**
- **Is Everything Due to Karma? from *A Manual of Buddhism* by Narada**
- ***Mahakarmavibhanga Sutta*, The Greater Exposition of Action, M 136**

**Kamma and Intention** – Here we will explore the Buddha's teaching on *cetana* or intention. This is the driving mechanism of *kamma*. It is directly linked with what we are experiencing in the present moment and it also has bearing on what we will do and experience in the future. Yet it is very subtle, rarely conscious, and not under the control of self. If we wish to manage the process of waking up, we need to understand intention and how it operates.

- **Intention Conditions Consciousness, S 12:40**

## (1) Kamma as action and consequences.

### Five Contemplations, A 5:57

There are five facts which ought to be often contemplated by everyone—whether man or woman, householder or one gone forth as a monk or nun. What five?

1. I am of the nature to age. I have not gone beyond aging.
2. I am of the nature to sicken. I have not gone beyond sickness.
3. I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond dying.
4. All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.
5. 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 will be the heir.

Thus, we should frequently recollect.

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***Dvedhavitakka Sutta*, Two Kinds of Thought, M 19** – Here the Buddha clearly states that when the mind is not filled with sensual desire, ill-will and cruelty, it inclines towards renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty.

Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: ‘Suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes.’ Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty, and I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty.

1. As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of sensual desire [...ill will...cruelty...] arose in me. I understood thus:

- ‘This thought of sensual desire [etc.] has arisen in me.
- This leads to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, and to the affliction of both;
- it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from *nibbāna*.’

When I considered...[in this way]...it subsided in me. Whenever a thought of sensual desire [...ill will...cruelty...] arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it.

Bhikkhus, **whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.** If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire [...ill will...cruelty...], he has abandoned the thought of renunciation [...non-ill will...non-cruelty...] to

cultivate the thought of sensual desire [...ill will...cruelty... ], and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire [...ill will...cruelty...].

Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined, or blamed [if he let them stray into the crops]. So too I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation, and defilement, and in wholesome states the blessing of renunciation, the aspect of cleansing.

2. As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of renunciation [...non-ill will...non-cruelty...] arose in me. I understood thus:

- ‘This thought of renunciation [etc.] has arisen in me.
- This does not lead to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, or to the affliction of both; it aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, and leads to nibbāna.’
- If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a night and a day, I see nothing to fear from it. But with excessive thinking and pondering I might tire my body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes disturbed, and when the mind is disturbed, it is far from concentration.’

So I steadied my mind internally, quieted it, brought it to singleness, and concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind should not be disturbed.

Bhikkhus, **whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.** If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of renunciation [...non-ill will...non-cruelty...], he has abandoned the thought of sensual desire [...ill will...cruelty...] to cultivate the thought of renunciation [...non-ill will...non-cruelty... ], and then his mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation [...non-ill will...non-cruelty].

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when all the crops have been brought inside the villages, a cowherd would guard his cows while staying at the root of a tree or out in the open, since he needs only to be mindful that the cows are there; so too, there was need for me only to be mindful that those states were there.

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***Kukkaravatika Sutta, The Dog-duty Ascetic, M 57.8-12*** – Here the Buddha describes four kinds of kamma. Dark (evil) kamma does not give a bright (happy) result, nor does bright (beneficial) kamma lead to dark (miserable) result. Kamma can be mixed, where an action is done with a variety of motives, some good, some evil. And that kind of kamma also exists which gives up attachment to and interest in the other three and so leads beyond the range of kamma.

8. "Punna, there are four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after realization myself with direct knowledge. What are the four? There is dark kamma with dark ripening, there is bright kamma with bright ripening, there is dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright ripening, and there is kamma that is not dark and not bright with neither-dark-nor-bright ripening that conduces to the exhaustion of kamma.

9. "What is dark kamma with dark ripening? Here someone produces a (kammic) bodily process (bound up) with affliction, he produces a (kammic) verbal process (bound up) with affliction, he produces a (kammic) mental process (bound up) with affliction. By so doing, he reappears in a world with affliction. When that happens, afflicting contacts touch him. Being touched by these, he feels afflicting feelings entirely painful as in the case of beings in hell. Thus a being's reappearance is due to a being: he reappears owing to the kammias he has performed. When he has reappeared, contacts touch him. Thus I say are beings heirs of their kammias. This is called dark kamma with dark ripening.

10. "And what is bright kamma with bright ripening? Here someone produces a (kammic) bodily process not (bound up) with affliction, he produces a (kammic) verbal process not (bound up) with affliction, he produces a (kammic) mental process not (bound up) with affliction. By doing so, he reappears in a world without affliction. When that happens, unafflicting contacts touch him. Being touched by these, he feels unafflicting feelings entirely pleasant as in the case of the Subhakinha, the gods of Refulgent Glory. Thus a being's reappearance is due to a being: he reappears owing to the kammias he has performed. When he has reappeared, contacts touch him. Thus I say are beings heirs of their kammias. This is called bright kamma with bright ripening.

11. "What is dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright ripening? Here someone produces a (kammic) bodily process both (bound up) with affliction and not (bound up) with affliction... verbal process... mental process both (bound up) with affliction and not (bound up) with affliction. By doing so, he reappears in a world both with and without affliction. When that happens, both afflicting and unafflicting contacts touch him. Being touched by these, he feels afflicting and unafflicting feelings with mingled pleasure and pain as in the case of human beings and some gods and some inhabitants of the states of deprivation. Thus a being's reappearance is due to a being: he reappears owing to the kammias he has performed. When he has reappeared, contacts touch him. Thus I say are beings heirs of their kammias. This is called dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright ripening.

12. "What is neither-dark-nor-bright kamma with neither-dark-nor-bright ripening that leads to the exhaustion of kamma? As to these (three kinds of kamma), any volition in abandoning the kind of kamma that is dark with dark ripening, any volition in abandoning the kind of kamma that is bright with bright ripening, and any volition in abandoning the kind of kamma that is dark-and-bright with dark-and-bright ripening: this is called neither-dark-nor-bright kamma with neither-dark-nor-bright ripening.

"These are the four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after realization myself with direct knowledge."

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***Mahakammavibhanga Sutta, The Great Exposition of Kamma or the Greater Analysis of Action, M 136*** – The Buddha again links actions with consequences. He links rebirth in various destinations with keeping/not keeping the precepts and with wrong/right view. Buddha clearly states that when the mind is not filled with sensual desire, ill-will and cruelty, it inclines towards renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty.

There are four kinds of persons to be found existing in the world. What four?

1. Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips; he is covetous, has a mind of ill will, and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.

As to this person... either earlier he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or later he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook wrong view. Because of that, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. And since he has here killed living beings...and held wrong view, he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

2. Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips; he is covetous, has a mind of ill will, and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.

As to this person... either earlier he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or later he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook right view. Because of that, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world. But since he has here killed living beings...and held wrong view, he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

3. Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sensual pleasures, from false speech, from malicious speech, from harsh speech, from gossip; he is not covetous, his mind is without ill will, and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.

As to this person... either earlier he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or later he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook right view. Because of that, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world. And since he has here abstained from killing living beings...and held right view, he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

4. Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sensual pleasures, from false speech, from malicious speech, from harsh speech, from gossip; he is not covetous, his mind is without ill will, and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.

As to this person... either earlier he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or later he did an evil action to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook wrong view. Because of that, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. But since he has here abstained from killing living beings...and held right view, he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.

Thus:

- there is action that is incapable of good result and appears incapable;
  - there is action that is incapable of good result and appears capable;
  - there is action that is capable of good result and appears capable;
  - and there is action that is capable of good result and appears incapable.
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## (2) Kamma and rebirth

**We can know that certain behaviors will bear certain fruits.**

In the ***Culakarmavibhanga Sutta*, The Shorter Exposition of Action**, M 135 — The Buddha explains that it is due to their actions that beings experience fortune and misfortune. The sutta reveals the karmic fruits of unskillful actions:

- killing living being (rebirth in states of deprivation or reborn into a short life as a human);
- inflicting bodily harm (rebirth in states of deprivation or reborn into a sickly life as a human);
- anger and irritation, hostility and resentment and bitterness (rebirth in states of deprivation or reborn as an ugly human being);
- envy, resentment, begrudging attitudes (rebirth in states of deprivation or reborn as a human being with no influence);
- stingy as regard the giving of gifts (rebirth in states of deprivation or poor life as a human);
- obstinacy and arrogance (rebirth in states of deprivation or low-born life as a human);
- lack of interest in Dhamma (rebirth in states of deprivation or life as a stupid human).

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In the ***Vipaka Sutta*, Results**, A 8.40, the Buddha offers a similar teaching outlining very specific outcomes for actions:

- "**Taking of life** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from the taking of life is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to a short life span.
- "**Stealing** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from stealing is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to the loss of one's wealth.
- "**Illicit sexual behavior** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from illicit sexual behavior is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to rivalry and revenge.
- "**Telling falsehoods** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from

telling falsehoods is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to being falsely accused.

- "**Divisive tale-bearing** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from divisive tale-bearing is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to the breaking of one's friendships.
- "**Harsh speech** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from harsh speech is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to unappealing sounds.
- "**Frivolous chattering** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from frivolous chattering is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to words that aren't worth taking to heart.
- "The **drinking of fermented and distilled liquors** — when indulged in, developed, and pursued — is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts. The slightest of all the results coming from drinking fermented and distilled liquors is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to mental derangement."

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The teaching on fruits or results also includes skillful or happy results – See **Five Desirable Things**, A 5.43.

“There are, O householder, five things that are wished for, loved and agreeable yet rarely gained in the world. What five? – long life, beauty, happiness, fame, and rebirth in heaven. But of those five things, householder, I do not teach that they are to be obtained by prayer or by vows. If one could obtain them by prayer or vows, who would not obtain them?

“For a noble disciple, householder, who wishes to have long life, (beauty, happiness, fame, and rebirth in heaven), it is not befitting that he should pray for them or take delight in so doing. He should rather follow a path of life that is conducive to longevity, (beauty, happiness, fame, and rebirth in heaven). By following such a path he will obtain, be it divine or human.”

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**We cannot know what any given experience is the fruit of.**

In the **Acintita Sutta, Imponderable** A 4.77, the Buddha says that we cannot know the results of karma.

"These **four imponderables** are not to be speculated about. Whoever speculates about them would go mad and experience vexation. Which four?

1. The Buddha-range of the Buddhas [i.e., the range of powers a Buddha develops as a result of becoming a Buddha]...
2. The jhana-range of one absorbed in jhana [i.e., the range of powers that one may obtain while absorbed in jhana]...
3. The results of karma...
4. Speculation about [the first moment, purpose, etc., of] the cosmos is an imponderable that is not to be speculated about.

Whoever speculates about these things would go mad and experience vexation."

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### There are other factors to consider.

In one of the commentaries (called **Points of Controversy**) we read that not everything is due to *karma*. (See: **Is Everything Due to Karma?** from **A Manual of Buddhism** by Narada.) According to Buddhism, there are five orders or processes – *niyamas* – that operate in physical and mental realms. Every mental or physical phenomenon can be explained by these all-embracing five orders or processes, which are laws in themselves. All are subject to causes and are interdependent; they are called the laws of nature. **Niyama** means fixed determinant or way.

1. **Utu Niyama** – physical inorganic order; for example, the seasonal phenomena of winds and rains, the unerring order of seasons, characteristic seasonal changes and events, the causes of wind and rains, the nature of heat, the way flowers bloom, the way soil and nutrients make things grow.
2. **Bija Niyama** – physical organic order; the order of germs and seeds; for example, rice producing from rice (as the seed, so the fruit), sugar taste resulting from sugar cane or honey, the peculiar characteristics of certain fruits. The scientific theory of cells and genes and the physical similarity of twins, that is, the natural law of heredity, may be ascribed to this order.
3. **Karma Niyama** – order of act and result; the natural law pertaining to human behavior; the process of generation of action and their results; for example, desirable and undesirable acts produce corresponding results. As surely as water seeks its own level, so does *karma*, given the opportunity, produce its inevitable result – not in the form of 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. **Citta Niyama** – order of mind or psychic law; the natural law pertaining to the workings of the mind; for example, the process of cognition of sense objects and the natural reaction to them; processes of consciousness, arising and perishing of consciousness, constituents of consciousness, power of mind, etc. Telepathy,

telesthesia, retro-cognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-reading – all psychic phenomena which are inexplicable to modern science are included in this class.

5. ***Dhamma Niyama*** – order of the norm; the natural law governing the relationship and interdependence of all things (that is, all things arise and pass away, are subject to change, are unsatisfactory, and not self). *Dhamma Niyama* includes the natural phenomena occurring at the advent of a Bodhisatta in his last birth. Gravitation and other similar laws of nature.

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### **Buddha's teaching on kamma is strongly connected with the present, the future, and with rebirth.**

See the ***Mahakarmavibhanga Sutta***, **The Greater Exposition of Action**, M 136 wherein the Buddha expounds on the question of consequences for skillful and unskillful actions. He cites varying views by recluses and brahmins as follows:

- when recluses and brahmins say that some people live good/evil lives and are reborn into heavenly states, therefore there are results for good/bad conduct, he agrees with this
  - but when they say that upon dissolution of the body after death, everyone who commits skillful/unskillful actions will reappear in happy/woeful states, he does not agree
  - nor does he agree that there are no moral consequences for skillful/unskillful action
  - consequences, he says, may be felt here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence.
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### (3) Kamma and Intention

**Intention Conditions Consciousness, S 12:40** – Here the Buddha explain the link between intention and consciousness.

What one intends, and what one plans,  
and whatever one has a tendency towards:  
this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness.

- When there is a basis, there is a support for the establishing of consciousness.
- When consciousness is established and has come to growth, there is inclination.
- When there is inclination, there is coming and going.
- When there is coming and going, there is passing away and being reborn.
- When there is passing away and being reborn, future birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be.

Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

If one does not intend, and one does not plan,  
but one still has a tendency towards something,  
this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness...

But when one does not intend, and one does not plan,  
and one does not have a tendency towards anything,  
no basis exists for the maintenance of consciousness.

- When there is no basis, there is no support for the establishing of consciousness.
- When consciousness is unestablished and does not come to growth, there is no inclination.
- When there is no inclination, there is no coming and going.
- When there is no coming and going, there is no passing away and being reborn.
- When there is no passing away and being reborn, future birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease.

Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.

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