

Kamma and Its Fruit

I.

Most writings on the doctrine of kamma emphasize the strict lawfulness governing kammic action, ensuring a close correspondence between our deeds and their fruits. While this emphasis is perfectly in place, there is another side to the working of kamma — a side rarely noted, but highly important. This is the modifiability of kamma, the fact that the lawfulness which governs kamma does not operate with mechanical rigidity but allows for a considerably wide range of modifications in the ripening of the fruit.

If kammic action were always to bear fruits of invariably the same magnitude, and if modification or annulment of kamma-result were excluded, liberation from the samsaric cycle of suffering would be impossible; for an inexhaustible past would ever throw up new obstructive results of unwholesome kamma. Hence the Buddha said:

"If one says that in whatever way a person performs a kammic action, in that very same way he will experience the result — in that case there will be no (possibility for a) religious life and no opportunity would appear for the complete ending of suffering.

"But if one says that a person who performs a kammic action (with a result) that is variably experienceable, will reap its results accordingly — in that case there will be (a possibility for) a religious life and an opportunity for making a complete end of suffering."

— AN 3.110

Like any physical event, the mental process constituting a kammic action never exists in isolation but in a field, and thus its efficacy in producing a result depends not only on its own potential, but also upon the variable factors of its field, which can modify it in numerous ways. We see, for example, that a particular kamma, either good or bad, may sometimes have its result strengthened by supportive kamma, weakened by counteractive kamma, or even annulled by destructive kamma. The occurrence of the result can also be delayed if the conjunction of outer circumstances required for its ripening is not complete; and that delay may again give a chance for counteractive or destructive kamma to operate.

It is, however, not only these extraneous conditions which can cause modification. The ripening also reflects the kamma's "internal field" or internal conditions — that is, the total qualitative structure of the mind from which the action issues. To one rich in moral or spiritual qualities, a single offense may not entail the weighty results that the same offence will have for one who is poor in such protective virtues. Also, analogously to human law, a first offender's punishment will be milder than that of a re-convicted criminal.

Of this type of modified reaction the Buddha speaks in the continuation of the discourse quoted above:

"Now take the case when a minor evil deed has been committed by a certain person and it takes him to hell. But if the same minor offense is committed by another person, its result might be experienced during his lifetime and not even the least (residue of a reaction) will appear (in the future), not to speak about a major (reaction).

"Now what is the kind of person whom a minor offense takes to hell? It is one who has not cultivated (restraint of) the body, not cultivated virtue and thought, nor has he developed any wisdom; he is narrow-minded, of low character and even for trifling things he suffers. It is such a person whom even a minor offense may take to hell.

"And what is the person by whom the result of the same small offense will be experienced in his lifetime, without the least (future residue)? He is one who has cultivated (restraint of) the body, who has cultivated virtue and thought and who has developed wisdom; he is not limited by (vices), is a great character and he lives unbounded (by evil). It is such a person who experiences the result of the same small offense during his lifetime, without the least future residue.

"Now suppose a man throws a lump of salt into a small cup of water. What do you think, monks: would that small quantity of water in the cup become salty and undrinkable through that lump of salt?" — "It would, Lord." — "And why so?" — "The water in the cup is so little that a lump of salt can make it salty and undrinkable." — "But suppose, monks, that lump of salt is thrown into the river Ganges. Would it make the river Ganges salty and undrinkable?" — "Certainly not, Lord." — "And why not?" — "Great, Lord, is the mass of water in the Ganges. It will not become salty and undrinkable by a lump of salt."

"Further, O monks, suppose a person has to go to jail for a matter of a halfpenny, a penny or a hundred pence, and another man does not have to go to jail on that account.

"Now what is the kind of person that has to go to jail for a matter of a halfpenny, a penny or a hundred pence? It is one who is poor, without means or property. But he who is rich, a man of means and property, does not have to go to jail for such a matter."

— AN 3.110

Hence we must say that it is an individual's accumulation of good or evil kamma and also his dominating character traits, good or evil, which affect the kammic result. They determine the greater or lesser weight of the result and may even spell the difference between whether or not it occurs at all.

But even this does not exhaust the existing possibilities of modifications in the weight of kammic reaction. A glance into the life histories of people we know may well show us a person of good and blameless character, living in secure circumstances; yet a single mistake, perhaps even a minor one, suffices to ruin his entire life — his reputation, his career, and his happiness — and it may also lead to a serious deterioration of his character. This seemingly disproportionate crisis might have been due to a chain-reaction of aggravating circumstances beyond his control, to be ascribed to a powerful counteractive kamma of his past. But the chain of bad results may have been precipitated by the person's own action — decisively triggered by his initial mistake and reinforced by subsequent carelessness, indecision or wrong decisions, which, of course, are unskillful kamma in themselves. This is a case when even a predominantly good character cannot prevent the ripening of bad kamma or soften the full force of the results. The good qualities and deeds of that person will certainly not remain ineffective; but their future outcome might well be weakened by any presently arisen negative character changes or actions, which might form a bad counteractive kamma.

Consider too the converse situation: A person deserving to be called a thoroughly bad character, may, on a rare occasion, act on an impulse of generosity and kindness. This action may turn out to have unexpectedly wide and favorable repercussions on his life. It might bring about a decisive improvement in his external circumstances, soften his character, and even initiate a thorough "change of heart."

How complex, indeed, are situations in human life, even when they appear deceptively simple! This is so because the situations and their outcome mirror the still greater complexity of the mind, their inexhaustible source. The Buddha himself has said: "The mind's complexity surpasses even the countless varieties of the animal kingdom." (SN 22.100) For any single individual, the mind is a stream of ever-changing mental processes driven by the currents and cross-currents of kamma accumulated in countless past existences. But this complexity, already great, is increased still very much more by the fact that each individual life-stream is interwoven with many other individual life-streams through the interaction of their respective kammas. So intricate is the net of kammic conditioning that the Buddha declared kamma-result to be one of the four "unthinkables" (*acinteyya*) and warned against creating it as a subject of speculation. But though the detailed workings of kamma escape our intellection, the practically important message is clear: the fact that kammic results are modifiable frees us from the bane of determinism and its ethical corollary, fatalism, and keeps the road to liberation constantly open before us.

The potential "openness" of a given situation, however, also has a negative side, the element of risk and danger a wrong response to the situation might open a downward path. It is our own response which removes the ambiguity of the situation, for better or worse. This reveals the kamma doctrine of the Buddha as a teaching of moral and spiritual responsibility for oneself and others. It is truly a "human teaching" because it corresponds to and reflects man's wide range of choices, a range much wider than that of an animal. Any individual's moral choice may be severely limited by the varying load of greed, hatred and delusion and their results which he carries around; yet every time he stops to make a decision or a choice, he has the opportunity to rise above all the menacing complexities and pressures of his unfathomable kammic past. Indeed, in one short moment he can transcend aeons of kammic bondage. It is through right mindfulness that man can firmly grasp that fleeting moment, and it is mindfulness again that enables him to use it for making wise choices.

II.

Every kammic action, as soon as it is performed, first of all affects the doer of the deed himself. This holds with as much truth for bodily and verbal deeds directed towards others as it does for volitional thoughts that do not find outward expression.

To some extent we can control our own response to our actions, but we cannot control the way others respond to them. Their response may turn out to be quite different from what we expect or desire. A good deed of ours might be met with ingratitude, a kind word may find a cold or even hostile reception. But though these good deeds and kind words will then be lost to the recipient, to his own disadvantage, they will not be lost to the doer. The good thoughts that inspired them will ennoble his mind, even more so if he responds to the negative reception with forgiveness and forbearance rather than anger and resentment.

Again, an act or word meant to harm or hurt another may not provoke him to a hostile reaction but only meet with self-possessed calmness. Then this "unaccepted present will fall back to the giver," as the Buddha once told a brahmin who had abused him. The bad deed and words, and the thoughts motivating them may fail to harm the other, but they will not fail to have a damaging effect on the character of the doer; and it will affect him even worse if he reacts to the unexpected response by rage or a feeling of resentful frustration. Hence the Buddha says that beings are the responsible owners of their kamma which is their inalienable property. They are the only legitimate heirs of their actions, inheriting their legacy of good or bad fruits.

It will be a wholesome practice to remind oneself often of the fact that one's deeds, words and thoughts first of all act upon and alter one's own mind. Reflecting thus will give a strong impetus to true self-respect, which is preserved by protecting oneself against everything mean and evil. To do so will also open a new, practical understanding of a profound saying of the Buddha:

"In this fathom-long body with its perceptions and thoughts there is the world, the origin of the world, the ending of the world and the path leading to the ending of the world."

— AN 4.45

III.

The "world" of which the Buddha speaks is comprised in this aggregate of body-and-mind. For it is only by the activity of our physical and mental sense faculties that a world can be experienced and known at all. The sights, sounds, smells, tastes and bodily impressions which we perceive, and our various mental functions, conscious and unconscious — this is the world in which we live.

And this world of ours has its origin in that very aggregate of physical and mental processes that produces the kammic act of craving for the six physical and mental sense objects.

"If, Ananda, there were no kamma ripening in the sphere of the senses, would there appear any sense-sphere existence?" — "Surely, not Lord."

— AN 3.76

Thus kamma is the womb from which we spring (*kamma-yoni*), the true creator of the world and of ourselves as the experiencer of the world. And through our kammic actions in deed, word and thought, we unceasingly engage in building and rebuilding this world and worlds beyond. Even our good actions, as long as they are still under the influence of craving, conceit and ignorance, contribute to the creation and preservation of this world of suffering. The Wheel of Life is like a treadmill set in perpetual motion by kamma, chiefly by its three unwholesome roots — greed, hatred and delusion. The "end of the world" cannot be reached by walking on a treadmill; this only creates the illusion of progress. It is only by stopping that vain effort that the end can be reached.

It is "through the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion that the concatenation of kamma comes to an end" (AN 10.174). And this again can happen nowhere else than in the same aggregate of body-and-mind where suffering and its causes originate. It is the hopeful message of the third noble truth that we can step out of the weary round of vain effort and misery. If, despite our knowledge of the possibility of release, we keep walking on the treadmill of life, that is because of an age-old addiction hard to break, the deeply rooted habit of clinging to the notions of "I," "mine" and "self." But here again there is the hopeful message in the fourth noble truth with its Noble Eightfold Path, the therapy that can cure the addiction and gradually lead us to the final cessation of suffering. And all that is required for the therapy is again found in our own body and mind.

The treatment proper starts with correctly understanding the true nature of kamma and thereby our situation in the world. This understanding will provide a strong motivation for ensuring a prevalence of good kamma in one's life. And as it deepens by seeing the human condition still more clearly, this same understanding will become the spur for breaking the chains of kammic bondage. It will impel one to strive diligently along the path, and to dedicate all one's actions and their fruits to the greatest end of action — the final liberation of oneself and all sentient beings.

Source: "Kamma and its Fruit", by Nyanaponika Thera. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 10 November 2013,
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/kammafruit.html>
[This format was produced by Alexander Peck.]

© 2004 BuddhaNet edition © 1996.

Publisher's note

The [Buddhist Publication Society](#) is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is — a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka

©1994 Nyanaponika Thera.

You may copy, reformat, reprint, republish, and redistribute this work in any medium whatsoever, provided that: (1) you only make such copies, etc. available *free of charge* and, in the case of reprinting, only in quantities of no more than 50 copies; (2) you clearly indicate that any derivatives of this work (including translations) are derived from this source document; and (3) you include the full text of this license in any copies or derivatives of this work. Otherwise, all rights reserved.

Documents linked from this page may be subject to other restrictions. Originally published in *The Vision of the Dhamma* (Kandy: [Buddhist Publication Society](#), 1994). Offered for free distribution via BuddhaNet by arrangement with the Publisher. Transcribed for Access to Insight from a file provided by BuddhaNet (BuddhaNet, P.O. Box K1020, Haymarket, NSW 2000, AUSTRALIA). Last revised for Access to Insight on 10 November 2013.