

# Only we can help ourselves

Venerable Dhammavuddho Thero



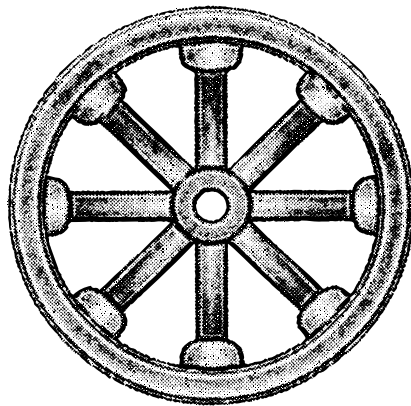
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**ONLY WE  
CAN HELP  
OURSELVES**



**Dhammavuddho Thero**

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*Only  
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Dhammavuddho Thero

*Sabba dānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti*  
The gift of Dhamma surpasses all gifts

## **ONLY WE CAN HELP OURSELVES (BASED ON A TALK)**

This essay is based on a talk “*The Working of Karma*” by the author at the Kuching Buddhist Society, Sarawak in December, 1997 and was published by the Buddhist Gem Fellowship in their book “*K. Sri Dhammananda Felicitation*” in 1999. It is reproduced here with some minor amendments.

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May the merits accruing from this *Dhamma-dāna* be shared by all beings.  
May all beings be well and happy, live in peace and harmony, be enlightened soon and liberated from all suffering.

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## INTRODUCTION

*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-vipāka*.

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 *vipāka* is the result or effects of it. The result may ripen immediately, later in this life or in a future life.

The Buddhist perspective of *kamma* is not one of fatalistic surrender, for the scriptures aptly document numerous instances whereby we can counteract or weaken the effects of our previous evil *kamma* by building up on our own treasure store of good *kamma* here and now.

We definitely cannot alter what has been sown in our past, but by skillfully exercising wisdom, loving kindness and compassion in our present actions, we can surely determine a future in line with our hopes and aspirations. We can help ourselves by sincerely embarking on this journey of transformation and with the greatest love for ourselves. For who else can help us but ourselves.

Venerable Dhammavuddho Thero was born in 1947 and worked as an electrical engineer with the Public Works Department for twelve years. He went forth into the homeless life as a monk at the age of 35. He was first ordained in the Chinese Mahayana tradition. In 1986 he was re-ordained in the Therāvada tradition in Thailand. After that he spent about ten years living the solitary lifestyle in quiet places. He has also written numerous booklets and articles on Buddhism. Venerable Dhammavuddho is presently abbot of a newly established 15-acre forest monastery in Temoh, a small town near Ipoh, Perak.

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# ONLY WE CAN HELP OURSELVES

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa*

## 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-vipāka*. 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 *vipāka* is the result or effects of it. The result may ripen immediately, later in this life or in a future life.

*Kamma-vipāka* 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 are driving 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-vipāka* because there was no intention on your part to kill the boy. So we must clearly differentiate between worldly cause and effect and *kamma-vipāka* (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. Through the body, we can kill, steal, and commit adultery. Through speech, we lie, cause disharmony by carrying tales from one person to another, use coarse speech and idle talk (gossip). Mental *kamma* is when we have excessive greed and covetousness, malice and hatred, wrong views, etc. 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. Evil *kamma* or unwholesome *kamma* is that which harms living beings, like killing and stealing, that results in the suffering of some living beings. In this way the criteria 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 follows us.

## **AVOIDING EVIL**

The Buddhas teaching is concerned with skilful living so that we can reduce or avoid unnecessary suffering. It is important to know the law of *kamma-vipāka* 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. In the worldly sense, take for example, drinking and driving. If you drink and then drive at the same time, you'll probably end up with an accident. However, you know that when you drink, you shouldn't drive and when you drive, you shouldn't drink-that way you avoid an unnecessary accident. So in the same way, when it comes to *kamma-vipāka*, we know unskillful or evil actions 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-vipāka* 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 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 the 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 cannot be eaten. 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 instance, if you buy the meat from the market which is already slaughtered, e.g. fish that is already dead, that is acceptable. The type of meat that is not allowed is where for example, you go to the market, and select a 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. Suffering (*dukkha*) is a fact of life, and as living beings strive to survive, those that succeed inevitably do so at the expense of other living beings. 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 (e.g. in Malaysia, dogs on the streets without licence are disposed of).

## 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 *dāna*. *Dāna* is offerings or charity. You can also keep the eight precepts once a week. 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 Buddhas teachings also brings you blessings. Discussion of the Dhamma with others, and hav-

ing 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 about 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 or seeing 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 *parinibbāna*, we can-

not interact with him. So, we cannot do anything about that. 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 is a good monk or nun, then our demerit is serious. The third one is our mother, and the fourth is our father.

Our mothers and fathers are a good field of merit. 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 doing wholesome *kamma* is that you will get a good reputation. Because if you do not kill, do not steal, commit adultery or lie, you will get a good reputation. You will have nothing to be ashamed of when you do good *kamma* instead of evil *kamma*, and that is the second advantage of doing good. When you are facing a group of people, you would dare to face them without any sense of shame. Whereas, if you have done shame-

ful deeds, you would not have such confidence.

Another advantage of doing good *kamma* is that we would 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 very quickly by the age of 55, they are already senile and talking nonsense. This is because they have a lot of unwholesome *kamma* troubling their minds.

We are also 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 when we close our eyes and pass away, we will be going to a good place. Whereas, people who have done a lot of evil are afraid of dying when their time comes. They are very scared and dare not close their eyes. Some of them do not even dare to switch off the lights at night, and some are even terrified.

Lastly, if you 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 (*dāna*), moral conduct (*sīla*) and mind development (*bhāvanā*). A person who practises charity and moral conduct only on a small scale would 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 in a previous life, a per-



son 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 born 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 a fierce and ugly face, and people will say it is an ugly face. Whereas 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 — in a past life has done a lot of killing, for example, he liked to go hunting, and fishing — in other words, he enjoys himself at the expense of the life of other beings—due to the fact that he had made other beings' lives short, the next time he will get a short life as a result. You see some children that are born but do not survive, or pass away very young. 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 have been selfish in the past-never charitable, never helpful to others — in the next life, you will be reborn into a poor family. When you try to do business, nobody wants to support you. However, if you are charitable, very helpful towards others, in the next life, you will get it back. You might be born 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. Therefore, some of the things that the Buddha taught are self-evident because you can see it all around us.

Why is a person born stupid? This is because in the past, when you did not know something, you did not take the trouble to investigate what is wholesome and unwholesome. 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 does not know something, he takes the trouble to ask and investigate. The other reason is that he avoids intoxicants like liquor and drugs. The third reason is that he meditates. We meditate to develop our mind. It 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 is a person who was a small-hearted person, who was always jealous of other people, and very spiteful. Therefore, when he is reborn, he becomes unknown and insignificant. Nobody bothers about him. Whereas another person is big-hearted and was never jealous of other people. He had a lot of goodwill instead of ill-will. Therefore, that person, when he comes to be a human again, will be born influential and 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 you say that everything is due to past life *kamma*, then we do not need to 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, but refuses to study. 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 unfortu-

nately, he is born not very smart, but he works hard. 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* that gives him intelligence. That is why he did not succeed. On the other hand, the third student has the support from previous life *kamma* to be born very smart, and he works hard (present life *kamma*). When both the past life and the present life *kamm*-*mas* are working together, we can get what we want. This is a fact that we have to keep in mind.

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 do the walking 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 about performing *kamma*. He said that before we do any *kamma*, we have to reflect, "This *kamma* that I am going to do through

body, speech and mind—is it going to harm somebody? If it is going to harm some being or myself, I should not do it. However, if it benefits some other being, or if it benefits myself, then I should do it, and do it again and again.”

So before you do a *kamma*, you must reflect. Even while doing the *kamma*, the Buddha said that we must also reflect. In the midst of doing the *kamma*, we must 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. You reflect on whether the action was correct or not, and whether you 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 other people. 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, like non-

attachment; goodwill instead of ill-will; a tranquil mind instead of a restless mind; not jealous of others; and the like. So this kind of wholesome states of mind gives you peace, gives you a happy state.

Whereas unwholesome states of mind are states that make you agitated; make you 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. You 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 occurrences, 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, this is another thing to remember; not everything is due to *kamma*.

There are five *kammic* offenses mentioned in a discourse that are considered as most serious. The first serious offence is when you intentionally shed the blood of a Buddha with evil intent. The second serious offence is when you kill an Arahant. The third serious offence is the killing of your own mother. The fourth offence is the killing of your own father. Lastly, you cause disharmony among the harmonious community of monks that result 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-vipāka* 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 would become deranged. The first is the power of the Buddha; the second is the depth and power of *jhāna*; the third is *kamma-vipāka*; and the fourth is speculation about the nature of the world.

Why should we not think too much about *kamma-vipāka*? It is because *kamma-vipāka* is very complex. The working of *kamma-vipāka* depends not only on your present lifetime but also on many, many lifetimes of un-

settled *kamma* accounts. On top of that, the result of it depends on the state of mind at that moment. Moreover, the state of mind of the other person you do the *kamma* to also affects your *vipāka*. 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. Whereas, if you kill a mosquito, the *kamma* is not as bad, but still you are not encouraged to kill it. The workings of *kamma-vipāka* is very complex that we find it hard to understand.

Sometimes we see certain people whom you consider as evil, rough, stingy, and offensive, but they are having a luxurious life. This is sometimes due to their good *kamma* from past life supporting them, and they are now creating a lot of bad *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 find it hard to see fairness in this world. We see that good people are not the ones who are happy, but many evil people are happy. The working of *kamma-vipāka* 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? It is useless to only pray and make vows.

The Buddha points out to us that 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 you want long life, then you 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 in the world, 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 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 unskilful *kamma*, and without having to resort to prayers, 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 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 in 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? So 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 favouritism. 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 Buddhas 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-vipāka*, even the Buddha. 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, and pockets the money, and walks out. Just at that time, you come out from the back and see the beggar walking away, and notices 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 came 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 story, 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 minimised, 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 very 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.

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 *saṃsāra* (rounds of rebirth). 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 and 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 that 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 for 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 so he 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 hoping to get some blessings from the Buddha, in order that he would not be killed. 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 a lot of 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*. Imagine that! He did not have to be reborn in hell for many 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 (*bhāvanā*) surpasses moral conduct (*sīla*) and charity (*dāna*).

## KAMMA AND REBIRTH

The Buddha also said that most beings, after passing away, will be reborn into 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.

Therefore, the Buddha said that most beings after passing away will fall into the woeful planes. The hell realms are the worse, a little higher is the animal realm,

and slightly better than that is the ghost realm. These three planes are the woeful planes of rebirth. The realm of human beings is above them. Above us 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 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 years left, another year goes by and there is twenty-eight years more, and so on. Time is very short, so we have to make the most use 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-vipāka*. The Buddha said that it is very hard to find a being that is not related to you in the past. We might have been father and child, or mother and child. 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 suppose a day comes in which 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, 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 toward 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 themselves visible or they contact their relatives in the sleep (dream) state. So in the *Therāvada* 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.

## 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 a long time ago. 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. Therefore, 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 straight forward 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 call "*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 *samsāra*, 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 *saṃsāra*, 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, getting 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*. Therefore, these are good contemplations to make.

Sometimes when we have problems, for example, if we become sick, like having cancer, we would go everywhere looking for a miraculous cure. When we hear of another place that is powerful in its cure, we would go there too. 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 the Dhamma that everything is impermanent; we know that because we are born, then we have to 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.

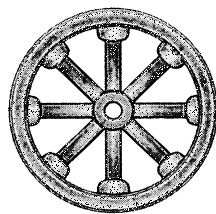
Those people who go here and there, looking for a cure for their cancer, although they may find a miracle and are cured, how much longer can they live? Maybe another five or ten years, but death will come again another day. When you see the face of death, you will shake and tremble again. However, when 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 skilfully.

Human life is very important compared to other types of lives 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 Buddhas and *Arahats* (A.N. 10.63) and the *Sangha* of monks. Hence, it is of paramount importance that we live our human life as skilfully and fruitfully as we can so that we avoid unnecessary suffering and eventually end all suffering.



“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 “

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