

Berget Jelane-12-02-09



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Karma

In the culture of the Buddha, and even today in many Eastern countries, the concept of rebirth and karma (*kamma* in Pali) is well accepted. In the West however, rebirth has been divested of its close ties with karma, and is not as well thought of. Karma, although familiar to Westerners, is not well understood.

Karma is an essential core concept of Buddhism. It tells us that our actions matter. In the *Cula-kammavibhanga Sutta: The Shorter Exposition of Kamma* (MN 135), a student asks the Buddha:

"Master Gotama, what is the reason, what is the condition, why inferiority and superiority are met with among human beings, among mankind? For one meets with short-lived and long-lived people, sick and healthy people, ugly and beautiful people, insignificant and influential people, poor and rich people, low-born and high-born people, stupid and wise people. What is the reason, what is the condition, why superiority and inferiority are met with among human beings, among mankind?"

"Student, beings are owners of kammass, heirs of kammass, they have kammass as their progenitor, kammass as their kin, kammass as their homing-place. It is kammass that differentiate beings according to inferiority and superiority."

Further, in *The Buddhist Dictionary* (http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/palidict.pdf), most terms significant to Buddhism are explained in a sentence, or at most, a paragraph. Karma, however, takes up four pages. The concept of karma is at the heart of Buddhism. The first definition of karma in *The Buddhist Dictionary* is:

kamma: (Sanskrit : karma): 'action', correctly speaking denotes the wholesome and unwholesome volitions and their concomitant mental factors, causing rebirth and shaping the destiny of beings. These kammical volitions become manifest as wholesome or unwholesome actions by body, speech and mind.

Thus the Buddhist term 'kamma' by no means signifies the result of actions, and quite certainly not the fate of man, or perhaps even of whole nations (the so-called wholesale or mass-kamma), misconceptions which, through the influence of theosophy, have become widely spread in the West.

"Volition, o monks, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action by body, speech or mind. There is kamma (action), o monks, that ripens in hell.... Kamma that ripens in the animal world. Kamma that ripens in the world of men.... Kamma that ripens in the heavenly world.... Threefold, however, is the fruit of kamma: ripening during the life-time, ripening in the next birth, ripening in later births" (A.VI, 63).

http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/bud-dict/dic_idx.htm

The Buddha defines karma as volition or intention. Karma is intentional action, and the fruit of karma is the reaction.

Karma is not fate. Karma does not cause a future that is predetermined. The results of our actions are the fruit of karma. However, the factors that contribute to karma are many and complex. The results of our actions are not a simplistic "bad action = bad karma."

Karma is often explained in agricultural terms. For example, if you plant a mango seed, you will get a mango tree. However, the size and vitality of the tree depend on the soil, amount of water and sunlight and other environmental factors. The mango tree may be small or enormous – it depends on many factors.

Because of the multiplicity of factors, we should not judge others or ourselves. We can't know all the factors. If bad things are happening to someone, it does *not* mean simply that their bad karma is wrecking retribution and they are simply getting what they deserve.

Gil Fronsdal explains that the results of karma are like brushing your teeth. Brushing teeth is a good and healthy activity. However, it is not a guarantee that you will never get cavities. Cavities are a result of genetics, what you eat, how often and how well you brush, etc. It is not a simple and direct "if you brush your teeth, you will not get cavities."

The law of karma is not a superstition or a belief system. It is a natural law. Seeing how things work is knowing the law of karma. The effects of Karma are inevitable.

*You will not find a spot in the world –
Not in the sky, not in the ocean,
Not inside a mountain cave –
Where you will be free from your evil karma.
Dhammapada, v 127*

Karma is one of the imponderables – it is too complex for us to fully know or comprehend. Yet, we can see the effects.

The world was not made by a Creator. The world we see is a result of our actions.

*All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
And suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.*

*All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind,
And happiness follows
Like a never departing shadow.
- Dhammapada, v 1-2*

Before the Buddha, karma was already a well known concept in the culture he came from. For example, Jainism had already incorporated karma into their teachings. However, while the Jainists talked about the results of bad karma only, the Buddha brought the idea of ethics and good karma into the fold, and emphasized the importance of karma in all that we do.

Karma is not deterministic or a cause of inescapable fate; nor is it random. Karma is a middle way between these two extremes. Previous actions are not the *only* factor in what we experience. Our current actions can mitigate or modify the effects of our previous actions.

The story of Angulimala

There was once a young student who went to study under a well-known Brahmin guru. At the school, he excelled in his studies and became the teachers' favorite student,

enjoying special privileges in his teachers' house. However, the other students grew jealous of his speedy progress and sought to turn his master against him. To that end, they made it seem as though the student had seduced the master's wife and boasted that he was wiser than the guru. Unwilling or unable to attack the student directly (one version of the story states that he was as "strong as seven elephants", while another states that the teacher worried that his business would suffer if he was found to have murdered a student), the teacher said that the student's training was complete, but that he must provide the traditional final gift offered to a guru before the teacher would grant his approval. As his payment, the teacher demanded 1,000 fingers, each taken from a different victim, thinking that the student would be killed in the course of seeking this grisly prize.

Through unquestioning obedience to the guru, the student became a highwayman, killing travelers who passed through the forest. When the people of the kingdom began to avoid the roads, he entered the villages and dragged people from their homes. He never took clothes or jewels from his victims, only fingers. To keep count of the number of victims that he had taken, he strung them on a thread and hung them on a tree. However because birds began to eat the flesh from the fingers, he started to wear them around his neck as a garland. He thus became known as Angulimala (finger necklace), and was much feared in the area.

The Buddha perceived with his "divine eye" that Angulimala had slain 999 victims, and was desperately seeking a thousandth. The Buddha set off to intercept Angulimala, despite being warned by the people of the village in which he was staying.

On the road through the forest of Kosala, Angulimala saw the Buddha and decided to make him the 1000th victim. He drew his sword, and started running towards the Buddha.

Then the Blessed One willed a feat of psychic power such that Angulimala, though running with all his might, could not catch up with the Blessed One walking at normal pace. Then the thought occurred to Angulimala: "Isn't it amazing! Isn't it astounding! In the past I've chased & seized even a swift-running elephant, a swift-running horse, a swift-running chariot, a swift-running deer. But now, even though I'm running with all my might, I can't catch up with this contemplative walking at normal pace." So he stopped and called out to the Blessed One, "Stop, contemplative! Stop!"

"I have stopped, Angulimala. You stop."

Then the thought occurred to Angulimala, "These Sakyan contemplatives are speakers of the truth, asserters of the truths, and yet this contemplative, even

while walking, says, 'I have stopped, Angulimala. You stop.' Why don't I question him?"

So Angulimala the bandit addressed this verse to the Blessed One:

"While walking, contemplative, you say, 'I have stopped.' But when I have stopped you say I haven't. I ask you the meaning of this: How have you stopped? How haven't I?"

[The Buddha:]

"I have stopped, Angulimala, once & for all, having cast off violence toward all living beings. You, though, are unrestrained toward beings. That's how I've stopped and you haven't."

[Angulimala:]

"At long last a greatly revered great seer for my sake has come to the great forest. Having heard your verse in line with the Dhamma, I will go about having abandoned evil." So saying, the bandit hurled his sword & weapons over a cliff into a chasm, a pit. Then the bandit paid homage to the feet of the One Well-gone, and right there requested the Going-forth. The Awakened One, the compassionate great seer, the teacher of the world, along with its devas, said to him then: "Come, bhikkhu." That in itself was bhikkhuhood for him.

Then the Blessed One set out wandering toward Savatthi with Ven. Angulimala as his attendant monk. After wandering by stages he reached Savatthi, and there he lived, near Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery.

Now at that time a large crowd of people, loud & noisy, had gathered at the gates to King Pasenadi Kosala's inner palace, [calling out,] "There is a bandit in your realm, sire, named Angulimala: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. The king must stamp him out!"

Then King Pasenadi Kosala, with a cavalry of roughly 500 horsemen, drove out of Savatthi and entered the monastery. Driving as far as the ground was passable for chariots, he got down from his chariot and went on foot to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "What is it, great king? Has King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha provoked you, or have the Licchavis of Vesali or some other hostile king?"

"No, lord. King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha hasn't provoked me, nor have the Licchavis of Vesali, nor has some other hostile king. There is a bandit in my realm, lord, named Angulimala: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. I am going to stamp him out." [1](#)

"Great king, suppose you were to see Angulimala with his hair & beard shaved off, wearing the ochre robe, having gone forth from the home life into homelessness, refraining from killing living beings, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from telling lies, living the holy life on one meal a day, virtuous & of fine character: what would you do to him?"

"We would bow down to him, lord, or rise up to greet him, or offer him a seat, or offer him robes, almsfood, lodgings, or medicinal requisites for curing illness; or we would arrange a lawful guard, protection, & defense. But how could there be such virtue & restraint in an unvirtuous, evil character?"

Now at that time Ven. Angulimala was sitting not far from the Blessed One. So the Blessed One, pointing with his right arm, said to King Pasenadi Kosala, "That, great king, is Angulimala." Then King Pasenadi Kosala was frightened, terrified, his hair standing on end. So the Blessed One, sensing the king's fear & hair-raising awe, said to him, "Don't be afraid, great king. Don't be afraid. He poses no danger to you."

Then the king's fear, his terror, his hair-standing-on-end subsided. He went over to Ven. Angulimala and said, "Are you really Angulimala, lord?"

"Yes, great king."

"What is your father's clan? What is your mother's clan?"

"My father is a Gagga, great king, and my mother a Mantani."

"Then may Master Gagga Mantaniputta delight [in staying here]. I will be responsible for your robes, almsfood, lodgings, & medicinal requisites for curing illness."

Now it so happened that at that time Ven. Angulimala was a wilderness-dweller, an alms-goer, wearing one set of the triple robe made of cast-off cloth. So he said to King Pasenadi Kosala, "Enough, great king. My triple robe is complete."

So King Pasenadi Kosala went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, "It's amazing, lord. It's astounding, how the Blessed One has tamed the untamed,

pacified the unpeaceful, and brought to Unbinding those who were not unbound. For what we could not tame even with blunt or bladed weapons, the Blessed One has tamed without blunt or bladed weapons. Now, lord, we must go. Many are our duties, many our responsibilities."

"Then do, great king, what you think it is now time to do."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala got up from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One and — keeping him to his right — departed....

Then Ven. Angulimala, dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute, in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Angulimala became another one of the arahants.

Then Ven. Angulimala, early in the morning, having put on his robes and carrying his outer robe & bowl, went into Savatthi for alms. Now at that time a clod thrown by one person hit Ven. Angulimala on the body, a stone thrown by another person hit him on the body, and a potsherd thrown by still another person hit him on the body. So Ven. Angulimala — his head broken open and dripping with blood, his bowl broken, and his outer robe ripped to shreds — went to the Blessed One. The Blessed One saw him coming from afar and on seeing him said to him: "Bear with it, brahman! Bear with it! The fruit of the kamma that would have burned you in hell for many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years, you are now experiencing in the here-&-now!"

Then Ven. Angulimala, having gone alone into seclusion, experienced the bliss of release.

- Angulimala Sutta: About Angulimala (MN 86)

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.086.than.html>

The story of Angulimala shows us the complexity of karma. Angulimala embarked on his exploits as a killer at the order of his spiritual master. However, the Kalama Sutra tells us to question authority, and not blindly follow orders, even if they come from the Buddha himself. If our heart tells us that an action is wrong, we should not engage in it, even if the most reputable beings tell us to do so. This was the first unskillful action of Angulimala.

The reign of terror that Angulimala began ended with his following the Buddha. This skillful action resulted in King Pasenadi Kosala granting him pardon for his actions. Yet, even though Angulimala became an arahant, he could not escape the fruit of his actions. The villagers stoned and beat him when he went to beg alms. The Buddha

explained that he Angulimala was experiencing the result of his actions now, rather than a more severe consequence in the future. There is no escaping karma, but skillful actions can mitigate the consequences.

Karma can ripen now, or in future lives. There are too many factors for us to make definitive judgments. If we see someone having a good or bad life, it is naïve for us to judge them, and assume that their life is a result of their karma. We really don't know if someone is truly "getting what they deserve." Their karma could be ripening, and it is not up to us to judge.

Karma can result in someone being reborn in one of four realms. The worst, and considered one of the hells, is the realm of the hungry ghosts. Next, and also considered one of the hells, but not as bad as the hungry ghosts, is the animal realm. The third, which despite what some people may think, is not one of the hells, is the human realm. The fourth, and highest realm, is the heavenly realm.

Ironically, the heavenly realm is too pleasant to encourage enlightenment. The human realm is the most conducive for enlightenment and the escape from the otherwise endless cycle of rebirth.

A being who has become enlightened not only escapes from the wheel of rebirth, but is also free from the law of karma. The actions of an enlightened being are no longer subject to the law of karma, and cannot affect rebirth or future outcome. An enlightened being is free from the cycle of rebirth and karma.

For unenlightened beings, the karmic effects can have many influences. A person who has killed will tend to have a shorter life than those who have not. Harming others tends to result in illness. Anger tends to result in ugliness, and stinginess in poverty. Openness, however, tends to result in wisdom.

Remember that the law of karma is neither fully deterministic, nor random. Sometimes illness can be the result of karma, and other times not. Occasionally the distinction is made between bodily illness and karmic illness. We are all subject to aging, death, and illness – these are not necessarily the outcomes of karma, they are going to happen anyway.

The state of our mind at time of death affects rebirth. There are four factors of karma that can result in different outcomes.

1. **WEIGHTY (GARUKA) KARMA.**

This is either weighty or serious – may be either good or bad. It produces its results in this life or in the next for certain. On the Immoral side, there are five

immediate effective serious crimes: Matricide, Patricide, and the murder of an Arahant, the wounding of a Buddha and the creation of a schism in the Sangha.

The order of these is important, if a really good state is followed by a really bad state, the most recent undoes the previous.

2. PROXIMATE (*ASANNA*) KARMA OR DEATH-PROXIMATE KARMA

This is that which one does or remembers immediately before the moment of dying. Owing to the great part it plays in determining the future birth, much importance is attained to this deathbed (*asanna*) Karma in almost all Buddhist countries. The customs of reminding the dying man of good deeds and making him do good acts on his deathbed still prevails in Buddhist countries.

Sometimes a bad person may die happily and receive a good birth if he remembers or does a good act at the last moment. At times a good person may die unhappy by suddenly remembering an evil act of his or by harboring some unpleasant thought, perchance compelled by unfavorable circumstances.

3. HABITUAL (*ACCINA*) KARMA

It is that which one habitually performs and recollects and for which one has a great liking. Habits whether good or bad become one's second nature, tending to form the character of a person. At unguarded moments one often lapses into one's habitual mental mindset. In the same way, at the death-moment, unless influenced by other circumstances, one usually recalls to mind one's habitual deeds.

4. RESERVE OR CUMULATIVE (*KATATTA*) KARMA

This literally means 'because done'. All actions that are not included in the aforementioned and those actions soon forgotten belong to this category. This is, as it were the reserve fund of a particular being.

We should never use karma as an excuse for blaming or judging someone. Karma is too complex to allow us to use it as an indicator of sin. For people who are suffering a bad life, our only skilful action is compassion. Karma is a natural law, it is not a judgement.

Karma is action, and Vipaka, fruit or result, is its reaction.

Just as every object is accompanied by a shadow, even so every volitional activity is inevitably accompanied by its due effect. Karma is like potential seed: Vipaka could be likened to the fruit arising from the tree – the effect or result. Anisamsa and Adinaya are the leaves, flowers and so forth that correspond to external differences such as health, sickness and poverty – these are inevitable

consequences, which happen at the same time. Strictly speaking, both Karma and Vipaka pertain to the mind.

As Karma may be good or bad, so may Vipaka, - the fruit – is good or bad. As Karma is mental so Vipaka is mental (of the mind). It is experienced as happiness, bliss, unhappiness or misery, according to the nature of the Karma seed. Anisamsa are the concomitant advantages – material things such as prosperity, health and longevity. When Vipaka's concomitant material things are disadvantageous, they are known as Adinaya, full of wretchedness, and appear as poverty, ugliness, disease, short life-span and so forth.

As we sow, we reap somewhere and sometime, in his life or in a future birth. What we reap today is what we have sown either in the present or in the past. ...

Happiness and misery, which are the common lot of humanity, are the inevitable effects of causes. From a Buddhist point of view, they are not rewards and punishments, assigned by a supernatural, omniscient ruling power to a soul that has done good or evil. Theists, who attempt to explain everything in this and temporal life and in the eternal future life, ignoring a past, believe in a 'postmortem' justice, and may regard present happiness and misery as blessings and curses conferred on His creation by an omniscient and omnipotent Divine Ruler who sits in heaven above controlling the destinies of the human race. Buddhism, which emphatically denies such an Almighty, All merciful God-Creator and an arbitrarily created immortal soul, believes in natural law and justice which cannot be suspended by either an Almighty God or an All-compassionate Buddha. According to this natural law, acts bear their own rewards and punishments to the individual doer whether human justice finds out or not.

- <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm>