

## **What is Kamma?**

**K**amma is an impersonal, natural law that operates in accordance with our actions. It is a law in itself and does not have any lawgiver. Kamma operates in its own field without the intervention of an external, independent, ruling agent.

Kamma or karma can be put in the simple language of the child: do good and good will come to you, now, and hereafter. Do bad and bad will come to you, now, and hereafter.

In the language of the harvest, kamma can be explained in this way: if you sow good seeds, you will reap a good harvest. If you sow bad seeds, you will reap a bad harvest.

In the language of science, kamma is called the law of cause and effect: every cause has an effect. Another name for this is the law of moral causation. Moral causation works in the moral realm just as the physical law of action and reaction works in the physical realm.

In the Dhammapada, kamma is explained in this manner: the mind is the chief (forerunner) of all good and bad states. If you speak or act with a good or bad mind, then happiness or unhappiness follows you just as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox or like your shadow which never leaves you.

Kamma is simply action. Within animate organisms there is a power or force which is given different names such as instinctive tendencies, consciousness, etc. This innate propensity forces every conscious being to move. He moves mentally or physically. His motion is action. The repetition of actions is habit and habit becomes his character. In Buddhism, this process is called kamma.

In its ultimate sense, kamma means both good and bad, mental action or volition. 'Kamma is volition,' says the Buddha. Thus kamma is not an entity but a process, action, energy and force. Some interpret this force as 'action-influence'. It is our own doings reacting on ourselves. The pain and happiness man experiences are the result of his

own deeds, words and thoughts reacting on themselves. Our deeds, words and thoughts produce our prosperity and failure, our happiness and misery.

Kamma is an impersonal, natural law that operates strictly in accordance with our actions. It is law in itself and does not have any lawgiver. Kamma operates in its own field without the intervention of an external, independent ruling agency. Since there is no hidden agent directing or administering rewards and punishments, Buddhists do not rely on prayer to some supernatural forces to influence karmic results. According to the Buddha, kamma is neither predestination nor some sort of determinism imposed on us by some mysterious, unknown powers or forces to which we must helplessly submit ourselves.

Buddhists believe that man will reap what he has sown; we are the result of what we were, and we will be the result of what we are. In other words, man is not one who will absolutely remain to be what he was, and he will not continue to remain as what he is. This simply means that kamma is not complete determinism. The Buddha pointed out that if everything is determined, then there would be no free will and no moral or spiritual life. We would merely be the slaves of our past. On the other hand, if everything is undetermined, then there can be no cultivation of moral and spiritual growth. Therefore, the Buddha accepted neither strict determinism nor strict indeterminism.

### **Misconceptions regarding Kamma**

The misinterpretation or irrational views on kamma are stated in the Anguttara Nikaya which suggests that the wise will investigate and abandon the following views:

- the belief that everything is a result of acts in previous lives;
- the belief that all is the result of creation by a Supreme Ruler; and
- the belief that everything arises without reason or cause.

If a person becomes a murderer, a thief, or an adulterer, and, if his actions are due to past actions, or caused by creation of a Supreme Ruler, or if that happened by mere chance, then this person would not be held responsible for his evil action.

Yet another misconception about kamma is that it operates only for certain people according to their faiths. But the fate of a man in his next life does not in the least depend on what particular religion he chooses. Whatever may be his religion, man's fate depends entirely on his deeds by body, speech and thought. It does not matter what religious label he himself holds, he is bound to be happy world in his next life so long as he does good deeds and leads an unblemished life. He is bound to be born to lead a wretched life if he commits evil and harbors wicked thoughts in his mind. Therefore, Buddhists do not proclaim that they are the only blessed people who can go to heaven after their death. Whatever the religion he professes, man's kammic thought alone determines his own destiny both in this life and in the next. The teaching of kamma does not indicate a post-mortem justice. The Buddha did not teach this law of *kamma* to protect the rich and to comfort the poor by promising illusory happiness in an after life.

According to Buddhism kamma explains the inequalities that exist among mankind. These inequalities are due not only to heredity, environment and nature but also to kamma or the results of our own actions. Indeed kamma is one of the factors which are responsible for the success and the failure of our life.

Since kamma is an invisible force, we cannot see it working with our physical eyes. To understand how kamma works, we can compare it to seeds: the results of kamma are stored in the subconscious mind in the same way as the leaves, flowers, fruits and trunk of a tree are stored in its seed. Under favorable conditions, the fruits of kamma will be produced just as with moisture and light, the leaves and trunk of a tree will sprout from its tiny seed.

The working of *kamma* can also be compared to a bank account: a person who is virtuous, charitable and benevolent in his present life is like a person who is adding to his good *kamma*. This accrued good *kamma* can be used by him to ensure a trouble-free life. But he must replace what he takes or else one day his account will be exhausted and he will be bankrupt. Then whom will he be able to blame for his miserable state? He can blame neither others nor fate. He alone is responsible. Thus a good Buddhist cannot be an escapist. He has to face life as it is and not run away from

it. The kammic force cannot be controlled by inactivity. Vigorous activity for good is indispensable for one's own happiness. Escapism is the resort of the weak, and an escapist cannot escape the effects of the kammic law.

The Buddha says, 'There is no place to hide in order to escape from kammic results.' (Dhammapada 127).

### **Our Own Experience**

To understand the law of kamma is to realize that we ourselves are responsible for our own happiness and our own misery. We are the architects of our kamma. Buddhism explains that man has every possibility to mould his own kamma and thereby influence the direction of his life. On the other hand, a man is not a complete prisoner of his own actions; he is not a slave of his kamma. Nor is man a mere machine that automatically release instinctive forces that enslave him. Nor is man a mere product of nature. Man has within himself the strength and the ability to change his kamma. His mind is mightier than his kamma and so the law of kamma can be made to serve him. Man does not have to give up his hope and effort in order to surrender himself to his own kammic force. To off-set the reaction of his bad kamma that he has accumulated previously, he has to do more meritorious deeds and to purify his mind rather than by praying, worshipping, performing rites or torturing his physical body in order to overcome his kammic effects. Therefore, man can overcome the effect of his evil deeds if he acts wisely by leading noble life.

Man must use the material with which he is endowed to promote his ideal. The cards in the game of life are within us. We do not select them. They are traced to our past kamma; but we can call as we please, do what suits us and as we play, we either gain or lose.

Kamma is equated to the action of men. This action also creates some karmic results. But each and every action carried out without any purposeful intention, cannot become a Kusala-Kamma (skillful action) or Akusala-Kamma (unskillful action). That is why the Buddha interprets kamma as volitional activities. That means, whatever good and bad deeds we commit ourselves without any purposeful intention, are not strong enough to

be carried forward to our next life. However, ignorance of the nature of the good and bad effect of the kamma is not an excuse to justify or avoid the karmic results if they were committed intentionally. A small child or an ignorant man may commit many evil deeds. Since they commit such deeds with intention to harm or injure, it is difficult to say that they are free from the karmic results. If that child touches a burning iron-rod the heat element does not spare the child without burning his fingers. The karmic energy also works exactly in the same manner. Karmic energy is unbiased, it is like energy of gravity.

The radical transformations in the characters of Angulimala and Asoka illustrate man's potential to gain control over his kammic force.

Angulimala was a highway robber who murdered more than a thousand of his fellow men. Can we judge him by his external actions? For within his lifetime, he became an Arahant and thus redeemed his past misdeeds.

Asoka, the Indian Emperor, killed thousands and thousands to fight his wars and to expand his empire. Yet after winning the battle, he completely reformed himself and changed his career to such an extent that today, 'Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines and shines almost alone, as a star,' says a well-known world historian H.G. Well.

### **Other Factors Which Support Kamma**

Although Buddhism says that man can eventually control his karmic force, it does not state that everything is due to kamma. Buddhism does not ignore the role played by other forces of nature. According to Buddhism there are five orders or processes of natural laws (niyāma) which operate in the physical and mental worlds:

- seasonal laws (utu niyāma): physical inorganic order e.g., seasonal phenomena of winds and rains, etc.
- the biological laws (bīja niyāma): relating to seasonal changes etc.,
- the kammic law (kamma niyāma): relating to moral causation or the order of act and

result,

- natural phenomena (dhamma niyāma): relating to electrical forces, movement of tides etc., and
- psychological laws (citta niyāma): which govern the processes of consciousness.

Thus kamma is considered only as one of the five natural laws that account for the diversity in this world.

### Can Kamma Be Changed?

Kamma is often influenced by circumstances: beneficent and malevolent forces act to counter and to support this self-operating law. These other forces that either aid or hinder this kamma are birth, time or conditions, appearances, and effort.

A favorable birth (*gati sampatti*) or an unfavorable birth (*vipatti*) can develop or hinder the fruition of kamma. For instance, if a person is born to a noble family or in a state of happiness, his fortunate birth will provide an easy opportunity for his good kamma to operate. An unintelligent person who, by some good kamma, is born in a royal family, will, on account of his noble parentage be honored by the people. If the same person were to have a less fortunate birth, he would not be similarly treated.

Good appearance (*upadhi sampatti*) and poor appearance (*upadhi vipatti*) are two other factors that hinder or favor the working of kamma. If by some good kamma, a person obtains a good birth, but is born deformed by some bad kamma, then he will not be able to fully enjoy the beneficial results of his good kamma. Even a legitimate heir to a throne may not perhaps be raised to that high position if he happens to be physically or mentally deformed. Beauty, on the other hand, will be an asset to the possessor. A good-looking son of poor parents may attract the attention of others and may be able to distinguish himself through their influence. Also, we can find cases of people from poor, obscure family backgrounds who rise to fame and popularity as film actors or actresses or beauty queens.

Time and occasion are other factors that influence the working of kamma. In the time of famine or during the time of war, all people without exception are forced to suffer

the same fate. Here the unfavorable conditions open up possibilities for evil kamma to operate. The favorable conditions, on the other hand, will prevent the operation of bad kamma.

Effort or intelligence is perhaps the most important of all the factors that affect the working of kamma. Without effort, both worldly and spiritual progress is impossible. If a person makes no effort to cure himself of a disease or to save himself from his difficulties, or to strive with diligence for his progress, then his evil kamma will find a suitable opportunity to produce its due effects. However, if he endeavours to surmount his difficulties, his good kamma will come to help him. When shipwrecked in a deep sea, the *Bodhisatta* during one of his previous births, made an effort to save himself and his old mother, while the others prayed to the gods and left their fate in the hands of these gods. The result was that the Bodhisatta escaped while the others were drowned.

Thus the working of kamma is aided or obstructed by birth, beauty and ugliness, time and personal effort or intelligence. However, man can overcome immediate kammic effects by adopting certain methods. Yet, he is not free from such karmic effects if he remains within this *Samsāra* = cycle of birth and death. Whenever opportunities arise the same karmic effects that he overcame, can affect him again. This is the uncertainty of worldly life. Even the Buddha and Arahantas were affected by certain kammās, although they were in their final birth.

The time factor is another important aspect of the karmic energy for people to experience the good and bad effects. People experience certain karmic effects only within this lifetime while certain karmic effects become effective immediately hereafter the next birth. And certain other karmic effects follow the doers as long as they remain in this wheel of existence until they stop their rebirth after attaining *Nibbāna*. The main reason for this difference is owing to mental impulsion (Javana Citta) of the people at the time when a thought arises in the mind to do good or bad.

### **Impartial Energy**

Those who do not believe that there is an energy known as kamma should understand that this karmic energy is not a by-product of any particular religion although Hinduism,

Buddhism and Jainism acknowledge and explain the nature of this energy. This is an existing universal law which has no religious label. All those who violate this law, have to face the consequences irrespective of their religious beliefs, and those who live in accordance with this law experience peace and happiness in their life. Therefore, this karmic law is unbiased to each and every person, whether they believe it or not; whether, they have a religion or not. It is like any other existing universal law. Please remember that *kamma* is not the exclusive property of Buddhism.

If we understand kamma as a force or a form of energy, then we can discern no beginning. To ask where is the beginning of kamma is like asking where is the beginning of electricity. Kamma like electricity does not begin. It comes into being under certain conditions. Conventionally we say that the origin of kamma is volition but this is as much conventional as saying that the origin of a river is a mountain top.

Like the waves of the ocean that flow into one another , one unit of consciousness flows into another and this merging of one thought consciousness into another is called the working of kamma. In short, every living being, according to Buddhism, is an electricity current of life that operates on the automatic switch of kamma.

Kamma being a form of energy is not found anywhere in this fleeting consciousness or body. Just as mangoes are not stored anywhere in the mango tree but, dependent on certain conditions, they spring into being, so does kamma. Kamma is like wind or fire. It is not stored up anywhere in the Universe but comes into being under certain conditions.