

CAN WE CHANGE OUR KARMA?

By Alec Robertson, Sri Lanka

The teachings of the Buddha are fast gaining popularity all over the world, mainly because the Buddha has shown that the only way to gain peace and happiness is through controlling the mind. Unfortunately, since very few people know how to control the mind, they go to unscrupulous meditation “masters” and other purveyors of the religions of “the mysterious East”, and spend much money and effort to learn meditation techniques. In this article Mr. Alec Robertson shows that Buddhist meditation can be practised on a simple level, that mind control is something which can be done even by the uninitiated. The Buddha’s Dhamma can be understood by people with varying intellectual and spiritual attainments, beginning with the elementary precepts and developing to the highest levels of mental purification culminating in Arahantship., Mr. Robertson, a well-known Sri Lankan writer on Buddhism, explains that according to the Buddha, the individual can change the karmic effect of his destiny by developing his mind through meditation.

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The subject of *Karma* is of utmost importance to Buddhists. We Buddhists do not believe that *Karma* is fatalistic or deterministic. We have the power and the free choice of either changing our lives for good or bad. We should have an idea of what *Karma* is and then we will be in a position to understand how we can transform and elevate our lives. Now according to Buddhism, *Karma* is not something static. Even at this moment, when you are reading this article you are doing some *Karma*. *Karma* is mostly mental and when we read something that improves our minds we change our lives for the better. Now, as you go on reading this article you will find that your character and personality have become better. Just before you started reading this article your minds might have been restless, in a state of agitation or turmoil. But after you started reading this article, your minds settled down and gradually, (depending on the individuals concerned) became more calm, composed, serene and tranquil.

Now, this is due to the fact that you are reading the Dhamma and reading and listening to the Dhamma is also a type of meditation. Unlike *Dana*, (Generosity)

or observing the five Precepts, *Karma* is only for the time being, it is more transient than meditation because meditation lasts for a longer period of time. When you focus your mind on a subject or on the Dhamma your mind constantly thinks of noble and sublime thoughts – it is a type of meditation. *Karma* is not fatalistic. During the Buddha's time, there were people who were under the impression that everything is due to one's *Karma* There were in fact three heretical views in the Buddha's time with regard to man and his destiny. One was that everything we do is due to one's past *Karma* and that we have no capacity or inclination to change, mould or shape one's life or personality, or in other words, bring about a total transformation. That was one wrong view and the Buddha refuted that wrong view. The second wrong view was that everything was due to a powerful omniscient God; that he was responsible for man's destiny, that whatever we do is governed and directed by that all-powerful, Omniscient being and we don't have the free will or the choice to change our future. And the third wrong view arises due to more fortuitous circumstances, that there is no *Karma* or moral law that governs one's life.

The Buddha refutes these three views by saying that if everything is due to a past, to an omniscient Being or due to pure chance, then if a person is a liar, he will continue to be a liar. If he is a person who has a tendency to do wrong things, he will continue in that way. He won't have the free will to change his future. In place of the three views regarding man and his destiny, the Buddha presented the "Law of Moral Causation". We always think of *Karma* with regard to the past. If a person meets with an accident we tend to say, "that is his *Karma*".

It is not correct to say everything is due to one's *Karma*. *Karma Vipaka* is the result of some past Evil. *Karma* is what we do at the present moment. I say that it is *Karma* when any action, whether moral or immoral is done physically, verbally or mentally. Now at this present moment by reading this article, you are performing a very powerful *Karma*. *Kusala* – skillful action, or meritorious deed and any meritorious action that you are doing now has the capacity to shape and modify your *Karma* which could weaken or attenuate some of your evil actions and thereby annihilate to some extent the effect of your evil actions and also consolidate and reinforce your good actions. This fact should be clearly understood. I will give you an illustration to clarify the point. Take two buckets of water. In one bucket of water, there is muddy water and in the other clear water.

Now the muddy water could be compared to *Akusala karma* or to unskillful actions or demeritorious actions. *Kusala Karma* could be compared to the pure water. If we take some water from the bucket containing pure water and pour it into the

bucket containing impure or muddy water, and if you go on pouring it continuously there will come a time when the muddy water will become less impure. This is a crude example but all examples have their limitations. It is for the purpose of driving home a point that the force of our bad *Karma* (*Akusala Karma*) can be reduced in intensity. We have that capacity and it is purely through meditation. No doubt also through *Dana* and *Sila* we can do it to some degree because the Buddha's training path to deliverance consists of virtue, concentration and wisdom. To refrain from all evil is the restraint of one's verbal and bodily actions or virtue, which in other words, is *Sila*. The performance of all meritorious deeds involves the focusing of your mind on a wholesome subject of meditation. Now at this present moment while reading this article you are focusing your mind on the Dhamma. It is just like focusing the rays of the sun on a convex lens. If you have a piece of paper on the other side, what would happen? It will get burnt. But if you normally hold a piece of paper in the sunlight in broad daylight, the paper will not burn. Our mind, when concentrated, is just like focusing the rays of the sun on a convex lens. This is a beautiful illustration. The whole idea of *samatha* meditation is succinctly explained by this analogy on tranquility or composure of the mind. Our minds normally are just like the monkey which keeps swinging from one tree to another in the forest.

But when you focus your mind on any particular object it becomes very powerful. So the above illustration conveys the concept of concentration very well in a striking and forceful manner. So at this moment you are focusing your mind on something higher than verbal and physical discipline. It is mental discipline or discipline of the Mind.

Buddhism training is not merely concerned with virtue only; it is higher training which is the training of the mind. Tranquility of the mind or purification of the mind is in fact brought about through wisdom and wisdom in turn purifies the mind and this is the teaching of all Buddhas. This is the sum and substance of Buddhist ethics. The path which leads us to the eradication of the defilements of the mind also enables us to realize the apex of perfection – that of wisdom and love. It is by eradicating all the defilements of the mind by developing virtue, concentration and wisdom that one reaches the glorious heights of enlightenment. When you speak of the personality of the *Arahat*, it means that he is the embodiment and personification of virtue. He is completely virtuous. There is not a stain or blemish in his character. He is also the embodiment of composure and tranquility and serenity of the mind and last of all, he is the embodiment of insight or wisdom. So we see that the *Arahat* is not just a negative, ineffective personality. On the other hand, he is a dynamic personality and is a person who has attained the

pinnacle of perfection, virtue, wisdom and tranquility. Thus meditation forms two-thirds of the *Buddha sasana* and it's only through meditation that one is able to transform, shape and mould one's character and bring about a total transformation of one's personality and when one brings about a total transformation of one's personality, one reaches *Arahatship*. The *arahat* is a perfected man, perfected in wisdom and in holiness. Unlike in the case of other religious teachers, who speak of holy and saintly people whose saintliness is mostly confined to only purity, here according to Buddhism, a person is a saint or an *arahat* when he has reached not only perfection in purity but also perfection in wisdom. He is a wise and holy man The Buddha says that one of the salient qualities of the Dhamma is that one should experience and understand the deathless through wisdom and through wisdom one is able to eradicate all defilements of the mind.

Now let us see how this meditation can change one's *Karma*. Meditation is not only focusing one's mind on a subject of meditation. That is only the ABC of meditation. The etymological meaning of Buddhist Meditation is the cultivation of one's mind e.g. in horticulture we remove the weeds and plant seeds. In the garden of the human mind there are weeds and poisonous snakes. The ugly bearded monster of terrorism originates in the mind. Anger, hatred, resentment, animosity, jealousy, pride, vanity, delusion, restlessness, worry and greed germinate in our minds and gather strength and power and eventually give expression through our bodily and verbal actions which inevitably have devastating and malefic effects on society as well. Defilements are in our minds. It is a constant struggle and a persistent battle with the formidable enemies. To wage battle with these inveterate foes we must have powerful weapons. The three weapons we possess are *dana*, *sila*, and *bhavana*. In the *Angutta Nikaya*, the Buddha says that we are indeed spiritual warriors. With these three weapons we are warriors and our war with the defilements is a constant and relentless battle which goes on till we attain *arahatship*. The three powerful enemies we have to conquer are greed, hatred and ignorance. The weapons we possess as stated earlier are *Dana*, *Sila*, *Bhavana* and they are indeed powerful weapons. With the powerful weapons of *Dana*, we eliminate greed. With *Sila*, we get rid of hatred. With the powerful weapon of *vipassana* meditation we eliminate ignorance and emerge victorious and triumphant. The war we wage with the terrorists is nothing compared with the war we have to wage with these defilements. The Buddha fought it for an incalculable period of time. When you listen to the *Dhamma*, your personality changes. Your mind becomes serene, composed and tranquil. Buddhism is pragmatic; it is also empirical. You can test it in your own mind, just like a scientist tests something in a crucible. The question is often posed as to how it is possible to change your character by meditation. Many harbour the misconception that *karma* is something

fixed and inflexible. Even in science we are told that everything keeps changing with inconceivable rapidity. But the external world and its phenomena would appear to the ordinary mind to be something solid and substantial. Our minds are also changing with tremendous rapidity e.g. when you take a flash of lightning, you see it as a streak, not as individual sparks, though it is in fact made up like that. When it is raining heavily, we see it as one streak of water but it consists of millions of drops of water. In like manner, human personality is also made up of *Rupa, Vedana, Sanna, Sankhara, Vinnana* – Feeling, Perception, Mental formation and consciousness. These mental factors are changing with inconceivable rapidity. According to William James, the eminent psychologist, the mind is compared to a river, a river of consciousness, a stream of consciousness and it moves rapidly. Then you are listening to the *Dhamma*, your minds are dominated by predominant streams of thoughts of wisdom and love. Therefore you see that meditation is the development and cultivation of the mind. *Karma* is also part and parcel of your character. It is not something fixed. You can change it, e.g.:

1. Angulimala was a notorious criminal. He had a formidable past of both good and bad *karma*. He had killed 999 beings. Such a being became an *Arahat*. That shows that he was able to change his personality to bring about a transformation of life.
2. Alawaka was a carnivorous being. He attained the First Stage of Sainthood.
3. Dhammasoka was known as Chandasoka (cruel Asoka) and he became a Saintly Emperor. H.G. Wells says – “Amidst the thousands of Monarchs, His Majesties and Highness that crowd the columns of History the name of Asoka shines like a lonely star. It is the *Dhamma* which transformed him.”
4. King Devanampiyatissa listened to the sermon preached by Arahant Mahinda and that powerful sermon had a chastening and benign influence on his personality and converted him to Buddhism.

With all these examples it is quite clear and evident that you can change your *karma*. Buddhism is ethical, pragmatic, empirical and psychological. *Karma* works in different ways. There are four types of *karma* which determine our lives and destinies.

Garuka Karma – Weighty Karma. The bad *akusala karmas* are the five heinous crimes which are: killing of father, mother, shedding blood from the Buddha's personality, killing of an *Arahat* and creating schism in the *Sangha*. These cannot be altered. On the good side are the *Jhana* or Mental states that you attain through meditation. When you go on meditating there comes a stage when the mind is very powerful, concentrated and relaxed. The defilements get burnt just like the convex lens burns the piece of paper when focused to sunlight. With the concentrated mind you get certain supernormal powers and you attain various stages of the *Brahmaloka*. For example, when you hurl a weapon into space, it will be there so long as the energy you exerted into it is there. After the energy is exhausted, it will come down to earth. These powerful *karmas* are beyond our reach. The *karmas* that we can perform are called a *acinne karmas* or *bahula karma* or habitual *karmas*. Habitual means the repetitive actions you do over and over again, whether it is on the good side or on the bad side. These are habitual *karmas* that we do echo and re-echo in the corridors of our minds. When you see a charming personality, you tend to think of it over and over again. In the same way when you go on thinking of something you could achieve tranquility by counting your blessings or the ten contemplative reflections centered on the recollections of the *Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha*, on *Sila* (virtues) or the qualities of *Nirvana*, or death, or of the impurities of the body. The first five are important for laymen. Their meditation consolidates and re-enforces one's good *karma*. There was a French psychologist and psycho-therapist who used to cure people of various ailments by making them use a phrase – "Every day in every way, I am getting better and better." The Buddhist doctrine fails if one cannot change one's personality and become an *Arahat*. This celebrated psychologist was able to cure people even suffering from organic diseases. When you go on thinking of the qualities of the Buddha and you keep repeating them, you prevent extraneous thoughts from invading your mind and your personality will acquire incomparable and peerless qualities. The Buddha never flamed forth in anger because he had completely eradicated all the defilements of the mind and there was no stain in his personality. When you meditate in this manner on the sublime and noble qualities in your personality and weave them into the fabric of your lives, the mind becomes supreme. Just like we re-live the golden memories, you re-live the spiritual memories. When you are in the doldrums and are despondent we must re-live these golden memories. A certain author once said: a man is never lonely when he has good thoughts.

When you re-live the good deeds that you have done towards others that is a kind of meditation. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography said that he had a picture of a Samadhi Buddha which was his constant companion as it gave him

solace and inspiration while he was languishing in prison. He was able to get over his state of anxiety and depression by merely concentrating on the strong, calm picture of the Buddha statue. We run to the mediums or the astrologer or have a drink or attend a party in moments of dire distress and despondency because we don't have the strength of mind, moral stamina and spiritual fortitude to withstand frustrations. We have to cultivate such strength gradually step by step. A journey of a thousand miles starts with one step. You have to acquire it by sheer practice. A certain person wanted to become a good pianist. So he went up to a well-known and accomplished pianist and asked him what he should do. The celebrated pianist said he would give three practical suggestions. The first suggestion was to practise and this person practised for about a month and went to him again and asked what he was to do next. His reply was to practise again. He went again for the third time and he was given the same reply. We know the theory but practice and realisation will also have to be there. The Buddha said "so long as my disciples practise the *dhmma* and *vinaya*, the world will not be devoid of *Arahats*." The poet Longfellow aptly says:

"The heights of great men were not attained by sudden flights. They, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night."

In any walk of life, if you want to do well, it is only through diligent, perseverance that one can achieve greatness.

The two pillars of Buddhism are *Karuna* and *Panna*. When we meditate on the Buddha, we try to instil those great and noble qualities into our personality. It becomes part and parcel of our lives, as they are woven into the texture of our lives. We make our own hells and we make our own heavens as well. When you think of the qualities of the *Sangha* we picture the sublime qualities of the heart and mind of those great and mighty beings. The great qualities of love and detachment become part and parcel of you as well when you constantly meditate or reflect on them. Meditation is something more than just concentration of the mind. We change our mind and personality by contemplating on loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. They are called *Brahma Vihara* or Divine Abidings. When we contemplate on them, they become part of our lives. This is the purpose of meditation. When you practise *Metta* or loving kindness, you get rid of anger or ill-will. When you practise *Karuna* or compassion, you get rid of hatred. In today's society, people place little value on human life. *Muditha* is rejoicing in the joys of others. We find it difficult to spontaneously rejoice in the happiness of others because we are jealous of others. Lastly there is *Upekkha*,

equanimity, which the opposite of restlessness and anxiety. When you think of loving kindness over and over again you become the embodiment of love.

When you practise compassion consistently, you become that quality. In like manner, when you rejoice in the joy of others, the mind tends towards joy and happiness. Oscar Wilde, a shrewd observer of man's nature, says "it is easy to sympathize with the sorrows of another but it requires a very fine nature to rejoice in the joys of others." Bertrand Russell says that jealousy is predominant among equals. Meditation must necessarily bring about a change in your personality, equanimity or *Upekkha* is the opposite of restlessness it brings about balance or peace of mind. These qualities are of vital importance for contemporary society.

They are indeed powerful qualities which could contribute to harmony, amity, concord and stability and peace among the various communities, races and religious groups.

In a world raging with the fires of greed, hate, resentment, and the sublime qualities of love, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity will undoubtedly have a chastening, mellowing and sobering influence and impact on the hearts and minds of mankind. Indeed there will be a Heaven on Earth rather than a veritable Hell on Earth as we witness today. As such it is quite clear and evident that not only the lives of individuals could be transformed but society itself could be converted into a paradise. This clearly and unequivocally demonstrates the fact that Karma is not predestination or fatalistic but is a dynamic and active force which is guided and motivated by the thoughts, words and deeds of men.

The social and economic structure of society today accurately reflects man's muddled illogical and selfish nature. It will be changed only when the ignoble nature is completely transformed by the above sublime qualities.

All improvement must come from within, for mind creates all phenomena out of the raw material of the Universe. The world stuff is neither good nor bad; it is man's thinking which makes heaven or hell out of it.

The Buddha with his penetrating insight says – "In this body equipped with sense organs and faculties, O monks I declare to you is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation thereof."

Philosophically speaking, these words are the most profound, most comprehensive and most illuminating ever uttered. We create the world literally. The world in

turn conditions us, but it does not create us. This is the great difference, since we, each of us individually, are the creators of our world. Even the conditioning it imposes is ultimately traceable to ourselves. Indeed in the world there is nothing great but Man, and in man there is nothing great but mind.

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