

# **THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF KAMMA**

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The Pali word KAMMA (Sanskrit KARMA) has a specific and unique meaning and explanation in Buddhism. The earlier Upanishadic and Jain interpretation of it, and the later expositions in Hinduism, differ much from what is found in Buddhism.

In Buddhist thought, Kamma is the Natural Law of moral causation, governed by the natural functionings of the mind. This concept explains the diversity of human character and helps us to understand the role of that character in the process of rebirth. It also exposes the natural relationship between the mental actions and their reactions. Kamma, unlike predestination, is a process which can be nullified, but like predestination, once an individual is subject to it, the results are inescapable. Kamma is, in a sense, the individual's works laid at the right door step. As we are individually responsible for our actions, the possibility to divert the course of those actions also remains with us.

The world is the phenomena of action and reaction. Cosmic actions and human actions work together side by side to shape the world. The present world together with its nations, cultures and civilizations is the result of its past cosmic and human actions. So is the human being. The child is the father of man. Whatsoever we sow, we reap. Good actions, in this or any other existence, bring forth good results and evil actions evil, even if those results must be deterred to another incarnation. This is a Law in itself, a natural Law. We have to understand it and with our own understanding and effort we have to make use of it. The proper channeling of Kamma is, in brief, expounded by the Buddha, as follows: "Refraining from all evil; attainment of what is good; cleansing of one's thoughts; this is the advice of the Awakened Ones." (Dhammapada, Verse 183).

KAMMA is the sole responsible factor that accounts for inequality among beings. Various differences among us owe to our own Kamma and so we ourselves are responsible for them and not others.

At one time, the Buddha was staying near Savatthi, in the Jeta's Grove, in Anathapindika's monastery. A Brahmin youth named Subha came to see him and asked:

“What is the cause,” good Lord, “What is the reason that lowness and excellence are to be seen among human beings while they are in human form? For, human beings of short life-span are to be seen and those of long life-span; those of many and those of few illness; those who are ugly, those who are beautiful; those who are of little account, those of great account; those who are poor, those who are wealthy; those who are of lowly families, those of high families; and those who are weak in wisdom, those who are full of wisdom.”

"Deeds are one's own, O youth", replied the Buddha, "Beings are heirs to deeds. Deeds are their matrix, deeds are kin, and deeds are their arbiters. Deed divides beings, that is to say, by lowness and excellence."

### **Etymology of the word:**

The word 'KAMMA' is formed as a secondary derivative abstract noun of the root 'kar' meaning 'to do' or 'to act.' So it literally means 'deed' or 'action'. According to its derivation the word can mean any kind of action, cosmic or human, animate or inanimate. But the Buddhist term KAMMA is restricted and limited to mean only those mental actions that are able to produce results. Material, mechanical or chemical action is the field of science and mental action is the field of psychology and religion. As the animate being is a composition of mind and matter, science, psychology and religion, each have much to say about that being. KAMMA is what Buddhism has to say as an important teaching to explain the various ways of fruition of the mental action of beings.

The good mental actions that are able to bring good results are called “KUSALAKAMMA” in Pali. Those that are unable to bring good results but produce evil results are called "AKUSALAKAMMA." The mental actions that are unable to produce any kind of result, and those that become nullified because of not getting a chance for fruition in this life or in the next life, and also those that become nullified because of the total purification of the mind by the eradication of TANHA (Craving) are called 'KIRIYA' or 'AHOSI' or 'AVYAKATA'. The productive mental action is called KAMMA and the resultant reaction is called VIPAKA. So the life of a being is nothing but a combination of mental actions and their reactions in a temporary material form.

### **The Formation of KAMMA**

In Buddhism, mind is analytically divided into four different aspects, (1) VEDANA or Feelings and Perceptions, (2) SANNA or Ideations and Conceptions, SAMKHARA or Volitions, Synergies or KAMMA-Actions, and (4) VINNANA or Passive Consciousness or Sub-Consciousness. The first three

also could be called 'Active Consciousness.' VEDANA is direct knowledge that comes from sense-perception and SANNA is the indirect knowledge that develops through the same sense-perceptions and comes as conception or thinking. Skilful thinking comes from intelligence, which also is derived as a VIPAKA of KAMMA. VEDANAS and SANNAS are KIRIYAS so long as they are not reinforced by TANHA. When VEDANAS and SANNAS are mixed with TANHA they come to be called KAMMA or SAMKHARA. The Pali words KAMMA, SAMKHARA, UPADHI, UPADANA, KILESA, KUSALAKUSALA, and PUNNAPAPA are also synonyms and have the same meaning. TANHA, together with its various forms, is the factor that changes the character of VEDANA and SANNA and turns them to KAMMA or SAMKHARA. That is why the eradication of TANHA is so important for the person who is concerned about putting an end to his cycle of rebirth.

### **Classification of Karma**

KAMMA is, in Buddhism, mainly classified in five different ways. They are: (1) Classification according to the nature of the effect, (2) Classification according to the plane of existence within which the effects are produced, (3) Classification according to the time period in which the effects are worked out, (4) Classification according to the way the KAMMAS are functioning and (5) Classification according to the priority of effect. Now we shall turn to each classification separately and in more detail.

#### **(1) The Classification according to the nature of the effect**

KAMMA is divided into three broad groups as, (1) KUSALA, (2) AKUSALA and (3) AVYAKATA. Of Kusala Kammās ten are listed as, Generosity, Morality, Meditation, Transference of merit, Rejoicing in merit, Service, Reverence, Teaching what is good, Learning what is good, and Strengthening of confidence. The AKUSALA KAMMAS are likewise given a listing of ten as, Killing, Stealing, Sexual misconduct, Lying, Slandering, Harsh Speech, Frivolous Talk, Covetousness, Ill-will, and False View. The opposite of each is found in the other and serves as another way of listing of KUSALAS. Going beyond the listings, however, the KUSALA and AKUSALAS are innumerable. These are only the lists of more common ones. KUSALAS and AKUSALAS are those mental actions that are able to bring forth results according to the nature of each action. AVYAKATAS are nullified or fruitless mental actions which come under the names VEDANA and SANNA.

## **(2) The Classification according to the plane of existence within which the effects are produced**

According to this classification, KAMMA is divided into four groups as, (1) KAMAVACARA, (2) RUPAVACARA, (3) ARUPAVACARA, and (4) LOKUTTARA.

KAMAVACARAS are those KUSALAS AND AKUSALAS that produce their effects in the first set of planes which are called the eleven lower planes of existence. These eleven worlds are divided with the first four being the miserable planes of animals and goblins, the fifth plane being the human world, and the remaining six being heavenly planes where the lower divine beings live.

RUPAVACARAS are those KUSALAS that produce their effects in the second set of planes, the sixteen higher heavenly planes of existence where those who have developed Jhanas of Form are to be born. These sixteen planes also are called the BRAHMA Realms of Form. Brahmas are a higher type of divine beings. In these worlds the AKUSALA actions do not function.

## **(3) The Classification according to the time period in which the effects are worked out**

In this classification the KAMMA is, again divided into four as, (1) DITTHADHAMMA VEDANIYA, (2) UPAPAJJA VEDANIYA, (3) APARAPARIYA VEDANIYA, and (4) AHOSI, OR AVYAKATA or KIRIYA.

DITTHADHAMMA VEDANIYAS are those Kamma-actions that produce their effects in this very present life. A Kamma of this type if becomes unable to produce results in this life, because of other more influential Kammas or on some other reason, they become nullified.

UPAPAJJA VEDANIYAS are those Kamma-actions that produce their results in the next life after death. This kind of KUSALAS and AKUSALAS are also called 'ANANTARIYAS'. If a Kamma of this type does not get room to produce its effect in that next life then it becomes nullified and fruitless.

APARAPARIYA VEDANIYAS are those Kammic actions that are able to produce results in any life until the person attains Nibbana. They become nullified only after the death of a person after his attainment of Nibbana.

AHOSIS are those Kammic actions that are nullified as stated above and those actions that remain in the stages of VEDANA and SANNA without turning to be SAMKHARAS. In the active consciousness of the Buddha and of the

Arahant, who have eradicated TANHA, the VEDANAS and SANNAS remain as they are and so no SAMKHARAS to arise anew. VINNANA or the BHAVANGA SOTA, which is the store house of old SAMKHARAS of the Buddhas and Arahants, gets totally purified of defiling Samkharas and becomes so lucid that it comes to be introduced under the terms, NANA-Knowledge, CAKKHU-Eye, VIJJA-Insight, PANNA-Wisdom, and ALOKA-Light. To him rebirth is ended.

#### **(4) The Classification according to way the Kammās are functioning**

The four groups according to these classifications are, (1) JANAKA, (2) UPATTHAMBHAKA, (3) UPAPIDAKA, and (4) UPAGHATAKA.

The word 'Janaka' means "Rebirth-producer" or "Product-producer". These Kammic actions are able to produce new birth after the person's death. Rebirth is the linking of the BHAVANGA SOTA or VINNANA with a new embryo.

UPATTHAMBHAKA means 'Reinforcer'. Kusala-kammās reinforce Kusalas and Akusala-kammās reinforce Akusalas.

UPAPIDAKAS are 'Force-reducers.' Kusalas reduce the force of Akusalas and Akusalas of Kusalas.

UPAGHATAKAS are 'Destroyers.' A more forceful Kamma when continues producing its results the lesser ones do not get a chance in this life or in the next to produce their results. Then that lesser Kamma becomes fruitless and the stronger one is called its Upaghataka.

#### **(5) The Classification according to the priority of effect**

According to this classification also The KAMMA is again divided into four as, (1) GARUKA, (2) ASANNA, (3) ACINNA and (4) KATATTA.

GARUKAS are the weightier lot among Kammās. In fruition they get more chance to come forward. Nobler actions and grave crimes come under this category. DITTHADHAMMA VEDANIYAS and UPAPAJJA VEDANIYAS in classification No. 3, RUPAVACARAS, ARUPAVACARAS, and LOKUTTARAS in classification No. 2 and UPAGHATAKAS in classification No. 4, include in the category of GARUKA.

ASANNAS are the Kammās that are closer to Garukas in their forcefulness. In the absence of a Garuka an Asanna gets its chance. The Kamma that functions at the moment of death is also called an Asanna Kamma.

ACINNAS are the habitual Kammic actions. When a person often repeats a good or a bad Kamma then it is called a habitual.

KATATTAS are just AVYAKATAS OR AHOSIS. They are mere mental actions and are unable to produce results.