

THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA

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In the Chulla Vibhange Sutta, the Buddha teaches, “Kamassakata manava satta, kamma dayada, kammayoni kamma, bhandu, kamma, patisarana Kamma satte vibhajati yadidan henappanitataya”. This means that beings have been born into this world because of their kamma, they have kamma as their inheritance, their source or origin, their kinsman and refuge. Kamma divides beings into high low etc.

Thus the doctrine of kamma is fundamental to Buddhism. No one who rejects the teaching of Kamma can call himself a Buddhist. To be a Buddhist one will have to at least accept that the prevalence of Kamma is a possibility, though he not be able to provide positive verifiable evidence to support this theory, in his present state of knowledge and spiritual development. Most of us accept Kamma because of its philosophical soundness and the fact that it explains the diverse fortunes of men in this world better than any other theory known to man. The only verifiable evidence for Kamma that I know of is found in the works of clairvoyants like Edgar Cayce of America. His clairvoyant readings about Karma and the past lives of people have been verified and found to be true.

The word Kamma means action. Here a law of action and reaction, cause and effect operating in the psychic realm is revealed by the Buddha. Here we are told that good actions (kusala kamma) bear good results while evil actions (akusala) bring about bad effects. The law of Cause and Effect is accepted in scientific and allied disciplines. Everything that we know of operates on this law, and therefore it is reasonable to suppose that in the psychic realm too this law operates. Now karma is based on the volition or cetana that caused the action. Hence actions that are not motivated by any deliberate or calculated volition, that is unintended actions do not constitute Karma. The Buddha was clear on this when he said “Chetanahan bhikkave kammam vadami”.

Without maintaining the existence of a person, an individual or a self, no Karma theory can be maintained. There is no meaning in saying the five-fold aggregates (pancakkhanda) performs kusala kamma or akusala kamma. None of the five kkhandas performs kamma, apart from their existence in a combination, there is no self. Now this is an abstruse point in Buddhist teachings. Until we realise and understand the full significance of the Anatta doctrine in the higher spiritual light of the paths and the fruits, we will have to accept and base our behaviour on the conventional basis that there is a “person” who fares on in Samsara. Of him the scriptures say he is “not the same nor

another”. But ordinary Buddhists are not dialecticians, nor well versed in the intricacies of Abhidhamma teachings, so for all practical purpose we say a person fares on in Samsara and performs kusala and akusala kamma. In many of the Buddha’s sermons he refers to a person (in the conventional sense) performing kusala and akusala kammass, e.g.

The lines from the Dhammapada, “Punnañ ce purisam kaira kaira teasm punappunam”. “If a person performs a meritorious deed, let him perform it again and again”

“Evam jatene maccena katabbam kusalam bahu”. “One born a mortal must perform a large store of meritorious deeds”

“Paccattam veditabbo vinnuhi”. “The Dhamma should be understood by each wise man personally by himself”

“Santi bhikkave ekacce samanabrahmana uccadavade sato sattassa vinasam, vivhavam pannapeti”. “Some ascetics and Brahmins postulate the destruction of the existing being” (after death). It will be noted that though there is no reference to a soul as existing in a being, a being or a person I referred to as existing. This is conventional truth. (Sammuti Sacca.)

Now Samsara is the faring on from life to life by a person. Release from the round of births is Nirvana. If escape from Samsara is Nirvana, then Nirvana exists because of the existence of Samsara. If there is no being or person faring on in Samsara then there can be no release from Samsara, and hence there could be no Nirvana. Samsara has always existed and no one can find its beginning. As long as there is Karma beings will fare on. Hence it is said that “Beings have karma as their own inheritance, and refuge. Karma divides them into high and low etc..” Here in discussing karma and vipaka we have to speak of a being or person as actually existing. Otherwise talk of karma and its results becomes meaningless.

The doctrine of Karma was known in India, prior to the arrival of the Buddha on the religious scene. The pre-Buddhistic teachers taught that Karma was unalterable. The Buddha did not accept this view. The Buddha taught that we the inheritors of our Karma can also alter our Karma, if we wish to and make the necessary effort. We can render the operation of Karma null and void by destroying all Karma in the attainment of Arahantship. Nigantanathaputta the founder of Jainism was one who accepted the doctrine of karma. He taught that karma could be exhausted and rendered null and void by the practice of severe forms of asceticism. As a result his followers practised very severe forms of self-mortification. The Buddha refuted these teachings and advocated the practice of the Noble Eightfold Paths, treading the middle-way between the two extremes of self-mortification, and self-indulgence.

There are many Buddhists who believe that everything that happens to us is the result of past Karma. This view called “Pubbekatuhetuvada” was rejected by the Buddha in the Mahatittayana Sutta, and the Kuddhevattu Vibhanga. There the Buddha mentions three fallacious views which were the sources of 3 erroneous beliefs held by heretics. viz:-

1. Everything that happens is due to former karma.
2. Everything that happens is due to the will of God.
3. Everything that happens is without cause. They are mere coincidences or accidents.

There are many idlers who do not make the necessary effort to achieve success in life. They do not practise diligence and industry in the fields of their business, industry, agriculture undertaking and so on. They say whether I make an effort or not I will be prosperous and well off if my Karma is good. This is an idler’s philosophy and an attempt to rationalise his indolence. Man is born into a prosperous or indigent family according to one’s previous Karma. After birth his fate depends on the food and the care he gets. There is no man who can depend entirely on his Karma and be independent of food and attention. Everyone has to make an effort to live. Man has to build a house, find food and drink, and the medicines he needs. He has to observe the rules of health and practice temperance. If he does not make an attempt to meet these requirements his fate will be a sad one. After a child is born if we tell him, “If you were born by the power of your karma then live by your karma” and abandon him, the child would meet with a sad fate. In the physical body of man only 1/4 part is dependent on Karma. The balance 3/4 parts are produced by food, mind and the element of heat (tejo dhatu). Thus the major factors of life are dependent on factors other than Karma. Mentally happy conditions bring about physical health and radiance of countenance. Distress brings about sadness, and consequently the physique is affected adversely. This is how the mind influences the body. The element of heart helps in the digestion of food and prevents the body disintegration as happens to a corpse, when the heat-element has gone off.

Men fall ill due to external causes other than Karma. The Girimanada Sutta mentions diseases born of bile, phlegm, and windy complaints and diseases caused by the combination of these three roots of illness taught in the Aurveda. Diseases are classified into 8 divisions, and only 1 of them is Karma. Thus it is only 1/8 of the diseases that affect man that have their origin in Karmic Causes. Others have physical causes and could be cured by the medical care and attention.

In the commentaries Kamma is classified into four types, viz: 1. Janaka Kamma. 2. Upatthambaka Kamma. 3. Upapidaka Kamma. 4. Upagataka. Janaka Kamma brings about rebirth. Upatthambaka gives support and fosters that Karma. Upapidaka causes obstruction or harassment to these Kammās. Upagathaka, destroys and takes away the operation of the first two and brings about death.

An analogy illustrating this is the instance of a farmer sowing his crops, and the rains and favourable weather supporting the growth of the crop. Harassment or obstruction is caused by wild animals and so on, while a flood or a fire can devastate the entire field and ruin the harvest.

Akusala kammās are suppressed and delayed from taking effect by 4 factors known as 1. Gati Sampatti. 2. Upadi Sampatti. 3. Kala Sampatti. and 4. Payoga Sampatti. Being born into a rich and prosperous family will prevent the opportunity of bad kammās coming up. Physical beauty also will help a person and prevent some of his bad kammās coming up.

Being born in a favourable age and time will also help favourable kammās to fruition and hinder akusala kammās coming up. Similarly effort and endeavour on the part of the person will favour his good kammās and help hinder his akusala kamma from bearing fruit. Similarly the fruits of good past kammās are prevented and barred from taking place by four factors. They are, 1. Gati vipatti. 2. Upadi vipatti. 3. Kala vipatti, and 4. Payoga vipatti. These constitute the converse of the favourable conditions referred to above. Being born in a unfavourable family and environment will prevent latent kusala kammās coming to bear fruit. Even though born indigent and poor if possessed with physical beauty this will help to hinder the fruition of akusala and assist in the fruition of good Kammās that are latent. Being born in adverse times will hinder the coming up of good kammās and pave the way for bad kammās to come up. Indolence and laziness will inhibit good kammās coming up and assist bad Kammās to bear their fruit.

In the Dhammapada we are taught that kamma does not bear fruits immediately or soon as we may wish. “Nahi papa katam kammam, sajju kirmva mucchati”. Just as milk does not turn to curd immediately after being taken from the cow kamma also takes time to bear fruit. The commentators say that the farmer may wish to reap his harvest say one week after sowing. But he will have to wait till the plants come up and bear the crops and wait till the crop is mature. Similarly we are told that kammās also take time. We know the physical reasons why milk takes time to turn to curd. We also know the physical reasons why grain that is sown takes time to mature and bear the harvest. But we do not know the mechanism or the details of the working of kamma that necessitates the delay in bearing the fruits. Neither Buddha nor the commentators have explained this to

us. To the question where is kamma stored we receive no answer in the Theravada beyond saying “Kamma vishaya achintya”. The field of kamma is beyond our process of reason and knowledge. But the Mahayanists say kamma is stored in the “Alayavignana – a so-called “storehouse consciousness”. But such a thing is not recognized in the Theravada nor is there reference to such a thing in the Suttas preached by the Buddha in our scriptures.

A question is sometimes asked “which came first the being or kamma? Kamma comes into the picture only after a being has come into existence. But how could a being come into existence without kamma? It is here that Darwin’s theory of Evolution can shed some light. The lower forms of life have no mind and thinking processes. It is after a being is evolved and come to the stage of thinking and acting according to volition that kamma can be acquired. So in the light of evolution we will have to say that it is the being that came first.

Buddhism teaches us to avoid akusalas and perform kusala kammass. But it should be remembered that kusala kammass also prolong our existence in Samsara. Then why advocate the cultivation of kusala-kammass? The reply is that the strength to destroy kamma is obtained by the performance of kusala kammass. It is by restraint of the senses in the performance of Kusala Kamma that we gain the ability to do away with all kammass. First akusala kammass have to be inhibited and done away with. The senses have to be controlled. This gives us the necessary power to perform the higher types of kammass that are necessary to completely do away with kammass in the attainment of Arahantship.