

# Kamma in Buddhism

**As Buddhists, we must understand *kamma* (action and the result of action) as it is explained in Buddhism.** We should not blindly follow the *kamma* teachings of other religions; otherwise, we will pitifully spin around according to *kamma* without being able to get beyond its power or realize its end.

**Why do we need to know the essence of *Kamma*?** Because our lives are inseparable from it and happen according to it. To be more precise, we can say that life is actually a stream of *kamma*. Desire to do deeds (*kamma*) causes one to perform actions and receive the results of those actions; then, desire to do deeds arises again and again endlessly. Therefore, life is merely a pattern of *kamma*. If we rightly understand *kamma*, we can lead our lives at peace, without any problems or suffering.

**There are two primary *kamma* doctrines.** One has been taught since before the Buddha's time and is still taught outside Buddhism; the other is the Buddhist principle of *kamma*. The first doctrine presents only half of the story. In that doctrine, one cannot conquer *kamma* and remains always under its domination; one actually desires to be under its power and asks for its help, without ever trying to fight for one's own liberation. One thus performs *kamma* as if accumulating assets for more satisfactory rebirth. One never thinks of ending *kamma*. One expects to rely on it instead of trying to end it. In Buddhism, we can understand *kamma* up to the level that we can conquer it and be liberated from it, that is, not carry the burden of *kamma* any more. We neither sit waiting for things to happen, nor leave our fate in the hands of gods, nor follow superstitions like purifying our *kamma* in sacred rivers.

**To be beyond *kamma*** seems incredible to most people; they may consider it a deception or a salesman's trick. Nonetheless, it really is possible if we take the Buddha as our True and Noble Friend. This will help us in practicing the complete set of Ten Rightnesses: the noble eightfold path plus right insight knowledge and right liberation in accordance with the law of specific conditionality (*idappaccayata*). In such practice, there is no foolish feeling that leads to desire for the various results of *kamma* (actions). A doctrine master from Southern India and contemporary of the Buddha heard that the Buddha taught the cessation of *kamma*. He then sent his disciples to ask the Buddha questions and to ask for His instructions. This well-known story is told in the *Solasapanha, Parayanavagga* of the *Khuddakanikaya* in the Pali Canon. Many people learn the Buddha's answers from this story and take them for study and practice.

**Nowadays, wrong teachings concerning *kamma*** are publicized in books by various Indian and Western writers under titles such as "*Kamma and Rebirth*." Although they are presented in the name of Buddhism, they are actually about *kamma* and rebirth as understood in Hinduism. So the right teaching of Buddhism is misrepresented. This should be recognized and corrected so that the Buddhist *kamma* principle can be preserved in its undistorted essence. The Buddha accepted as correct — that is, as not a wrong understanding of *kamma* — the half-formed teaching concerning good and evil deeds and their results that was presented before his time and outside his teaching. However, he added to it a final aspect, namely, the end of *kamma*, which is the essential Buddhist principle, thus completing the teaching on *kamma*. This cessation of *kamma* goes by two names. It can be called "the third kind of *kamma*" because there are good deeds, evil deeds, and the *kamma* leading to the end of both good and evil deeds. Sometimes four kinds of *kamma* are distinguished: good deeds, evil deeds, mixed deeds, and the *kamma* that is the end of all *kamma*. When enumerated in this fourfold way, the additional *kamma* taught in Buddhism becomes the fourth kind of *kamma*. However, if we take mixed *kamma* as falling under good actions and evil actions, then there are only three kinds of *kamma*, with the *kamma* that ends all *kamma* as the third kind again. This three-fold formulation is easy, convenient, and concise. If the third kind of *kamma* is left out, the teaching misses the essence of *kamma* in the true Buddhist sense.

**Kamma and Rebirth:** Rebirth occurs every time one does a deed, and that rebirth occurs spontaneously at the moment of action. We need not wait for rebirth to come after death, as is generally understood in the worldly sense. When one thinks and acts, the mind is spontaneously changed through the power of desire and clinging, which lead immediately to becoming and birth in accordance with the law of Dependent Co-origination (*paticca-samuppada*). There is no need to wait for physical death in order for rebirth to occur. This truth should be realized as the true teaching of Buddhism, as a core principle of the original, pristine Buddhism that states there is no self (*atta*) to be reborn. How the concept of rebirth after death crept into Buddhism is difficult to explain, and we need not concern ourselves with it. Simply preventing rebirth within the stream of Dependent Co-origination is enough for us to be free. Stopping egoistic rebirth is truly in accordance with Buddhism, and such action will be the kind of *kamma* that can be taken as refuge. When a good deed is done, goodness spontaneously arises; when an evil deed is done, evilness spontaneously arises. There is no need to wait for any further results. If there will be any birth after death, that rebirth only occurs through the *kamma* one has done in this very life and the results of which have already occurred here. We need not worry about rebirth such that it obstructs our practice.

**Receiving the Fruits of Kamma:** We should see the truth that a mind performing a deed is *kamma* itself and the subsequent mind is the result of that *kamma*. Other results that follow it are only uncertain by-products, since they may or may not occur, or do not keep up with our expectations due to other interfering factors. That the results of actions occur for the minds performing them is most certainly in line with the Buddhist principle that there is no self or soul to be reborn, as stated by the Buddha in the Kevatta Sutta. To hold the view that a soul or somebody is reborn deviates from the truth of not-self. Whenever a good or evil deed is done, goodness or evilness spontaneously arises accordingly without having to wait for later results. Nonetheless, most people expect certain results according to their wishes; then, they are disappointed when other factors interfere. Such intervening circumstances may lead one to hold a wrong view that good actions bring bad results and bad actions bring good results. We should be careful of this wrong view and should develop right understanding concerning the fruits of *kamma*.

Our understanding of how the results of *kamma* are received must always be self-apparent, immediate, and inviting of inquiry, and should never contradict the truth that the five aggregates of human life are not-self. Mind is merely a phenomenon pushed this way and that by conditions, stimulated to do things by environmental factors. The resulting reactions are accepted and regarded as good or evil according to one's feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Either kind pushes us into suffering, thus we should aim at ending *kamma* and getting beyond it. Then, we will have realized, awakened, and fully blossomed, which is genuine Buddhahood.

**There is a moralistic teaching of kamma** that retains an illusion of self that owns this and that. This version contradicts the principle of not-self stressed by the Buddha. We should correctly understand this perspective; otherwise, we will not benefit from practicing *kamma* teachings, since we will not be able to go beyond *kamma*. Endlessly remaining under the power of *kamma* is not the *kamma* teaching of Buddhism. Instead, wholeheartedly practice the *kamma* that ends all *kamma*. This will prevent us from unwittingly going astray.

**Activity & Reactivity:** The actions or movements of sentient beings that are done with volition, particularly that of craving and arising through defilements, are called *kamma*. An activity that is not caused by defilement, for example, one with an Arahant's intention, is not called "*kamma*"; it is called "*kiriya* (activity)." The result of *kiriya* is called "*patikiriya* (reaction)," while the result of *kamma* is called "*vipaka* (fruit of action)." These results occur justly in accordance with the law of nature. Ordinary people have ordinary volitions (*cetana*) as the causes of their actions, which are consequently *kamma*. Good volition leads to good action; evil volition leads to evil action. Through moral and cultural training, everybody is taught to do good deeds that do not cause trouble to others and bring good results to everyone. Therefore, *kamma* concerns the law of nature and is scientific.

**Types of Kamma:** There are many types of *kamma* depending on the characteristics of the

deeds and their doers. Some act with selfishness concerning the selves they desire to be. Some perform actions that lead to the ending of the self-illusion and the realization of Nibbana. Some people are pleased with worldly prosperity, others with heavenly prosperity, and some with the realization of Nibbana, such that they always seem to contradict each other. Some like to show off their good deeds, while others perform their good deeds secretly. Some proclaim their meritorious deeds with fanfare, while others do not need such fanfare. Some do their deeds with excessive ritual, while others do theirs without any ceremony at all. Some do theirs out of magical or superstitious fear, while others do theirs properly as Buddhist practice. Obviously, there are many types of *kamma*. Nevertheless, they all can be classified into two categories: those with self and for the sake of self, and those that aim for the ending of self-clinging and selfishness. Some do deeds in a business-like manner, expecting excessive profits. Others wish for the end of the vicious circle of life and death. Look for yourselves! Ordinary people do good deeds merely for the sake of inordinate profits.

***Kamma and Not-Self:*** The question of *kamma* and not-self is confusing and difficult to understand for various reasons. A monk once asked the Buddha, "How does *kamma* done by not-self give results for self?" This question arose because of the teaching on not-self that points out how the "actor" is merely a mind-body process void of self. After an action (*kamma*) is done by a selfless mind-body, how could it have any results for a "self" who is the "doer" who intentionally did that deed. The new concept of not-self contradicts the old concept of self. There is a self that claims to be not-self and does things in the name of not-self, but the sense of self still exists to receive the results of the deeds. Hence, this monk's question. If we see it rightly, we will understand that when the mind-body is not-self, the results of its actions will happen to a selfless mind-body, also. However, if that mind-body is full of a sense of self, the results of its actions will always happen to this apparent self. If *kamma* is not-self, its result will be not-self, and what occurs in accordance with *kamma* will be not-self. The things, whether human or animal, that we conventionally speak of as "actors (doers of *kamma*)" will also be not-self. The facts of *kamma* and not-self are never separate and never oppose each other.

**The ending of *kamma* is the same thing as *Nibbana*,** in other words, is synonymous with *Nibbana*. From where, then, come the teachers who instruct the people that death is the end of *kamma*? When someone dies, people murmur, "oh well, his *kamma* is finished." Moreover, they often say that one dies according to one's merits and *kamma*, without realizing that what is happening to them now is also according to their good and bad *kamma*, until they really reach the end of *kamma*, namely, *Nibbana*.

***Nibbana* is freedom from *kamma* and its results.** Further, *Nibbana* is freedom from the vicious *samsara* (cyclic existence) that keeps spinning according to *kamma*. *Nibbana*, therefore, is lovely and loveable, not frightening in the least. Even so, people prefer being trapped within the vicious cycles of birth and death according to their *kamma*, particularly the *kamma* they desire as a result of their defilements, although they never really get what they wish. Those who have big egos will normally hate and fear the end of *kamma* because ego-self desires *kamma*-results that appear lovely according to its viewpoint.

***Kamma* is attachment (*upadhi*) or burden.** When one performs *kamma*, life happens according to *kamma*, that is, one is bound by *kamma* no matter whether it is good or evil *kamma*. Good *kamma* makes one laugh and bad *kamma* makes one cry, but both weary us almost to death. Even so, people still like to laugh, since they misunderstand that good *kamma* is great virtue. When *kamma* does not bind our lives, it is as if there are no chains on our legs, whether iron chains or diamond-studded golden chains. Life becomes a burden when it is weighed down by *kamma* and we have to carry and support it. The end of *kamma* makes our lives light and free, but only a few people appreciate this as it is obscured by the veils of *atta* (self).

**In conclusion,** as Buddhists let's try to do only the *kamma* that is the end of *kamma*. When we see that *kamma* has occupied and ruled our lives, we will strive to practice, improve ourselves, and fight in every possible way to triumph over both good and evil *kamma*, so that none of them will oppress our minds. Let's develop minds that are clean, clear, and calm because no *kamma* and no results disturb it. Nowadays, most people understand

*kamma* as something bad and undesirable. This is correct because both good and evil *kamma* are despicable in that they cause the vicious cycles of birth and death to go on without cessation.

***Kamma in Buddhism*** is that *kamma* (action) which leads to the end of all *kamma* so that life is above and beyond *kamma*. Far from despicable, it is something to be understood and fully integrated into our lives. "Living beyond *kamma*" is something to be realized and attained.

Mokkhabalarama, Chaiya  
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