

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KAMMA

“All living beings have Kamma as their own.”

~ Majjhima Nikaya

18.1 LAW OF MORAL CAUSATION

- 18.1.1 Kamma is the law of moral causation. Rebirth is its corollary. Both Kamma and Rebirth are interrelated, fundamental doctrines in Buddhism.
- 18.1.2 What is the cause of the inequality that exists amongst mankind?
- 18.1.3 How do we account for the unevenness in this ill-balanced world?
- 18.1.4 Why should one be brought up in the lap of luxury, endowed with excellent mental, moral, and physical qualities, and another in absolute poverty, in abject misery? Why should one be born a millionaire and another a pauper? Why should one be a mental prodigy and another a idiot? Why should one be born with saintly characteristics and another with criminal tendencies? Why should some be linguists, artists, mathematicians, and musicians from the very cradle? Why should others be congenitally blind, deaf, and deformed? Why should some be blessed and others cursed from their birth?

18.1.5 According to the Buddha this inequality is due not only to heredity, environment, “nature and nurture” but also to the operation of the law of Kamma or, in other words, to the result of our own inherited past actions and our present doings. We ourselves are responsible for our own happiness and misery. We create our own heaven. We create our own hell. We are the architects of our own fate.

18.2 THE CAUSE OF INEQUALITY

18.2.1 Perplexed by the seemingly inexplicable, apparent disparity that exists amongst humanity, a young truth-seeker named Subha approached the Buddha and questioned him regarding it.

18.2.2 “What is the reason, what is the cause, O Lord, that we find amongst mankind the short-lived (*appayuka*) and the long-lived (*dighayuka*), the diseased (*bavhabadha*) and the healthy (*appabadha*), the ugly (*dubbanna*) and the beautiful (*vannavanta*), the powerless (*appesakka*) and the powerful (*mahesakka*), the poor (*appabhoga*) and the rich (*mahabhoga*), the lowborn (*nicakulina*) and the high-born (*uccakulina*), the ignorant (*duppanna*) and the wise (*pannavanta*)?”

18.2.3 The Buddha’s reply was:

*“All living beings have actions (Kamma) as their own, their inheritance, their congenital cause, their kinsman, their refuge. It is Kamma that differentiates beings into low and high states.”*¹

18.2.4 He then explained the causes of such differences in accordance with the law of cause and effect.

- 18.2.5 If a person destroys life, is a hunter, besmears his hand with blood, is engaged in killing and wounding, and is not merciful towards living beings, he, as a result of his killing, when born amongst mankind, will be short-lived.
- 18.2.6 If a person avoids killing, leaves aside cudgel and weapon, and is merciful and compassionate towards all living beings, he, as a result of his non-killing when born amongst mankind, will be long-lived.
- 18.2.7 If a person is in the habit of harming others with fist or clod, with cudgel or sword, he, as a result of his harmfulness, when born amongst mankind, will suffer from various diseases.
- 18.2.8 If a person is not in the habit of harming others, he, as a result of his harmlessness, when born amongst mankind, will enjoy good health.
- 18.2.9 If a person is wrathful and turbulent, is irritated by a trivial word, gives vent to anger, ill-will and resentment, he, as a result of his irritability, when born amongst mankind, will become ugly.
- 18.2.10 If a person is not wrathful and turbulent, is not irritated even by a torrent of abuse, does not give vent to anger, ill-will and resentment, he, as a result of his amiability, when born amongst mankind, will become beautiful.
- 18.2.11 If a person is jealous, envies the gains of others, marks of respect and honour shown to others, stores jealousy in his heart, he, as a result of his jealousy, when born amongst mankind, will be powerless.
- 18.2.12 If a person is not jealous, does not envy the gains of others, marks of respect and honour shown to others, stores not

jealousy in his heart, he, as a result of his absence of jealousy, when born amongst mankind, will be powerful.

18.2.13 If a person does not give anything for charity, he, as a result of his greediness, when born amongst mankind, will be poor.

18.2.14 If a person is bent on charitable giving, he, as a result of his generosity, when born amongst mankind, will be rich.

18.2.15 If a person is stubborn, haughty, honours not those who are worthy of honour, he, as a result of his arrogance and irreverence, when born amongst mankind, will be of low-birth.

18.2.16 If a person is not stubborn, not haughty, honours those who are worthy or honour, he, as a result of his humility and deference, when born amongst mankind, will be of high-birth.

18.2.17 If a person does not approach the learned and the virtuous and inquire what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong, what should be practised and what should not be practised, what should be done and what should not be done, what conduces to one's welfare and what to one's ruin, he, as a result of his non-inquiring spirit, when born amongst mankind, will be ignorant.

18.2.18 If a person does approach the learned and virtuous and makes inquiries in the foregoing manner, he, as a result of his inquiring spirit, when born amongst mankind, will be intelligent.

18.2.19 Certainly we are born with hereditary characteristics. At the same time we possess certain innate abilities that science cannot adequately account for. To our parents we are indebted for the gross sperm and ovum that form the nucleus

of this so-called being. There they remain dormant until this potential germinal compound is vitalized by the Kammic energy needed for the production of the foetus. Kamma is therefore the indispensable conceptive cause of this being.

- 18.2.20 The accumulated Kammic tendencies inherited, in the course of previous lives, at times play a far greater role than the hereditary parental cells and genes in the formation of both physical and mental characteristics.
- 18.2.21 The Buddha, for instance, inherited, like every other person, the reproductive cells and genes from his parents. But physically, morally, and intellectually there was none comparable to Him in His long line of honourable ancestors. In the Buddha's own words, He belonged not to the Royal lineage, but to that of the *Ariyan* Buddhas. He was certainly a superman, an extraordinary creation of His own Kamma.
- 18.2.22 According to the Lakkhana Sutta² the Buddha inherited exceptional physical features such as the thirty-two major marks, as the result of his past meritorious deeds. The ethical reason for acquiring each physical feature is clearly explained in the discourse.
- 18.2.23 It is obvious from this unique case that Kammic tendencies could not only influence our physical organism, but also nullify the potentiality of the parental cells and genes — hence the significance of the Buddha's enigmatic statement: "We are the heirs of our own actions."

18.3 NOT EVERYTHING IS DUE TO KAMMA

- 18.3.1 Although Buddhism attributes this variation to the law of Kamma, as the chief cause amongst a variety, it does not

however assert that everything is due to Kamma. The law of Kamma, important as it is, is only one of the twenty-four causal conditions (*paccaya*), described in Buddhist Philosophy.

- 18.3.2 Refuting the erroneous view that “Whatsoever weal or woe or neutral feeling is experienced, is all due to some previous action (*pubbekatahetu*),” the Buddha states:

“So, then, owing to previous action, men will become murderers, thieves, unchaste, liars, slanderers, babblers, covetous, malicious, and perverse in view. Thus for those who fall back on the former deeds as the essential reason, there is neither the desire to do, nor effort to do, nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed.”³

- 18.3.3 This important text contradicts the belief that all physical circumstances and mental attitudes spring solely from past Kamma. If the present life is totally conditioned or wholly controlled by our past actions, then Kamma is certainly tantamount to fatalism or pre-determination or pre-destination. One will not be free to mould one’s present and future. If this were true, freewill would be an absurdity. Life would be purely mechanical, not much different from a machine. Whether we are created by an Almighty God who controls our destinies and fore-ordains our future, or are produced by an irresistible past Kamma that completely determines our fate and controls our life’s course, independent of any free action on our part, is essentially the same. The only difference then lies in the two words God and Kamma. One could easily be substituted for the other, because the ultimate operation of both forces would be identical.

- 18.3.4 Such a fatalistic doctrine is not the Buddhist law of Kamma.

18.4 THE FIVE NIYAMAS

18.4.1 According to Buddhism there are five orders or processes (*Niyamas*) which operate in the physical and mental realms.

18.4.2 They are:-

- i. *Utu Niyama*, physical inorganic order; e.g., seasonal phenomena of winds and rains, the unerring order of seasons, characteristic seasonal changes and events, causes of winds and rains, nature of heat, etc. belong to this group.
- ii. *Bija Niyama*, order of germs and seeds (physical organic order); e.g., rice produced from rice seed, sugary taste from sugar-cane or honey, and peculiar characteristics of certain fruits. The scientific theory of cells and genes and the physical similarity of twins may be ascribed to this order.
- iii. *Kamma Niyama*, order of act and result; e.g., desirable and undesirable acts produce corresponding good and bad results.

As surely as water seeks its own level, so does Kamma, given opportunity, produce its inevitable result, — not in the form of a reward or punishment but as an innate sequence. This sequence of deed and effect is as natural and necessary as the way of the sun and the moon, and is the retributive principle of Kamma.

Inherent in Kamma is also the continuative principle. Manifold experiences, personal characteristics, accumulated knowledge, and so forth are all indelibly recorded in the palimpsest-like mind. All these experiences and characters transmigrate from life to life. Through lapse of time they may be forgotten as in the case of our experiences of our childhood. Infant prodigies and wonderful children, who speak in different

languages without receiving any instruction, are noteworthy examples of the continuative principle of Kamma.

- iv. *Dhamma Niyama*, order of the norm; e.g., the natural phenomena occurring at the birth of a Bodhisatta in his last birth. Gravitation and other similar laws of nature, the reason for being good, etc. may be included in this group.
- v. *Citta Niyama*, order of mind or psychic law; e.g., processes of consciousness, constituents of consciousness, power of mind, including telepathy, telesthesia, retro-cognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-reading, and such other psychic phenomena, which are inexplicable to modern science.

18.4.3 Every mental or physical phenomenon could be explained by these all-embracing five orders or processes which are laws in themselves. Kamma as such is only one of these five orders. Like all other natural laws, they demand no lawgiver.

18.4.4 Of these five, the physical inorganic order, the physical organic order and the order of the norm are more or less of the mechanical type though they can be controlled to some extent by human ingenuity and the power of mind. For example, fire normally burns, and extreme cold freezes, but man has walked unscathed over fire and meditated naked on Himalayan snows; horticulturists have worked marvels with flowers and fruits; and Yogis have performed levitation. Psychic law is equally mechanical, but Buddhist training aims at control of mind, which is possible by right understanding and skilful volition. Kamma law operates quite automatically and, when the Kamma is powerful, man cannot interfere with its inexorable result though he may desire to do so; but here also right understanding and skilful

volition can accomplish much and mould the future. Good Kamma, persisted in, can thwart the reaping of bad.

18.4.5 Kamma is certainly an intricate law whose working is fully comprehended only by a Buddha. The Buddhist aims at the final destruction of all Kamma.

18.4.6 *Kamma-Vipaka* (fruit of action) is one of the four unthinkableables (*acinteyya*), states the Buddha in the Anguttara Nikaya⁴.

18.5 NOTES ON CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

1. *Kamassaka manava satta, Kammadayada, Kammayoni, Kammabandhu, Kammaṭṭisārana, Kammam satte vibhajati yadidam hinappanitataya 'ti.* Majjhima Nikaya, Cullakammavibhanga Sutta, No. 135, Cf. Venerable Nagasena's reply to the identical question put by King Milinda.
2. Digha Nikaya, iii, 142, No. 30.
3. Anguttara Nikaya i, 173; Gradual Sayings, i. 157.
4. Gradual Sayings, part 2, p. 90.