



Good, Evil and Beyond

Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching

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Translated by Bruce Evans

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Introduction

The work presented here is based on a single chapter from *Buddhadhamma*, by Venerable P. A. Payutto. *Buddhadhamma* is perhaps the author's most formal and ambitious book to date, a volume of over one thousand pages dealing with the whole of the Buddha's teaching. Although the work is scholarly in approach, it renders the Buddhist themes so often misunderstood or considered beyond the scope of the ordinary layman more approachable in practical terms.

The venerable author is one of the foremost Buddhist scholars in Thailand today. His vast output of material ranges from simple explanations of basic Buddhist themes to more substantial Dhamma teachings of a commentarial nature (such as *Buddhadhamma*) and social analyses from a Buddhist perspective (such as *Buddhist Economics*). Venerable Payutto is unusually gifted in this regard, having had experience of both Eastern and Western cultures in the course of his scholastic and teaching careers. This, combined with an inquiring mind, exhaustive research, and an intuitive understanding of rare scope, gives the venerable author an outstanding position from which to present the Buddha's teaching.

For the modern Westerner, the teaching of *kamma* offers a path of practice based not on fear of a higher authority, nor dogma, but founded on a clear understanding of the natural law of cause and effect as it relates to human behavior. It is a teaching to be not so much believed in as understood and seen in operation.

Buddhism is a religion that puts wisdom to the fore rather than faith. Intelligent and honest inquiry are not only welcomed, but encouraged. Part of this inquiry requires a good background understanding of the way cause and effect function on the personal level. This is the domain of ethics or morality, and the specific domain of *kamma*. What criteria are there for right and wrong behavior? As concepts, these words are open to a wide range of interpretations, but in the study of *kamma* we are concerned with finding definitions that are workable and sound. Such definitions must not only point out a clear direction for moral conduct, but also provide the reasons and incentives for maintaining it. The teaching of *kamma* satisfies these requirements.

Western society today lacks clarity or a coherent direction in moral issues. With the waning of faith in a Supreme Being that followed the advances of science, all that seems to remain as a prescription for life are political systems and social ideals. When authoritarian rule is rejected, it often means a rejection of any coherent behavioral standard. There seems to be no room in modern thinking for morality, except perhaps on the level of ideals such as human rights.

In the age of personal freedom and the right to self-expression, ethics seem to have been reduced to a matter of personal opinion, social decree or cultural preference. Concepts such as "right" and "wrong," and "good" and "evil," no longer stand on solid ground, and we find ourselves more and more floundering when asked to define them. Are these qualities simply a matter of opinion, or do they have some reality based on natural law? How do they relate to the scientific world of impersonal cause and effect relationships? In the eyes of many, the concepts

of good and evil have been reduced to tools for righteous bigotry or political opportunism. This is why it is irksome for so many people to see or hear the word "morality"; the subject is a decidedly boring one for most. In an age when life seems to be offering an endless succession of "cheap thrills," who's interested in restraint?

Even so, without any clear direction in life we are faced with problems on many levels. With no clear direction, no guidelines on which to base life, it becomes a shabby collection of blunders, as we go clumsily groping from one experience to the next -- even more so when the meaning of life is reduced to a compulsive race to amass "experiences" for their own sake. The result is a society driven by hedonism, fueled by craving, and plagued with problems: on the personal level, depression, loneliness, and nervous disorders; on the communal level, irrational behavior, crime and social unrest. And at the most subtle level, the legacy of the present age is a life out of step with nature, producing the spiritual "angst" which has led to the modern search for enlightenment from Eastern sources.

It is in the light of precisely this situation that the law of kamma is so relevant. Although the words "kamma" or "karma"[*] are sometimes heard in the present day, the concept rarely emerges from the cloud of mystery that has enshrouded it from its first introduction to the West. Strangely so, because in fact the law of kamma is a singularly dynamic and lucid teaching, one which is particularly pertinent to the modern age. In the law of kamma we are able to find meaningful and relevant definitions of "good" and "evil," an understanding of which not only clarifies the path of ethical practice, but also facilitates personal well-being and fulfillment. Not only individual needs, but problems and directions on a social level can be more readily understood with the help of this teaching. It is no wonder, then, that the Law of Kamma is one of the cornerstones of Buddhism.

It is my belief that the present book is an invaluable reference for both the casual student and the more committed practitioner of Buddhism. The law of kamma, as one of Buddhism's central themes, requires not only a modicum of learning, but also a good deal of inner reflection. The book should therefore not be read as simply a collection of ideas to be committed to memory, but as "food for thought," to be mulled over, reflected on and applied to practical reality. Some of the concepts presented may at first seem strange, but time spent contemplating them will reveal that these concepts, far from strange, are really quite ordinary. They are, in fact, so ordinary that they somehow elude our complicated minds.

* * *

I originally set out to make a fairly literal translation of this book, but having completed the first draft I was faced with a number of problems. Firstly, some of the points raised in the book applied specifically to Thai culture and would only be meaningful in such a context. One section, for instance, covered the difference between *kusala* (skillful) and *akusala* (unskillful) on one hand, and *puñña* (merit) and *papa* (demerit or sin) on the other, these words being extensively used in Thailand. But they are fairly untranslatable in English and not particularly relevant to non-Buddhist cultures. For this reason I asked the venerable author for permission to delete this section. Some sections, such as that on intention, were moved from one chapter to another. On all of these occasions I have sought out the venerable author's advice and permission.

One of the major changes to the book is the addition of Chapter 4, dealing with kamma on the social level, which was put together from a tape recording of an informal series of questions and answers on the subject between myself and the author. The subject is in fact a very broad one, worthy of a book in its own right. It is also one aspect of kamma which is particularly relevant to modern Western interests.

In general, the natures of the two languages, Thai and English, are vastly different. What is considered good Thai, if rendered directly into English, sometimes turns into bad English. Accordingly I have had to do some editing in the process of the translation, mainly by cutting out repetitious passages. There are a number of Pali words which it was felt were better left untranslated in the body of the text, in the hope that some of these words may, in time, find their way into the English language in one form or another. They are words for which the English language has no direct translations, and as such they represent an unfortunate lack for the Western world as a whole.

All in all, the book is not strictly a literal translation, as anyone familiar with the two languages will find out. For any shortcomings regarding both the language, the quality of translation, and the amount of editing that has gone into this work, I ask the reader's forgiveness, and can only hope that the shortcomings are surmountable to an earnest student on the quest for truth.

Finally, I should mention that the manuscript has been read over by so many people as to be too numerous to mention here. I have relied on the suggestions and feedback of all of them to guide my treatment of the translation, hoping to present the book in as "universal" a way as possible, and without this help I am sure the book would be much less polished than it now stands.

May any merits accruing from the production of this book serve to illuminate the subject of kamma, and thereby lead to a saner world for all.

Unless otherwise indicated, all footnotes are mine.

Bruce Evans
Bangkok, 1993

Acknowledgment

As the translator has pointed out in his own introduction, this work is not a direct translation of the original Thai version, but has been adapted to suit a Western audience. Some parts have been deleted, some trimmed down, some have been rearranged, and there have been a number of footnotes added to explain concepts which might not be readily understood by a Western readership. Even so, the essential meaning of the original remains intact, and in fact the work has in the process become more suitable for readers with a non-Buddhist background. This translation therefore is not only the fruit the translator's admirable ability, but of a concerted effort, based on a desire for true benefit.

I would like to express my appreciation to Mr. Evans for his good intentions and commitment in translating this work into English and setting the manuscript up for printing on computer. I would also like to express my appreciation to Venerable Maha Insorn Cintapanyo, who helped to finalize the setting up, and the Buddhadhamma Foundation, who have taken on the financial responsibility.

May the collected wholesome intentions of all concerned serve to encourage right understanding and right conduct, which are the conditions which will bring about peace and happiness in the world today.

P.A. Payutto
October 15, 1992 (B.E. 2535)

**All beings are the owners of their kamma
heirs of their kamma
born of their kamma
related to their kamma
supported by their kamma ...**

Footnote:

[*] Kamma -- the Pali spelling -- which is used throughout this book, is not as familiar as the Sanskrit spelling, *karma*, although they both mean the same. [[Back to text](#)]

Understanding the Law of Kamma

Kamma as a law of nature

Buddhism teaches that all things, both material and immaterial, are entirely subject to the direction of causes and are interdependent. This natural course of things is called in common terms "the law of nature," and in the Pali language *niyama*, literally meaning "certainty" or "fixed way," referring to the fact that specific determinants inevitably lead to corresponding results.

The laws of nature, although uniformly based on the principle of causal dependence, can nevertheless be sorted into different modes of relationship. The Buddhist commentaries describe five categories of natural law, or *niyama*. They are:

- 1. *Utuniyama*:** the natural law pertaining to physical objects and changes in the natural environment, such as the weather; the way flowers bloom in the day and fold up at night; the way soil, water and nutrients help a tree to grow; and the way things disintegrate and decompose. This perspective emphasizes the changes brought about by heat or temperature.
- 2. *Bijaniyama*:** the natural law pertaining to heredity, which is best described in the adage, "as the seed, so the fruit."
- 3. *Cittaniyama*:** the natural law pertaining to the workings of the mind, the process of cognition of sense objects and the mental reactions to them.
- 4. *Kammaniyama*:** the natural law pertaining to human behavior, the process of the generation of action and its results. In essence, this is summarized in the words, "good deeds bring good results, bad deeds bring bad results."
- 5. *Dhammaniyama*:** the natural law governing the relationship and interdependence of all things: the way all things arise, exist and then cease. All conditions are subject to change, are in a state of affliction and are not self: this is the Norm.

The first four *niyama* are contained within, or based on, the fifth one, *Dhammaniyama*, the Law of Dhamma, or the Law of Nature. It may be questioned why *Dhammaniyama*, being as it were the totality, is also included within the subdivisions. This is because this fourfold categorization does not cover the entire extent of *Dhammaniyama*.

To illustrate: the population of Thailand can be sorted into different categories, such as the royalty, the government, public servants, merchants and the populace; or it may be categorized as the police, military, public servants, students and the populace; or it can be divided up in a number of other ways. Actually, the words "the populace" include all the other groupings in the country. Public servants, householders, police, the military, merchants and students are all equally members of the populace, but they are singled out because each of those groups has its own unique characteristics. Those people without any relevant feature particular to them are grouped under the general heading, "the populace." Moreover, although those groupings may change according to their particular design, they will always include the word "the populace," or "the people," or a similar generic term. The inclusion of Dhammaniyama in the five niyama should be understood in this way.

Whether or not these five natural laws are complete and all-inclusive is not important. The commentators have detailed the five groupings relevant to their needs, and any other groupings can be included under the fifth one, Dhammaniyama, in the same way as in the example above. The important point to bear in mind is the commentators' design in pointing out these five niyama. In this connection three points may be mentioned:

Firstly, this teaching highlights the Buddhist perspective, which sees the course of things as subject to causes and conditions. No matter how minutely this law is analyzed, we see only the workings of the Norm, or the state of interdependence. A knowledge of this truth allows us to learn, live and practice with a clear and firm understanding of the way things are. It conclusively eliminates the problem of trying to answer questions of a Creator God with the power to divert the flow of the Norm (unless that God becomes one of the determining factors within the flow). When challenged with such misleading questions as, "Without a being to create these laws, how can they come to be?" we need only reflect that if left to themselves, all things must function in some way or other, and this is the way they function. It is impossible for them to function any other way. Human beings, observing and studying this state of things, then proceed to call it a "law." But whether it is called a law or not does not change its actual operation.

Secondly, when we analyze events, we must not reduce them entirely to single laws. In actual fact, one and the same event in nature may arise from any one of these laws, or a combination of them. For example, the blooming of the lotus in the day time and its folding up at night are not the effects of utuniyama (physical laws) alone, but are also subject to bijaniyama (heredity). When a person sheds tears it may be due largely to the effects of cittaniyama, as with happy or sad mental states, or it could be the workings of utuniyama, such as when smoke gets in the eyes.

Thirdly, and most importantly, here the commentators are showing us that the law of kamma is just one of a number of natural laws. The fact that it is given as only one among five different laws reminds us that not all events are the workings of kamma. We might say that kamma is that force which directs human society, or decides the values within it. Although it is simply one type of natural law, it is the most important one for us as human beings, because it is our particular responsibility. We are creators of kamma, and kamma in return shapes the fortunes and conditions of our lives.

Most people tend to perceive the world as partly in the control of nature, partly in the control of human beings. In this model, *kammaniyama* is the human responsibility, while the other *niyama* are entirely nature's domain.

Within the workings of *kammaniyama*, the factor of intention or volition is crucial. Thus, the law of *kamma* is the law which governs the workings of volition, or the world of intentional human thought and action. Whether or not we deal with other *niyama*, we must deal with the law of *kamma*, and our dealings with other *niyama* are inevitably influenced by it. The law of *kamma* is thus of prime importance in regulating the extent to which we are able to create and control the things around us.

Correctly speaking, we could say that the human capacity to enter into and become a factor within the natural cause and effect process, which in turn gives rise to the impression that we are able to control and manipulate nature, is all due to this law of *kamma*. In scientific and technological areas, for example, we interact with the other *niyama*, or natural laws, by studying their truths and acting upon them in conformity with their nature, creating the impression that we are able to manipulate and control the natural world.

In addition to this, our volition or intention shapes our social and personal relationships, as well as our interactions with other things in the environment around us. Through volition, we shape our own personalities and our life-styles, social positions and fortunes. It is because the law of *kamma* governs our entire volitional and creative world that the Buddha's teaching greatly stresses its importance in the phrase: *Kammuna vattati loko*: The world is directed by *kamma*.[\[1\]](#)*

The law of *kamma* and social preference

Apart from the five kinds of natural law mentioned above, there is another kind of law which is specifically man-made and is not directly concerned with nature. These are the codes of law fixed and agreed upon by society, consisting of social decrees, customs, and laws. They could be placed at the end of the above list as a sixth kind of law, but they do not have a Pali name. Let's call them Social Preference.[\[a\]](#) These codes of social law are products of human thought, and as such are related to the law of *kamma*. They are not, however, the law of *kamma* as such. They are merely a supplement to it, and do not have the same relationship with natural truth as does the law of *kamma*, as will presently be shown. However, because they are related to the law of *kamma* they tend to become confused with it, and misunderstandings frequently arise as a result.

Because both *kammaniyama* and Social Preference are human concerns and are intimately related to human life, it is very important that the differences between them are clearly understood.

In general we might state that the law of *kamma* is the natural law which deals with human actions, whereas Social Preference, or social laws, are an entirely human creation, related to nature only insofar as they are a product of the natural human thought process. In essence, with

the law of kamma, human beings receive the fruits of their actions according to the natural processes, whereas in social law, human beings take responsibility for their actions via a process established by themselves.

The meaning of kamma

Etymologically, kamma means "work" or "action." But in the context of the Buddha's teaching it is defined more specifically as "action based on intention" or "deeds willfully done." Actions that are without intention are not considered to be kamma in the Buddha's teaching.

This definition is, however, a very general one. If we wish to clarify the whole range of meaning for kamma, we must analyze it more thoroughly, dividing it up into different perspectives, or levels, thus:

a. Kamma as intention

Essentially, kamma is intention (*cetana*), and this word includes will, choice and decision, the mental impetus which leads to action. Intention is that which instigates and directs all human actions, both creative and destructive, and is therefore the essence of kamma, as is given in the Buddha's words, *Cetanaham bhikkhave kammam vadami*: Monks! Intention, I say, is kamma. Having willed, we create kamma, through body, speech and mind.[2]

At this point we might take some time to broaden our understanding of this word "intention." "Intention" in the context of Buddhism has a much subtler meaning than it has in common usage. In the English language, we tend to use the word when we want to provide a link between internal thought and its resultant external actions. For example, we might say, "I didn't intend to do it," "I didn't mean to say it" or "she did it intentionally."

But according to the teachings of Buddhism, all actions and speech, all thoughts, no matter how fleeting, and the responses of the mind to sensations received through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, without exception, contain elements of intention. Intention is thus the mind's volitional choosing of objects of awareness; it is the factor which leads the mind to turn towards, or be repelled from, various objects of awareness, or to proceed in any particular direction; it is the guide or the governor of how the mind responds to stimuli; it is the force which plans and organizes the movements of the mind, and ultimately it is that which determines the states experienced by the mind.

One instance of intention is one instance of kamma. When there is kamma there is immediate result. Even just one little thought, although not particularly important, is nevertheless not void of consequence. It will be at the least a "tiny speck" of kamma, added to the stream of conditions which shape mental activity. With repeated practice, through repeated proliferation by the mind,

or through expression as external activity, the result becomes stronger in the form of character traits, physical features or repercussions from external sources.

A destructive intention does not have to be on a gross level. It may, for example, lead to the destruction of only a very small thing, such as when we angrily tear up a piece of paper. Even though that piece of paper has no importance in itself, the action still has some effect on the quality of the mind. The effect is very different from tearing up a piece of paper with a neutral state of mind, such as when throwing away scrap paper. If there is repeated implementation of such angry intention, the effects of accumulation will become clearer and clearer, and may develop to more significant levels.

Consider the specks of dust which come floating unnoticed into a room; there isn't one speck which is void of consequence. It is the same for the mind. But the weight of that consequence, in addition to being dependent on the amount of mental "dust," is also related to the quality of the mind. For instance, specks of dust which alight onto a road surface have to be of a very large quantity before the road will seem to be dirty. Specks of dust which alight onto a floor, although of a much smaller quantity, may make the floor seem dirtier than the road. A smaller amount of dust accumulating on a table top will seem dirty enough to cause irritation. An even smaller amount alighting on a mirror will seem dirty and will interfere with its functioning. A tiny speck of dust on a spectacle lens is perceptible and can impair vision. In the same way, volition or intention, no matter how small, is not void of fruit. As the Buddha said:

"All kamma, whether good or evil, bears fruit. There is no kamma, no matter how small, which is void of fruit."[\[3\]](#)

In any case, the mental results of the law of kamma are usually overlooked, so another illustration might be helpful:

There are many kinds of water: the water in a sewer, the water in a canal, tap water, and distilled water for mixing a hypodermic injection. Sewer water is an acceptable habitat for many kinds of water animals, but is not suitable for bathing, drinking or medicinal use. Water in a canal may be used to bathe or to wash clothes but is not drinkable. Tap water is drinkable but cannot be used for mixing a hypodermic injection. If there is no special need, then tap water is sufficient for most purposes, but one would be ill-advised to use it to mix a hypodermic injection.

In the same way, the mind has varying levels of refinement or clarity, depending on accumulated kamma. As long as the mind is being used on a coarse level, no problem may be apparent, but if it is necessary to use the mind on a more refined level, previous unskillful kamma, even on a minor scale, may become an obstacle.

b. Kamma as conditioning factor

Expanding our perspective, we find kamma as a component within the whole life process, being **the agent which fashions the direction of life**. This is kamma in its sense of "sankhara,"[[b](#)] as it appears in the Wheel of Dependent Origination[[c](#)], where it is described as "the agent which fashions the mind." This refers to the factors or qualities of the mind which, with intention at the lead, shape the mind into good, evil or neutral states, which in turn fashion the thought process and its effects through body and speech. In this context, kamma could be defined simply as volitional impulses. Even in this definition we still take intention as the essence, and that is why we sometimes see the word sankhara translated simply as intention.

c. Kamma as personal responsibility

Now let us look further outward, to the level of an individual's relation to the world. Kamma in this sense refers to the expression of thoughts through speech and actions. This is **behavior from an ethical perspective**, either on a narrow, immediate level, or on a broader level, including the past and the future. Kamma in this sense corresponds to the very broad, general meaning given above. This is the meaning of kamma which is most often encountered in the scriptures, where it occurs as an inducement to encourage responsible and good actions, as in the Buddha's words:

"Monks! These two things are a cause of remorse. What are the two? Some people in this world have not made good kamma, have not been skillful, have not made merit as a safeguard against fear. They have committed only bad kamma, only coarse kamma, only harmful kamma ... They experience remorse as a result, thinking, 'I have not made good kamma. I have made only bad kamma ...'"[[4](#)]

It is worth noting that these days, not only is kamma almost exclusively taught from this perspective, but it is also treated largely from the perspective of past lives.

d. Kamma as social activity or career

From an even broader radius, that is, from the perspective of social activity, we have kamma in its sense of **work, labor or profession**. This refers to the life-styles and social undertakings resulting from intention, which in turn affect society. As is stated in the Vasettha Sutta:

"Listen, Vasettha, you should understand it thus: One who depends on farming for a livelihood is a farmer, not a Brahmin; one who makes a living with the arts is an artist ... one who makes a living by selling is a merchant ... one who makes a living working for others is a servant ... one who makes a living through stealing is a thief ... one who makes a living by the knife and the sword is a soldier ... one who makes a living by officiating at religious ceremonies is a priest, not a Brahmin ... one who rules the land is a king, not a Brahmin ... I say that he who has no defilements staining his mind, who is free of clinging, is a Brahmin ... One does not become a

Brahmin simply by birth, but by kamma is one a Brahmin, by kamma is one not a Brahmin. By kamma is one a farmer, an artist, a merchant, a servant, a thief, a soldier, a priest or even a king ... it is all because of kamma. The wise person, seeing Dependent Origination, skilled in kamma and its results, sees kamma as it is in this way. The world is directed by kamma. Humanity is directed by kamma ..."[5]

* * *

Having looked at these four different shades of meaning for the word "kamma," still it must be stressed that any definition of kamma should always be based on **intention**. Intention is the factor which guides our relationships with other things. Whether we will act under the influence of unskillful tendencies, in the form of greed, hatred and delusion, or skillful tendencies, is all under the control of intention.

Any act which is without intention has no bearing on the law of kamma. That is, it does not come into the law of kamma, but one of the other *niyama*, such as *utuniyama* (physical laws). Such actions have the same significance as a pile of earth caving in, a rock falling from a mountain, or a dead branch falling from a tree.

Kinds of kamma

In terms of its qualities, or its roots, kamma can be divided into two main types. They are:

1. Akusala kamma: kamma which is unskillful, actions which are not good, or are evil; specifically, actions which are born from the *akusala mula*, the roots of unskillfulness, which are greed, hatred and delusion.

2. Kusala kamma: actions which are skillful or good; specifically, actions which are born from the three *kusala mula*, or roots of skill, which are non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion.

Alternatively, kamma can be classified according to the paths or channels through which it occurs, of which there are three. They are:

1. Bodily kamma: intentional actions through the body.

2. Verbal kamma: intentional actions through speech.

3. Mental kamma: intentional actions through the mind.

Incorporating both of the classifications described above, we have altogether six kinds of kamma: bodily, verbal and mental kamma which is unskillful; and bodily, verbal and mental kamma which is skillful.

Another way of classifying kamma is according to its results. In this classification there are four categories:

1. Black kamma, black result: This refers to bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions which are harmful. Simple examples are killing, stealing, sexual infidelity, lying and drinking intoxicants.[\[d\]](#)

2. White kamma, white result: These are bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions which are not harmful, such as practicing in accordance with the ten bases for skillful action.[\[e\]](#)

3. Kamma that is both black and white, giving results both black and white: Bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions which are partly harmful, partly not.

4. Kamma which is neither black nor white, with results neither black nor white, which leads to the cessation of kamma: This is the intention to transcend the three kinds of kamma mentioned above, or specifically, developing the Seven Enlightenment Factors or the Noble Eightfold Path.

Of the three channels of kamma -- bodily, verbal and mental -- it is mental kamma which is considered the most important and far-reaching in its effects, as is given in the Pali:

"Listen, Tapassi. Of these three types of kamma so distinguished by me, I say that mental kamma has the heaviest consequences for the committing of evil deeds and the existence of evil deeds, not bodily or verbal kamma."[\[6\]](#)

Mental kamma is considered to be the most significant because it is the origin of all other kamma. Thought precedes action through body and speech. Bodily and verbal deeds are derived from mental kamma.

One of the most important influences of mental kamma is *ditthi* -- beliefs, views and personal preferences. Views have an important bearing on individual behavior, life experiences and social ideals. Actions, speech and the manipulation of situations are based on views and preferences. If there is wrong view, it follows that any subsequent thinking, speech and actions will tend to flow in a wrong direction. If there is right view, then the resultant thoughts, speech and actions will tend to flow in a proper and good direction. This applies not only to the personal level, but to the social level as well. For example, a society which maintained the belief that material wealth is the most valuable and desirable goal in life would strive to attain material possessions, gauging progress, prestige and honor by abundance of these things. The life-style of such people and the development of such a society would assume one form. In contrast, a society which valued peace of mind and contentment as its goal would have a markedly different life-style and development.

There are many occasions where the Buddha described right view, wrong view, and their importance, such as:

"Monks! What is Right View? I say that there are two kinds of Right View: the Right View (of one) with outflows, which is good kamma and of beneficial result to body and mind; and the Right View (of one) without outflows, which is transcendent, and is a factor of the Noble Path.

"And what is the Right View which contains outflows, which is good and of beneficial result to body and mind? This is the belief that offerings bear fruit, the practice of giving bears fruit, reverence is of fruit, good and evil kamma give appropriate results; there is this world, there is an after-world; there is a mother, there is a father; there are spontaneously arisen beings; there are mendicants and religious who practice well and who proclaim clearly the truths of this world and the next. This I call the Right View which contains the outflows, which is good, and is of beneficial result to body and mind ..."[7]

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"Monks! I see no other condition which is so much a cause for the arising of as yet unarisen unskillful conditions, and for the development and fruition of unskillful conditions already arisen, as wrong view ..."[8]

* * *

"Monks! I see no other condition which is so much a cause for the arising of as yet unarisen skillful conditions, and for the development and fruition of skillful conditions already arisen, as Right View ..."[8]

* * *

"Monks! When there is wrong view, bodily kamma created as a result of that view, verbal kamma created as a result of that view, and mental kamma created as a result of that view, as well as intentions, aspirations, wishes and mental proliferations, are all productive of results that are undesirable, unpleasant, disagreeable, yielding no benefit, but conducive to suffering. On what account? On account of that pernicious view. It is like a margosa seed, or a seed of the bitter gourd, planted in moist earth. The soil and water taken in as nutriment are wholly converted into a bitter taste, an acrid taste, a foul taste. Why is that? Because the seed is not good.

"Monks! When there is Right View, bodily kamma created as a result of that view, verbal kamma created as a result of that view, and mental kamma created as a result of that view, as well as intentions, aspirations, wishes and mental proliferations, are all yielding of results that are desirable, pleasant, agreeable, producing benefit, conducive to happiness. On what account? On account of those good views. It is like a seed of the sugar cane, a seed of wheat, or a fruit seed which has been planted in moist earth. The water and soil taken in as nutriment are wholly converted into sweetness, into refreshment, into a delicious taste. On what account is that? On account of that good seed ..."[9]

* * *

"Monks! There is one whose birth into this world is not for the benefit of the many, not for the happiness of the many, but for the ruin, for the harm of the manyfolk, for the suffering of both Devas and men. Who is that person? It is the person with wrong view, with distorted views. One with wrong view leads the many away from the truth and into falsehood ...

"Monks! There is one whose birth into this world is for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, for growth, for benefit, for the happiness of Devas and men. Who is that person? It is the person with Right View, who has undistorted views. One with Right View leads the many away from falsehood, and toward the truth ..."

"Monks! I see no other condition which is so harmful as wrong view. Of harmful things, monks, wrong view is the greatest."[\[10\]](#)

* * *

"All conditions have mind as forerunner, mind as master, are accomplished by mind. Whatever one says or does with a defective mind brings suffering in its wake, just as the cartwheel follows the ox's hoof ... Whatever one says or does with a clear mind brings happiness in its wake, just as the shadow follows its owner."[\[11\]](#)

Footnotes:

[*] Numbers indicate references to the Pali Canon, which are gathered in a separate [References](#) file, while letters (e.g., [a]) refer to footnotes. [[Back to text](#)]

a. In the Thai language, the words "gummaniyahm" (*kammaniyama*) and "sungkom niyom" (social preference) have a certain amount of fluency that is lost in the translation. [[Back to text](#)]

b. Volitional formations. [[Back to text](#)]

c. Patikasamuppada. [[Back to text](#)]

d. These are the practices proscribed by the Five Precepts, the basic moral standard for a practicing Buddhist. [[Back to text](#)]

e. The ten bases of skillful action: Refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, malicious tale-bearing, abusive speech, frivolous speech, covetousness, ill will and wrong view. [[Back to text](#)]

2

On Good and Evil

The problem of good and evil

Because kamma is directly concerned with good and evil, any discussion of kamma must also include a discussion of good and evil. Standards for defining good and evil are, however, not without their problems. What is "good," and how is it so? What is it that we call "evil," and how is that so? These problems are in fact a matter of language. In the Buddha's teaching, which is based on the Pali language, the meaning becomes much clearer, as will presently be demonstrated.

The English words "good" and "evil" have very broad meanings, particularly the word "good," which is much more widely used than "evil." A virtuous and moral person is said to be good; delicious food might be called "good" food; a block of wood which happens to be useful might be called a "good" block of wood. Moreover, something which is good to one person might not be good to many others. Looked at from one angle, a certain thing may be good, but not from another. Behavior which is considered good in one area, district or society might be considered bad in another.

It seems from these examples that there is some disparity. It might be necessary to consider the word "good" from different viewpoints, such as good in a hedonistic sense, good in an artistic sense, good in an economic sense, and so on. The reason for this disparity is a matter of values. The words "good" and "evil" can be used in many different value systems in English, which makes their meanings very broad.

In our study of good and evil the following points should be borne in mind:

(a) Our study will be from the perspective of the law of kamma, thus we will be using the specialized terms *kusala* and *akusala* or skillful and unskillful, which have very precise meanings.

(b) *Kusala* and *akusala*, in terms of Buddhist ethics, are qualities of the law of kamma, thus our study of them is keyed to this context, not as a set of social values as is commonly used for the words "good" and "evil."

(c) As discussed in Chapter One, the operation of the law of kamma is related to other laws. Specifically, insofar as the inner life of the individual is concerned, kammaniyama interacts with psychological laws (cittaniyama), while externally it is related to Social Preference.

The meaning of kusala and akusala

Although kusala and akusala are sometimes translated as "good" and "evil," this may be misleading. Things which are kusala may not always be considered good, while some things may be akusala and yet not generally considered to be evil. Depression, melancholy, sloth and distraction, for example, although akusala, are not usually considered to be "evil" as we know it in English. In the same vein, some forms of kusala, such as calmness of body and mind, may not readily come into the general understanding of the English word "good."

Kusala and akusala are conditions which arise in the mind, producing results initially in the mind, and from there to external actions and physical features. The meanings of kusala and akusala therefore stress the state, the contents and the events of mind as their basis.

Kusala can be rendered generally as "intelligent, skillful, contented, beneficial, good," or "that which removes affliction." Akusala is defined in the opposite way, as in "unintelligent," "unskillful" and so on.

The following are four connotations of kusala derived from the Commentaries:

1. *Arogya*: free of illness, a mind that is healthy; mental states which contain those conditions or factors which support mental health and produce an untroubled and stable mind.

2. *Anavajja*: unstained; factors which render the mind clean and clear, not stained or murky.

3. *Kosalasambhuta*: based on wisdom or intelligence; mental states which are based on knowledge and understanding of truth. This is supported by the teaching which states that kusala conditions have *yoniso-manasikara*, clear thinking, as forerunner.

4. *Sukhavipaka*: rewarded by well-being. Kusala is a condition which produces contentment. When kusala conditions arise in the mind, there is naturally a sense of well-being, without the need for any external influence. Just as when one is strong and healthy (*aroga*), freshly bathed (*anavajja*), and in a safe and comfortable place (*kosalasambhuta*), a sense of well-being naturally follows.

The meaning of akusala should be understood in just the opposite way from above: as the mind that is unhealthy, harmful, based on ignorance, and resulting in suffering. In brief, it refers to those conditions which cause the mind to degenerate both in quality and efficiency, unlike kusala, which promotes the quality and efficiency of the mind.

In order to further clarify these concepts, it might be useful to look at the descriptions of the attributes of a good mind, one that is healthy and trouble-free, found in the Commentaries, and then to consider whether kusala conditions do indeed induce the mind to be this way, and if so, how. We could then consider whether akusala conditions deprive the mind of such states, and how they do this.

For easy reference, the various characteristics of kusala found in the Commentaries can be compiled into groups, as follows:

1. **Firm:** resolute, stable, unmoving, undistracted.
2. **Pure and clean:** unstained, immaculate, bright.
3. **Clear and free:** unrestricted, free, exalted, boundless.
4. **Fit for work:** pliant, light, fluent, patient.
5. **Calm and content:** relaxed, serene, satisfied.

Having looked at the qualities of a healthy mind, we can now consider the qualities which are known as kusala and akusala, assessing to see how they affect the quality of the mind.

Some examples of kusala conditions are: *sati*, mindfulness or recollection, the ability to maintain the attention with whatever object or duty the mind is engaged; *metta*, goodwill; non-greed, absence of desire and attachment (including altruistic thoughts); wisdom, clear understanding of the way things are; calm, relaxation and peace; *kusalachanda*, zeal or contentment with the good; a desire to know and act in accordance with the truth; and gladness at the good fortune of others.

When there is goodwill, the mind is naturally happy, cheerful, and clear. This is a condition which is beneficial to the psyche, supporting the quality and efficiency of the mind. Goodwill is therefore kusala. Sati enables the attention to be with whatever the mind is involved or engaged, recollecting the proper course of action, helping to prevent akusala conditions from arising, and thus enabling the mind to work more effectively. Sati is therefore kusala.

Examples of akusala conditions are: sexual desire; ill will; sloth and torpor; restlessness and anxiety; doubt[\[a\]](#), anger, jealousy, and avarice.

Jealousy makes the mind spiteful and oppressive, clearly damaging the quality and health of the mind. Therefore it is akusala. Anger stirs up the mind in such a way that rapidly affects even the health of the body, and thus is clearly akusala. Sensual desire confuses and obsesses the mind. This is also akusala.

Having established an understanding of the words kusala and akusala, we are now ready to understand good and bad kamma, or kusala kamma and akusala kamma. As has been already mentioned, intention is the heart of kamma. Thus, an intention which contains kusala conditions

is skillful, and an intention which contains akusala conditions is unskillful. When those skillful or unskillful intentions are acted on through the body, speech or mind, they are known as skillful and unskillful kamma through body, speech and mind respectively, or, alternatively, bodily kamma, verbal kamma and mental kamma which are skillful and unskillful as the case may be.

Kusala and akusala as catalysts for each other

An act of faith or generosity, moral purity, or even an experience of insight during meditation, which are all kusala conditions, can precipitate the arising of conceit, pride and arrogance. Conceit and pride are akusala conditions. This situation is known as "kusala acting as an agent for akusala." Meditation practice can lead to highly concentrated states of mind (kusala), which in turn can lead to attachment (akusala). The development of thoughts of goodwill and benevolence to others (kusala), can, in the presence of a desirable object, precipitate the arising of lust (akusala). These are examples of kusala acting as an agent for akusala.

Sometimes moral or meditation practice (kusala) can be based on a desire to be reborn in heaven (akusala). A child's good behavior (kusala) can be based on a desire to show off to its elders (akusala); a student's zeal in learning (kusala) can stem from ambition (akusala); anger (akusala), seen in the light of its harmful effects, can lead to wise reflection and forgiveness (kusala); the fear of death (akusala) can encourage introspection (kusala): these are all examples of akusala as an agent for kusala.

An example: the parents of a teenage boy warn their son that his friends are a bad influence on him, but he takes no notice and is lured into drug addiction. On realizing his situation, he is at first angered and depressed, then, remembering his parents' warnings, he is moved by their compassion (akusala as an agent for kusala), but this in turn merely aggravates his own self-hatred (kusala as an agent for akusala).

These changes from kusala to akusala, or akusala to kusala, occur so rapidly that the untrained mind is rarely able to see them.

Gauging good and bad kamma

It has been mentioned that the law of kamma has a very intimate relationship with both psychological laws and Social Preference. This very similarity can easily create misunderstandings. The law of kamma is so closely related to psychological laws that they seem to be one and the same thing, but there is a clear dividing line between the two, and that is intention. This is the essence and motivating force of the law of kamma and is that which gives the law of kamma its distinct niche among the other niyama or laws. Cittaniyama, on the other hand, governs all mental activity, including the unintentional.

Human intention, through the law of kamma, has its own role distinct from the other niyama, giving rise to the illusion that human beings are independent of the natural world. Intention must rely on the mechanics of cittaniyama in order to function, and the process of creating kamma must operate within the parameters of cittaniyama.

Using an analogy of a man driving a motor boat, the "driver" is intention, which is the domain of the law of kamma, whereas the whole of the boat engine is comparable to the mental factors, which are functions of cittaniyama. The driver must depend on the boat engine. However, for the "boat engine" to lead the "boat," that is, for the mind to lead life and the body, in any direction, is entirely at the discretion of the "driver," intention. The driver depends on and makes use of the boat, but also takes responsibility for the welfare of both boat and engine. In the same way, the law of kamma depends on and makes use of cittaniyama, and also accepts responsibility for the welfare of life, including both the body and the mind.

There is not much confusion about this relationship between the law of kamma and cittaniyama, mainly because these are not things in which the average person takes much interest. The issue that creates the most confusion is the relationship between the law of kamma and Social Preference, and this confusion creates ambiguity in regard to the nature of good and evil.

We often hear people say that good and evil are human or social inventions. An action in one society, time or place, may be regarded as good, but in another time and place regarded as bad. Some actions may be acceptable to one society, but not to another. For example, some religions teach that to kill animals for food is not bad, while others teach that to harm beings of any kind is never good. Some societies hold that a child should show respect to its elders, and that to argue with them is bad manners, while others hold that respect is not dependent on age, and that all people should have the right to express their opinions.

To say that good and evil are matters of human preference and social decree is true to some extent. Even so, the good and evil of Social Preference do not affect or upset the workings of the law of kamma in any way, and should not be confused with it. "Good" and "evil" as social conventions should be recognized as Social Preference. As for "good" and "evil," or more correctly, kusala and akusala, as qualities of the law of kamma, these should be recognized as attributes of the law of kamma. Even though the two are related they are in fact separate, and have very clear distinctions.

That which is at once the relationship, and the point of distinction, between this natural law and the Social Preference is intention, or will. As to how this is so, let us now consider.

In terms of the law of kamma, the conventions of society may be divided into two types:

- 1. Those which have no direct relationship to kusala and akusala.**
- 2. Those which are related to kusala and akusala.**

Those conventions which have no direct relationship to kusala and akusala are the accepted values or agreements which are established by society for a specific social function, such as to enable people to live together harmoniously. They may indeed be instruments for creating social harmony, or they may not. They may indeed be useful to society or they may in fact be harmful. All this depends on whether or not those conventions are established with sufficient understanding and wisdom, and whether or not the authority who established them is acting with pure intention.

These kinds of conventions may take many forms, such as traditions, customs or laws. "Good" and "evil" in this respect are strictly matters of Social Preference. They may change in many ways, but their changes are not functions of the law of kamma, and must not be confused with it. If a person disobeys these conventions and is punished by society, that is also a matter of Social Preference, not the law of kamma.[b]

Now, let us consider an area in which these social conventions may overlap with the law of kamma, such as when a member of a society refuses to conform to one of its conventions, or infringes on it.[c] In so doing, that person will be acting on a certain intention. This intention is the first step in, and is therefore a concern of, the law of kamma. In many societies there will be an attempt to search out this intention for ascertaining the quality of the action. That is again a concern of Social Preference, indicating that that particular society knows how to utilize the law of kamma. This consideration of intention by society is not, however, in itself a function of the law of kamma. (That is, it is not a foregone conclusion -- illegal behavior is not always punished. However, whether actions are punished or not they are kamma in the sense that they are volitional actions and will bring results.)

As for the particular role of the law of kamma, regardless of whether society investigates the intention or not, or even whether society is aware of the infringement, the law of kamma functions immediately the action occurs, and the process of fruition has already been set in motion.

Simply speaking, the deciding factor in the law of kamma is whether the intention is kusala or akusala. In most cases, not to conform with any Social Preference can only be said to constitute no intentional infringement when society agrees to abandon or to reform that convention. Only then will there be no violation of the public agreement.

This can be illustrated by a simple example. Suppose two people decide to live together. In order to render their lives together as smooth and as convenient as possible, they agree to establish a set of regulations: although working in different places and returning from work at different times, they decide to have the evening meal together. As it would be impractical to wait for each other indefinitely, they agree that each of them should not eat before seven pm. Of those two people, one likes cats and doesn't like dogs, while the other likes dogs and doesn't like cats. For mutual well-being, they agree not to bring any pets at all into the house.

Having agreed on these regulations, if either of those two people acts in contradiction to them, there is a case of intentional infringement, and kamma arises, good or bad according to the intention that instigated it, even though eating food before seven pm., or bringing pets into a

house, are not in themselves good or evil. Another couple might even establish regulations which are directly opposite to these. And in the event that one of those people eventually considers their regulations to be no longer beneficial, they should discuss the matter together and come to an agreement. Only then would any intentional nonconformity on that person's part be free of kammic result. This is the distinction between "good" and "evil," and "right" and "wrong," as changing social conventions, as opposed to the unchanging properties of the law of kamma, kusala and akusala.

The conventions which are related to kusala and akusala in the law of kamma are those conventions which are either skillful or unskillful. Society may or may not make these regulations with a clear understanding of kusala and akusala, but the process of the law of kamma continues along its natural course regardless. It does not change along with those social conventions.

For example, a society might consider it acceptable to take intoxicants and addictive drugs. Extreme emotions may be encouraged, and the citizens may be incited to compete aggressively in order to spur economic growth. Or it might be generally believed that to kill people of other societies, or, on a lesser scale, to kill animals, is not blameworthy.

These are examples where the good and evil of Social Preference and kusala and akusala are at odds with each other: unskillful conditions are socially preferred and "good" from a social perspective is "bad" from a moral one. Looked at from a social perspective, those conventions or attitudes may cause both positive and negative results. For example, although a life of tension and high competitiveness may cause a high suicide rate, an unusually large amount of mental and social problems, heart disease and so on, that society may experience rapid material progress. Thus, social problems can often be traced down to the law of kamma, in the values condoned and encouraged by society.

Social Preference and the law of kamma are separate and distinct. The fruits of kamma proceed according to their own law, independent of any social conventions which are at odds with it as mentioned above. However, because the convention and the law are related, correct practice in regard to the law of kamma, that is, actions that are kusala, might still give rise to problems on the social level. For example, an abstainer living in a society which favors intoxicating drugs receives the fruits of kamma dictated by the law of kamma -- he doesn't experience the loss of health and mental clarity due to intoxicating drugs -- but in the context of Social Preference, as opposed to the law of kamma, he may be ridiculed and scorned. And even within the law of kamma there may arise problems from his intentional opposition to this Social Preference, in the form of mental stress, more or less depending on his wisdom and ability to let go of social reactions.

A progressive society with wise administrators uses the experience accumulated from previous generations in laying down the conventions and laws of society. These become the good and evil of Social Preference, and ideally they should correlate with the kusala and akusala of kammaniyama. The ability to establish conventions in conformity with the law of kamma would seem to be a sound gauge for determining the true extent of a society's progress or civilization.

In this context, when it is necessary to appraise any convention as good or evil, it would best be considered from two levels. Firstly, in terms of Social Preference, by determining whether or not it has a beneficial result to society. Secondly, in terms of the law of kamma, by determining whether or not it is kusala, beneficial to mental well-being.

Some conventions, even though maintained by societies for long periods of time, are in fact not at all useful to them, even from the point of view of Social Preference, let alone from the point of view of the law of kamma. Such conventions should be abandoned, and it may be necessary for an exceptional being with pure heart to point out their fault.

In the case of a convention which is seen to be helpful to society and to human progress, but which is not in conformity with the kusala of the law of kamma, such as one which enhances material progress at the expense of the quality of life, it might be worth considering whether the people of that society have not gone astray and mistaken that which is harmful as being beneficial. A truly beneficial custom should conform with both Social Preference and the law of kamma. In other words, it should be beneficial to both the individual and society as a whole, and beneficial on both the material and psychic levels.

In this regard we can take a lesson from the situation of society in the present time. Human beings, holding the view that wealth of material possessions is the path to true happiness, have proceeded to throw their energies into material development. The harmful effects of many of our attempts at material progress are only now becoming apparent. Even though society appears to be prosperous, we have created many new physical dangers, and social and environmental problems threaten us on a global scale. Just as material progress should not be destructive to the physical body, social progress should not be destructive to the clarity of the mind.

The Buddha gave a set of reflections on kusala and akusala for assessing the nature of good and evil on a practical level, encouraging reflection on both the good and evil within (conscience), and the teachings of wise beings (these two being the foundation of conscience and modesty).^[d] Thirdly, he recommended pondering the fruits of actions, both individually and on a social basis. Because the nature of kusala and akusala may not always be clear, the Buddha advised adhering to religious and ethical teachings, and, if such teachings are not clear enough, to look at the results of actions, even if only from a social basis.

For most people, these three bases for reflection (i.e., individually, socially, and from the accepted teachings of wise beings) can be used to assess behavior on a number of different levels, ensuring that their actions are as circumspect as possible.

Thus, the criteria for assessing good and evil are: in the context of whether an action is kamma or not, to take intention as the deciding factor; and in the context of whether that kamma is good or evil, to consider the matter against the following principles:

Primary Factors

- Inquiring into the roots of actions, whether the intentions for them arose from one of the skillful roots of non-greed, non-aversion or non-delusion, or from one of the unskillful roots of greed, aversion or delusion.
- Inquiring into the effects on the psyche, or mental well-being, of actions: whether they render the mind clear, calm and healthy; whether they promote or inhibit the quality of the mind; whether they encourage the arising of skillful conditions and the decrease of unskillful conditions, or vice versa.

Secondary Factors

1. Considering whether one's actions are censurable to oneself or not (conscience).
2. Considering the quality of one's actions in terms of wise teachings.
3. Considering the results of those actions:
 - a. towards oneself
 - b. towards others.

It is possible to classify these standards in a different way, if we first clarify two points. Firstly, looking at actions either in terms of their roots, or as skillful and unskillful in themselves, are essentially the same thing. Secondly, in regard to approval or censure by the wise, we can say that such wise opinions are generally preserved in religions, conventions and laws. Even though these conventions are not always wise, and thus any practice which conflicts with them is not necessarily unskillful, still it can be said that such cases are the exception rather than the rule.

We are now ready to summarize our standards for good and evil, or good and bad kamma, both strictly according to the law of kamma and also in relation to Social Preference, both on an intrinsically moral level and on a socially prescribed one.

1. In terms of direct benefit or harm: are these actions in themselves beneficial? Do they contribute to the quality of life? Do they cause kusala and akusala conditions to increase or wane?
2. In terms of beneficial or harmful consequences: are the effects of these actions harmful or beneficial to oneself?
3. In terms of benefit or harm to society: are they harmful to others, or helpful to them?
4. In terms of conscience, the natural human reflexive capacity: will those actions be censurable to oneself or not?

5. In terms of social standards: what is the position of actions in relation to those religious conventions, traditions, social institutions and laws which are based on wise reflection (as opposed to those which are simply superstitious or mistaken beliefs)?

Prior to addressing the question of the results of kamma in the next chapter, it would be pertinent to consider some of the points described above in the light of the Pali Canon.

"What are skillful (kusala) conditions? They are the three roots of skillfulness -- non-greed, non-aversion and non-delusion; feelings, perceptions, proliferations and consciousness which contain those roots of skillfulness; bodily kamma, verbal kamma and mental kamma which have those roots as their base: these are skillful conditions.

"What are unskillful (akusala) conditions? They are the three roots of unskillfulness -- greed, aversion and delusion -- and all the defilements which arise from them; feelings, perceptions, proliferations and consciousness which contain those roots of unskillfulness; bodily kamma, verbal kamma and mental kamma which have those roots of unskillfulness as a foundation: these are unskillful conditions."[\[12\]](#)

* * *

"There are two kinds of danger, the overt danger and the covert danger.

"What are the 'overt dangers'? These are such things as lions, tigers, panthers, bears, leopards, wolves ... bandits ... eye diseases, ear diseases, nose diseases ... cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation, urination, contact with gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and crawling animals: these are called 'overt dangers.'

"What are the 'covert dangers'? They are bad bodily actions, bad verbal actions, bad mental actions; the hindrances of sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt; greed, aversion and delusion; anger, vengeance, spite, arrogance, jealousy, meanness, deception, boastfulness, stubbornness, contention, pride, scornfulness, delusion, heedlessness; the defilements, the bad habits; the confusion; the lust; the agitation; all thoughts that are unskillful: these are the 'covert dangers.'

"They are called 'dangers' for what reason? They are called dangers in that they overwhelm, in that they cause decline, in that they are a shelter.

"Why are they called dangers in that they overwhelm? Because those dangers suppress, constrict, overcome, oppress, harass and crush ...

"Why are they called dangers in that they cause decline? Because those dangers bring about the decline of skillful conditions ...

"Why are they called dangers in that they are a shelter? Because base, unskillful conditions are born from those things and take shelter within them, just as an animal which lives in a hole takes shelter in a hole, a water animal takes shelter in water, or a tree-dwelling animal takes shelter in trees .. "[13]

* * *

"When greed, aversion and delusion arise within his mind, they destroy the evil doer, just as the bamboo flower signals the ruin of the bamboo plant ..."[14]

* * *

"See here, Your Majesty. These three things arise in the world not for welfare or benefit, but for woe, for discomfort. What are those three? They are greed, aversion and delusion ..."[15]

* * *

"Monks, there are these three roots of unskillfulness. What are the three? They are the greed-root, the aversion-root and the delusion-root of unskillfulness ...

"Greed itself is unskillful; whatever kamma is created on account of greed, through action, speech or thought, is also unskillful. One in the power of greed, sunk in greed, whose mind is distorted by greed, causes trouble for others by striking them, imprisoning them, crushing them, decrying them, and banishing them, thinking, 'I am powerful, I am mighty.' That is also unskillful. These many kinds of coarse, unskillful conditions, arising from greed, having greed as their cause, having greed as their source, having greed as condition, persecute the evil doer.

"Hatred itself is unskillful; whatever kamma is created on account of hatred, through action, speech or thought, is also unskillful. One in the power of hatred ... causes trouble for others ... that is also unskillful. These many kinds of coarse, unskillful conditions persecute the evil doer ...

"Delusion itself is unskillful; whatever kamma is created on account of delusion, through action, speech or thought, is also unskillful. One in the power of delusion causes trouble for others ... that is also unskillful. These many kinds of unskillful conditions persecute the evil doer in this way.

"One who is thus caught up, whose mind is thus infected, in the coarse, unskillful conditions born of greed, hatred and delusion, experiences suffering, stress, agitation and anxiety in this present time. At death, at the breaking up of the body, he can expect a woeful bourn, just like a tree which is completely entwined with a banyan creeper comes to ruin, to destruction, to decline, to dissolution ...

"Monks! There are these three roots of skillfulness. What are the three? They are the non-greed root, the non-aversion root and the non-delusion root ..."[16]

* * *

"Monks! There are three root causes of kamma. What are the three? They are greed ... hatred ... delusion ...

"Whatever kamma is performed out of greed ... hatred ... delusion, is born from greed ... hatred ... delusion, has greed ... hatred ... delusion as its root and as its cause, that kamma is unskillful, that kamma is harmful, that kamma has suffering as a result, that kamma brings about the creation of more kamma, not the cessation of kamma.

"Monks! There are these three root causes of kamma. What are the three? They are non-greed ... non-hatred ... non-delusion ...

"Whatever kamma is performed out of non-greed ... non-hatred ... non-delusion, is born of non-greed ... non-hatred ... non-delusion, has non-greed ... non-hatred ... non-delusion as its root and its cause, that kamma is skillful, that kamma is not harmful, that kamma has happiness as a result, that kamma brings about the cessation of kamma, not the creation of more kamma ..." [\[17\]](#)

* * *

"Listen, Kalamas. When you know for yourselves that these things are unskillful, these things are harmful, these things are censured by the wise, these things, if acted upon, will bring about what is neither beneficial nor conducive to welfare, but will cause suffering, then you should abandon them."

"Kalamas, how do you consider this matter? Do greed ... hatred ... delusion in a person, bring about benefit or non-benefit?"

(Answer: Non-benefit, Venerable Sir.)

"One who is desirous ... is angry ... is deluded; who is overwhelmed by greed ... hatred ... delusion, whose mind is thus distorted, as a result resorts to murder, to theft, to adultery, to lying, and encourages others to do so. This is for their non-benefit and non-welfare for a long time to come."

(Answer: That is true, Venerable Sir.)

"Kalamas, how say you, are those things skillful or unskillful?"

(Answer: They are unskillful, Venerable Sir.)

"Are they harmful or not harmful?"

(Answer: Harmful, Venerable Sir.)

"Praised by the wise, or censured?"

(Answer: Censured by the wise, Venerable Sir.)

"If these things are acted upon, will they bring about harm and suffering, or not? What do you think?"

(Answer: When put into practice, these things bring about harm and suffering, this is our view on this matter.)

"In that case, Kalamas, when I said, 'Come, Kalamas, do not believe simply because a belief has been adhered to for generations ... nor simply because this man is your teacher, or is revered by you, but when you know for yourselves that these things are unskillful, then you should abandon those things,' it is on account of this that I thus spoke." [18]

* * *

The following passage is from an exchange between King Pasenadi of Kosala and the Venerable Ananda. It is a series of questions and answers relating to the nature of good and evil, from which it can be seen that Venerable Ananda makes use of all the standards mentioned above.

King: Venerable Sir, when foolish, unintelligent people, not carefully considering, speak in praise or blame of others, I do not take their words seriously. As for pundits, the wise and astute, who carefully consider before praising or criticizing, I give weight to their words. Venerable Ananda, which kinds of bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions would, on reflection, be censured by wise ascetics and Brahmins?

Ananda: They are those actions of body ... speech ... mind that are unskillful, Your Majesty.

King: What are those actions of body ... speech ... mind that are unskillful?

Ananda: They are those actions of body ... speech ... mind that are harmful.

King: What are those actions of body ... speech ... mind that are harmful?

Ananda: They are those actions of body ... speech ... mind that are oppressive.

King: What are those actions of body ... speech ... mind that are oppressive?

Ananda: They are those actions of body ... speech ... mind which result in suffering.

King: What are those actions of body ... speech ... mind which result in suffering?

Ananda: Those actions of body ... speech ... mind which serve to torment oneself, to torment others, or to torment both; which bring about an increase in unskillful conditions and a decrease

of skillful conditions; Your Majesty, just these kinds of actions of body ... speech ... mind are censured by wise ascetics and Brahmins.

Following that, Venerable Ananda answered the King's questions about skillful conditions in the same way, summarizing with:

"Those actions of body ... speech ... mind which result in happiness, that is, those actions which do not serve to torment oneself, to torment others, nor to torment both; which bring about a decrease in unskillful conditions and an increase in skillful conditions; Your Majesty, just these kinds of actions of body ... speech ... mind are not censured by wise ascetics and Brahmins."[\[19\]](#)

* * *

"One in the power of greed and desire ... hatred and resentment ... delusion ... with mind thus distorted ... does not know as it is what is useful to oneself ... what is useful to others ... what is useful to both sides. Having abandoned desire ... aversion ... delusion, one knows clearly what is useful to oneself ... useful to others ... useful to both."[\[20\]](#)

* * *

"Bad kamma is like freshly squeezed milk -- it takes time to sour. Bad kamma follows and burns the evil doer just like hot coals buried in ash."[\[21\]](#)

* * *

"One who previously made bad kamma, but who reforms and creates good kamma, brightens the world like the moon appearing from behind a cloud."[\[22\]](#)

* * *

"To make good kamma is like having a good friend at your side."[\[23\]](#)

* * *

"Ananda! For those bad actions through body, speech and mind, which are discouraged by me, the following consequences can be expected: one is blameworthy to oneself; the wise, on careful consideration, find one censurable; a bad reputation spreads; one dies confused; and at death, on the breaking up of the body, one goes to the woeful states, the nether realms, hell ...

"Ananda! For those good actions through body, speech and mind recommended by me, the following rewards can be expected: one is not blameworthy to oneself; the wise, after careful consideration, find one praiseworthy; a good reputation spreads; one dies unconfused; and at death, on the breaking up of the body, one attains to a pleasant realm, to heaven ..."[\[24\]](#)

* * *

"Monks, abandon unskillful conditions. Unskillful conditions can be abandoned. If it were impossible to abandon unskillful conditions, I would not tell you to do so ... but because unskillful conditions can be abandoned, thus do I tell you ... Moreover, if the abandoning of those unskillful conditions was not conducive to welfare, but to suffering, I would not say, 'Monks, abandon unskillful conditions,' but because the abandoning of these unskillful conditions is conducive to benefit and happiness, so I say, 'Monks, abandon unskillful conditions.'

"Monks, cultivate skillful conditions. Skillful conditions can be cultivated. If it were impossible to cultivate skillful conditions, I would not tell you to do so ... but because skillful conditions can be cultivated, thus do I tell you ... Moreover, if the cultivation of those skillful conditions was not conducive to welfare, but to suffering, I would not tell you to cultivate skillful conditions, but because the cultivation of skillful conditions is conducive to welfare and to happiness, thus do I say, 'Monks, cultivate skillful conditions.'"[\[25\]](#)

* * *

"Monks, there are those things which should be abandoned with the body, not the speech; there are those things which should be abandoned with the speech, not the body; there are those things which should be abandoned neither with the body, nor speech, but must be clearly seen with wisdom (in the mind) and then abandoned.

"What are those things which should be abandoned with the body, not through speech? Herein, a monk in this Dhamma-Vinaya incurs transgressions through the body. His wise companions in the Dhamma, having considered the matter, say to him: 'Venerable Friend, you have incurred these offenses. It would be well if you were to abandon this wrong bodily behavior and cultivate good bodily behavior.' Having been so instructed by those wise companions, he abandons those wrong bodily actions and cultivates good ones. This is a condition which should be abandoned by body, not by speech.

"What are the things which should be abandoned through speech, not through the body? Herein, a monk in this Dhamma-Vinaya incurs some transgressions through speech. His wise companions in the Dhamma, having considered the matter, say to him: 'Venerable Friend, you have incurred these offenses of speech. It would be well if you were to relinquish this wrong speech and cultivate good speech.' Having been so instructed by those wise companions, he abandons that wrong speech and cultivates good speech. This is a condition which should be abandoned by speech, not by body.

"What are the things which should be abandoned neither by body nor speech, but which should be clearly understood with wisdom and then abandoned? They are greed ... hatred ... delusion ... anger ... vindictiveness ... spite ... arrogance ... meanness. These things should be abandoned neither by the body or speech, but should be clearly understood with wisdom and then abandoned."[\[26\]](#)

Footnotes:

- a. These first five qualities are called the Five Hindrances (*nivarana*), so named because they are obstacles to the successful development of meditation or a clear mind. [[Back to text](#)]
- b. Examples of such conventions are social codes of dress: before entering a Buddhist temple in Thailand, for example, it is appropriate to remove shoes and hat, whereas to enter a Christian church it is often required to wear both. [[Back to text](#)]
- c. -- such as by refusing to remove one's shoes in a Buddhist temple or to wear a hat in a Christian church. [[Back to text](#)]
- d. *Hiri*: sense of shame; *ottappa*: fear of wrong doing. [[Back to text](#)]

3

The Fruition of Kamma

Results of kamma on different levels

Probably the most misunderstood aspect of the whole subject of kamma is the way it yields results, as summarized in the principle, "Good actions bring good results, bad actions bring bad results." Is this really true? To some, it seems that in "the real world" there are many who obtain good results from bad actions and bad results from good actions. This kind of understanding arises from confusion between "Social Preference" and the law of kamma. The confusion can be readily seen from the way people misunderstand even the meaning of the words, "good actions bring good results." Instead of understanding the meaning as "in performing good actions, there is goodness," or "good actions bring about good results in accordance with the law of kamma," they take the meaning to be "good actions result in good things." Bearing this in mind, let us now consider the matter in more depth.

The subject which causes doubt is the distinction, and the relationship between, the law of kamma and Social Preference. To clarify this point, let us first consider the fruition of kamma on four different levels:

1. The inner, mental level: the results kamma has within the mind itself, in the form of accumulated tendencies, both skillful and unskillful, and the quality of the mind, its experiences of happiness, suffering, and so on.

2. The physical level: the effect kamma has on character, mannerisms, bearing, behavioral tendencies. The results on this level are derived from the first level, and their fields of relevance overlap, but here they are considered separately in order to further clarify the way these two levels affect life experiences.

3. The level of life experiences: how kamma affects the events of life, producing both desirable and undesirable experiences; specifically, external events like prosperity and decline, failure and success, wealth, status, happiness, suffering, praise and criticism. Together these are known as the *lokadhamma* (worldly conditions). The results of kamma on this level can be divided into two kinds:

- those arising from nonhuman environmental causes
- those arising from causes related to other people and society.

4. The social level: the results of individual and collective kamma on society, leading to social prosperity or decline, harmony or discord. This would include the effects of human interaction with the environment.

Levels 1 and 2 refer to the results which affect mind and character, which are the fields in which the law of kamma is dominant. The third level is where the law of kamma and Social Preference meet, and it is at this point that confusion arises. This is the problem which we will now consider. The fourth level, kamma on the social level, will be considered in the next chapter.

When considering the meaning of the words "good actions bring good results, bad actions bring bad results," most people tend to take note only of the results given on the third level, those from external sources, completely ignoring results on levels one and two. However, these first two levels are of prime importance, not only in that they determine mental well-being, inner strength or shortcomings, and the maturity or weakness of the faculties, but also in their potential to determine external events. That is to say, that portion of results on the third level which comes into the domain of the law of kamma is derived from the kamma-results on the first and second levels.

For instance, states of mind which are results of kamma on the first level -- interests, preferences, tendencies, methods for finding happiness or coping with suffering -- will influence not only the way we look at things, but also the situations we are drawn toward, reactions or decisions made, our way of life and the experiences or results encountered. They affect the attitude we adopt towards life's experiences, which will in turn affect the second level (behavioral tendencies). This in turn promotes the way in which mental activities (the first level)

affect external events (the third level). The direction, style, or method taken for action, the persistence with it, the particular obstacles in face of which we will yield and in face of which we will persist, including the probability of success, are all influenced by character and attitude. This is not to deny that other factors, particularly environmental and social ones, affect each other and have an influence over us, but here we are concerned more with observing the workings of kamma.

Although events of life are largely derived from the effects of the law of kamma from the personal (physical and mental) level, this is not always the case. An honest and capable public servant, for example, who applied himself to his work would be expected to advance in his career, at least more so than one who was inefficient and inept. But sometimes this doesn't happen. This is because the events in life are not entirely subject to the law of kamma. There are factors involved from other niyama and value-systems, especially Social Preference. If there were only the law of kamma operating there would be no problem, results would arise in direct correspondence with the relevant kamma. But looking only at the influence of kamma to the exclusion of other factors, and failing to distinguish between the natural laws and Social Preferences involved, causes confusion, and this is precisely what causes the belief, "good actions bring bad results, bad actions bring good results."

For example, a conscientious student who applies himself to his lessons could be expected to acquire learning. But there may be times when he is physically exhausted or has a headache, or the weather or some accident may interrupt his reading. Whatever the case, we can still assert that in general, the law of kamma is the prime determining factor for the good and bad experiences of life.

Let us now look at and rectify some of the misunderstandings in regard to the fruition of kamma by referring to the root texts. The phrase that Thai people like to repeat, "good actions bring good results, bad actions bring bad results," comes from the Buddha's statement,

Yadisam vapate bijam Tadisam labhate phalam
Kalyanakari kalyanam Papakari ca papakam

Which translates as:

As the seed, so the fruit.
Whoever does good, receives good,
Whoever does bad, receives bad.[27]

This passage most clearly and succinctly expresses the Buddhist doctrine of kamma. (Note that here the Buddha uses bijaniyama, the law of heredity, for illustration.) Simply by clearly considering this illustration, we can allay all confusion regarding the law of kamma and Social Preference.

That is to say, the phrase, "As the seed, so the fruit," explains the natural law pertaining to plants: if tamarind is planted, you get tamarind; if grapes are planted, you get grapes; if lettuce is planted, you get lettuce. It does not speak at all in terms of Social Preference, such as in "if

tamarind is planted, you get money," or "planting lettuce will make you rich," which are different stages of the process.

Bijaniyama and Social Preference become related when, having planted grapes, for example, and obtained grapes, and the time being coincident with a good price for grapes, then your grapes are sold for a good price, and you get rich that year. But at another time, you may plant water melons, and reap a good harvest, but that year everybody plants water melons, supply exceeds demand, and the price of water melons goes down. You make a loss and have to throw away a lot of water melons.

Apart from the factor of market demand, there may also be other factors involved, economic ones determined by Social Preference. But the essential point is the certainty of the natural law of heredity, and the distinction between that natural law and Social Preference. They are different and yet clearly related.

People tend to look at the law of kamma and Social Preference as one and the same thing, interpreting "good actions bring good results" as meaning "good actions will make us rich," or "good actions will earn a promotion," which in some cases seems quite reasonable. But things do not always go that way. To say this is just like saying, "Plant mangoes and you'll get a lot of money," or "They planted apples, that's why they're hard up." These things may be true, or may not be. But this kind of thinking jumps ahead of the facts a step or two. It is not entirely true. It may be sufficient to communicate on an everyday basis, but if you wanted to speak accurately, you would have to analyze the pertinent factors more clearly.

Factors which affect the fruition of kamma

In the Pali there are four pairs of factors which influence the fruition of kamma on the level of life experiences. They are given as the four advantages (*sampatti*) and the four disadvantages (*vipatti*).[\[28\]](#)

Sampatti translates roughly as attribute or attainment, and refers to the confluence of factors to support the fruition of good kamma and obstruct the fruition of bad kamma. The four are:

1. *Gatisampatti*: Favorable birthplace, favorable environment, circumstances or career; that is, to be born into a favorable area, locality or country; on a short term scale, to be in a favorable place.

2. *Upadhisampatti*: The asset, suitability and support of the body; that is, to have a beautiful or pleasant appearance or personality which arouses respect or favor; a strong and healthy body, etc.

3. *Kalasampatti*: The asset of opportunity, aptness of time, or the support of time; that is, to be born at a time when the country lives in peace and harmony, the government is good, people live

virtuously, praise goodness and do not support corruption; on an immediate level, to encounter opportunities at the right time, at the right moment.

4. *Payogasampatti*: The attribute of action, aptness of action, or advantage of action; that is, action which is appropriate to the circumstance; action which is in accordance with personal skill or capability; action which fully accords with the principles or criteria concerned; thoroughgoing, not halfhearted, action; proper procedure or method.

Vipatti translates roughly as defect or loss, and refers to a tendency within conditioning factors to encourage the fruition of bad kamma rather than the good. They are:

1. *Gativipatti*: Unfavorable birthplace, unfavorable environment, circumstances or career; that is, to be born into or be situated in a sphere, locality, country or environment which is unsupportive.

2. *Upadhivipatti*: Weakness or defectiveness of the body; that is, to have a deformed or sickly body, of unpleasant appearance. This includes times of bad health and illness.

3. *Kalavipatti*: Disadvantage or defectiveness of time; that is, to be born into an age when there is social unrest, bad government, a degenerate society, oppression of good people, praise of the bad, and so on. This also includes inopportune action.

4. *Payogavipatti*: Weakness or defectiveness of action; putting effort into a task or matter which is worthless, or for which one is not capable; action which is not thoroughly carried through.

First pair: *Gatisampatti*: Birth into an affluent community and a good education can procure a higher position in society than for another who, although brighter and more diligent, is born into a poorer community with less opportunity. ***Gativipatti*:** At a time when a Buddha is born into the world and expounding the Dhamma, birth in a primitive jungle or as a hell-being will obstruct any chance of hearing the teachings; learning and capability in a community where such talents are not appreciated may yield no benefits, and even lead to rejection and scorn.

Second pair: *Upadhisampatti*: Attractive features and a pleasant appearance can often be utilized to shift upwards on the social scale. ***Upadhivipatti*:** Deformity or deficiency are likely to hinder the honor and prestige that would normally befall a member of a socially high and wealthy family; where two people have otherwise equal attributes, but one is attractive while the other is unpleasant looking or sickly, the attributes of the body may be the deciding factor for success.

Third pair: *Kalasampatti*: At a time when government and society are honest and praise virtue, honesty and rectitude can procure advancement; at a time when poetry is socially preferred, a poet is likely to become famous and revered. ***Kalavipatti*:** At a time when society has fallen from righteousness and the government is corrupt, honest people may actually be persecuted; at a time when a large portion of society prefers harsh music, a musician skilled at cool and relaxing music may receive little recognition.

Fourth pair: Payogasampatti: Even without goodness or talent, a knack with public relations and an understanding of social mores can help to override failings in other areas; a skill in forging documents may be beneficially turned to the inspection of references. **Payogavipatti:** Talent and abilities will inevitably be impaired by an addiction to gambling; a sprinter with the ability to become a champion athlete might misuse his talent for running away with other people's goods; a practically minded person with a mechanical bent might go to work in a clerical position for which he is wholly unsuited.

The fruits of kamma on the external level are mostly worldly conditions, which are in a state of constant flux. These worldly conditions are relatively superficial, they are not the real essence of life. How much they influence us depends on the extent of our attachment to them. If there is little attachment, it is possible to maintain equilibrium in the face of hardships, or at least not be overwhelmed by them. For this reason Buddhism encourages intelligent reflection and understanding of the truth of this world, to have mindfulness and not be heedless: not to become intoxicated in times of good fortune, and not to fall into depression or anxiety in times of misfortune, but to carefully consider problems with wisdom.

Aspiration to worldly goals should be coupled with a knowledge of personal attributes and weaknesses, and the ability to choose and organize the relevant attributes to attain those goals through skillful means (*kusala kamma*). Such actions will have a lasting and beneficial effect on life at all levels. Success sought through unskillful means, or favorable occasions used to create unskillful kamma, will create undesirable results according to the law of kamma. These four advantages (*sampatti*) and disadvantages (*vipatti*) are constantly changing. When favorable times or opportunities have passed, evil kamma will ripen. Favorable conditions should rather be utilized to create good kamma.

In this context, we might summarize by saying that, for any given action, where many different natural laws come into play, our prime emphasis should be with the factors of kamma. As for the factors which come under other kinds of natural law, after careful consideration, they can also be incorporated, as long as they are not harmful on the level of kamma. Practicing in this way can be called "utilizing skillful kamma and the four advantages," or "knowing how to benefit from both the law of kamma and Social Preferences."

In any case, bearing in mind the real aim of the Buddha's teaching, an aspiration to true goodness should not be traded for merely worldly results. Truly good kamma arises from one or another of the three roots of skillfulness: non-greed, non-aversion and non-delusion. These are actions based on altruism, relinquishing the unskillful within the mind and developing benevolent thoughts towards others, creating actions based on goodwill and compassion. Such actions are based on wisdom, a mind which aspires to truth and enlightenment. This is the highest kind of kamma, the kamma which leads to the cessation of kamma.

Understanding the process of fruition

Whenever the intention to perform skillful or unskillful deeds arises, that is the beginning of movement in the mind. To use a more scientific phrase, we could say that "volition-energy" has arisen. How this energy proceeds, which determinants affect it and so on, are usually a mystery to people, one in which they take little interest. They tend to devote more interest to the results which appear clearly at the end of the cycle, especially those which materialize in the human social sphere. These are things which are easily seen and spoken about.

Mankind has a very good knowledge of the creations of the mind on a material plane, and how these things come about, but about the actual nature of the mind itself, the seat of intention, and the way intention affects life and the psyche, we have very little knowledge indeed. It is a dark and mysterious realm for most people, in spite of the fact that we must have an intimate relationship with these things and are directly influenced by them.

On account of this obscurity and ignorance, when confronted with seemingly random or unexplainable events, people tend to be unable to join the scattered threads of cause and effect, and either fail to see the relevant determining factors, or see them incompletely. They then proceed to reject the law of kamma and put the blame on other things. This is tantamount to rejecting the law of cause and effect, or the natural process of interdependence. Rejecting the law of kamma and blaming other factors for the misfortunes of life is in itself productive of more unskillful kamma. Specifically, by so doing, any chance of improving unfavorable situations through clear understanding is defeated.

In any case, it is recognized that the process of kamma fruition is extremely complex, it is a process that is beyond most people's comprehension. In the Pali it is said to be *acinteyya*, beyond the comprehension of the normal thought processes. The Buddha said that insisting on thinking about such things could make one go crazy. In saying this, the Buddha was not so much forbidding any consideration of the law of kamma, but rather pointing out that the intricacy of causes and events in nature cannot be understood through thought alone, but only through direct, intuitive knowledge.

Thus, being *acinteyya* does not forbid us from touching the subject at all. Our relationship with kamma is one of knowledge and a firm conviction in that knowledge, based on examination of those things which we are able to know. These are the things which are actually manifesting in the present moment, beginning with the most immediate and extending outwards.

On the immediate level we are dealing with the thought process, or intention, as has been described above, initially noticing how skillful thoughts benefit the psyche and unskillful thoughts harm it. From there, the fruits of these thoughts spread outwards to affect others and the world at large, rebounding to affect the perpetrator in correspondingly beneficial and harmful ways.

This process of fruition can be seen on increasingly intricate levels, influenced by innumerable external causes, until it is possible to see a complexity far exceeding anything we had previously conceived of. Such an awareness provides a firm conviction in the truth of the natural law of cause and effect. Once the process is understood on an immediate level, the long term basis is also understood, because the long term is derived from the immediate present. Without an

understanding of the process on the short term, it is impossible to understand the process on a long term basis. Only through seeing in the present can we see the way things are.

Having a firm conviction in the natural process of cause and effect in relation to intention or volition is to have a firm conviction in the law of kamma, or to believe in kamma. With a firm conviction in the law of kamma, we are able to realize aspirations through appropriate action, with a clear understanding of the cause and effect process involved. When any goal is desired, be it in the area of personal development or in worldly conditions, the relevant factors included in both the law of kamma and in other niyama must be carefully considered, and the right conditions created accordingly.

For example, a skilled artist or craftsman must not consider only his own designs and intentions to the exclusion of everything else, but also the relevant factors from other niyama and value-systems. When planning an intricate house design, an architect must consider the materials to be used for particular areas. If he designates a soft wood for use where a hardwood is needed, no matter how beautiful the design may be, that house may collapse without fulfilling the function it was intended for. To work with the law of kamma in a skillful way, it is necessary to develop an interest in moral rectitude and an appreciation of goodness, (*kusalachanda* or *dhammachanda*), and a motivation to improve life and one's surroundings. A desire for quality or care in personal actions and relationships is necessary. People who desire only worldly results, neglecting this aspiration for goodness, tend to try to play with or cheat the law of kamma, causing trouble not only for themselves, but for society as a whole.

Fruits of kamma on a long term basis -- Heaven and Hell

Some scholars feel that in order to convince the layman of the law of kamma and to encourage morality, he must first be convinced of the fruition of kamma on the long term basis, from past lives and into future lives. As a result of this, they see the need to verify the existence of an afterlife, or at least to present some convincing evidence to support it. Some scholars have attempted to explain the principle of kamma and afterlife by referring to modern scientific laws, such as The Law of Conservation of Energy, applying it to the workings of the mind and intention. Others refer to the theories of modern psychology and data concerning recollection of past lives. Some even go so far as to use mediums and seances to support their claims. These attempts at scientific verification will not be detailed here, because they are beyond the scope of this book. Those interested are advised to look into the matter for themselves from any of the numerous books available on the subject. As far as the present book goes, only a few reflections on the matter will be given.

The desirability of demonstrating the truth of future lives and the fruits of kamma on a long term basis would seem to have some validity. If people really did believe these things, it is possible that they would be more inclined to shun bad actions and cultivate good ones. It would thus seem unnecessary to oppose the continued study of and experimentation with such matters, as long as it lies within the bounds of reason. (Otherwise, such investigations, instead of casting

light on the mysterious, may turn observable truths into inexplicable mysteries!) If there is honest and reasoned experimentation, at the very least some scientific gain is to be expected.

On the other hand, scholars who are delving into such matters should not become so engrossed in their research that they are blinded by it, seeing its importance above all else and overlooking the importance of the present moment. This becomes an extreme or unbalanced view.

Overemphasis on rebirth into heaven realms and hell realms ignores the good which should be aspired to in the present. Our original intention to encourage moral conscience at all times, including future lives, and an unshakable faith in the law of kamma, will result instead in an aspiration only for future results, which becomes a kind of greed. Good actions are performed for the sake of profit. Overemphasis on past and future lives ignores the importance of the qualities of moral rectitude and desire for goodness, which in turn becomes a denial of, or even an insult to, the human potential to practice and develop truth and righteousness for their own sakes.

Even though there are some grounds to the idea that verification of an afterlife might influence people to lead more virtuous lives, still there is no reason why people should have to wait to be satisfied on this point before they will agree to lead more moral lives. It is impossible to tell when the big "if" of this scientific research will be answered: when will this research be completed?

If we consider the matter strictly according to the meaning of the word "verification," as being a clear demonstration, then the word is invalid in this instance. It is impossible for one person to resolve another's doubts about rebirth. Rebirth is something which only those who see for themselves can really be sure about. This "verification" that is spoken of is merely an assemblage of related facts and case histories for analysis or speculation. The real essence of the matter remains acinteyya, unfathomable. No matter how many facts are amassed to support the issue, for most it will remain a matter of faith or belief. As long as it is still a matter of belief, there will always be those who disbelieve, and there will always be the possibility of doubt within those who believe. Only when certain of the fetters have been abandoned on the attainment of Stream Entry is it possible to be beyond doubt.

To sum up, searching for data and personal histories to support the issue of life after death has some benefit, and such doings should not be discouraged, but to say that ethical practice must depend on their verification is neither true nor desirable.

Summary: verifying future lives

Are there really past and future lives, heaven and hell? This is not only a fascinating question, but also, to some, a disquieting one, because it is an unknown quantity. Therefore I would like to include a small summary of the matter.

1. According to the teachings of Buddhism as preserved in the scriptures, these things do exist.

2. There is no end to verifying them, because they cannot be proven one way or another. You either believe in them or you don't. Neither those who believe, nor those who disbelieve, nor those who are trying to prove or disprove, really know where life comes from or where it goes to, either their own or others'. All are in darkness, not only about the distant past, but even toward their present birth, their present lives, and the future, even one day away.

3. On the subject of verification: it can be said that "sights must be seen with the eye, sounds must be heard with the ear, flavors must be tasted with the tongue" and so on. It would be impossible to see a visual object using organs other than the eye, even if you used ten ears and ten tongues to do so. Similarly, perceiving visual or audible objects (such as ultraviolet light waves or supersonic sound waves) with instruments of disparate or incompatible wave length is impossible. Some things are visible to a cat, but even ten human eyes cannot see them. Some things, although audible to a bat, are inaudible to even ten human ears. In this context, death and birth are experiences of life, or to be more precise, events of the mind, and must be researched by life or the mind. Any research should therefore be carried out in one of the following ways:

(a) In order to verify the truth of these things in the mind, it is said that the mind must first be in the state of concentrated calm, or *samadhi*. However, if this method seems impractical or inconvenient, or is considered too prone to self-deception, then the next method is

(b) to verify with this present life itself. None of us have ever died. The only thorough test is that achieved with one's own death ... but few seem inclined to try this method.

(c) If there is no real testing as mentioned above, all that remains is to show a number of case histories and collected data, such as accounts of recollections of previous lives, or to use analogies from other fields, such as sounds perceptible only to certain instruments, to show that these things do have some credibility. However, the issue remains on the level of belief.

Regardless of belief or disbelief, or however people try to prove these things to one another, the unavoidable fact, from which all future life must stem, is life in the present moment. Given this, it follows that this is where we should be directing our attention. In Buddhism, which is considered to be a practical religion, the real point of interest is our practical relationship towards this present life. How are we going to conduct our lives as they unfold right now? How are we going to make our present life a good one, and at the same time, in the event that there is a future life, ensure that it will be good? In the light of these points, we might consider the following:

- In the original Pali, that is, in the Discourses (Suttas), there is very little mention of previous and future lives, heaven and hell. In most cases they are merely given a mention. This indicates that not much importance or relevance is attributed to them in comparison to the conduct of life in the present world, or the practices of morality, meditation and wisdom.
- When, in the Pali, rebirth in heaven or hell is included in the fruits of good and evil kamma, it is usually after mentioning all the fruits of kamma occurring in the present life. These may be given as four, five or up to ten in number, with the final phrase: "At death,

on the breaking up of the body, he goes to the nether worlds, a woeful state, hell," or "At death, on the breaking up of the body, he goes to a pleasant bourn, heaven."

There are two observations to be made in this respect:

Firstly, the fruits of kamma in the present life are given priority and are described in detail. Results in an afterlife seem to be thrown in at the end to "round off the discussion," so to speak.

Secondly, the Buddha's explanation of the good and bad results of kamma was always as a demonstration of the truth that these things proceed according to causes. That is, the results (of kamma) follow automatically from their causes. Simply to know this fact is to install confidence in the fruits of actions.

As long as those who do not believe in an afterlife still do not know for a fact that there is no afterlife, or heaven and hell, they will be unable to completely refute the doubts lurking deeply within their minds. When such people have spent the energy of their youth and old age is advancing, they tend to experience fear of the future, which, if they have not led a virtuous life, can be very distressing. Therefore, to be completely certain, even those who do not believe in these things should develop goodness. Then, whether there is or is not an afterlife, they can be at peace.

As for those who believe, they should ensure that their belief is based on an understanding of the truth of cause and effect. That is, they should see results in a future life as ensuing from the quality of the mind developed in the present one, giving emphasis to the creation of good kamma in the present. This kind of emphasis will ensure that any relationship with a future life will be one of confidence, based on the present moment. Aspirations for a future life will thus encourage care with the conduct of the present moment, bearing in mind the principle: "Regardless of how you relate to the next life, don't give it more importance than the present one." This way, the mistake of performing good deeds as a kind of investment made for profit is avoided.

Any belief in a future life should help to alleviate or completely do away with any dependence on higher powers or things occult. Belief in a future life means belief in the efficacy of one's own actions (kamma). Dependence on any external power will only hinder progress in life and personal development. Those who have allowed themselves to slide into such dependencies should strive to extract themselves from them and become more self-reliant.

Ideally, we should try to advance to the stage of avoiding bad actions and developing the good, irrespective of belief or disbelief. This means to perform good deeds without the need for a result in some future life, and to avoid evil actions even if you don't believe in such things. This can be achieved by:

(1) developing an appreciation for moral rectitude, an aspiration for goodness, and a desire for the best in all situations.

(2) developing an appreciation for the subtle happiness of inner peace through meditation practice, and making that in itself an instrument for preventing the arising of evil states of mind

and for encouraging the good. This is because it is necessary to avoid bad actions and cultivate the good in order to experience this inner peace. In addition, inner peace is an important aid in resisting the attraction of sensual desire, thus preventing the creation of the more extreme forms of bad kamma. However, concerning the state of inner peace, as long as it is on the worldly level, it is advisable to be wary of getting so caught up in it as to cease to progress in one's practice by allowing it to become an object of attachment.

(3) training the mind to conduct life with wisdom, knowing the truth of the world and life, or knowing the truth of conditions. This enables us to have some degree of freedom from material things or sense pleasures, thus reducing the likelihood of committing bad kamma on their account. We develop a sensitivity to the lives and feelings of others, understanding their pleasures, pains and desires, so that there is a desire to help rather than to take advantage of them. This is the life style of one who has reached, or is practicing towards, the transcendent truth and transcendent Right View. Failing this, we can live by the faith which is the forerunner of that wisdom, the unshakable conviction in a life guided by liberating wisdom as the finest and most excellent kind of life. This kind of an appreciation will serve as a foundation for the development of such a life.

These three principles of practice are connected and support each other. In particular, point number (1), chanda (zeal) is necessary in performing any kind of good action, so is also essential in points (2) concentration and (3) wisdom.

When accompanied by practice in accordance with these three principles, any belief in fruition of kamma in a future life will serve to encourage and strengthen the avoidance of bad actions and development of the good. Such belief will not in itself be so critical that without expectation of good results in a future life, there will no longer be any incentive to do good deeds.

If it is not possible to practice these three principles, then belief in a future life can be used to encourage a more moral life, which is better than letting people live their lives obsessed with the search for sensual gratification, which only serves to increase exploitation on both the individual and social levels. In addition, belief in a future life is considered to be mundane Right View and thus is one step on the way to developing a good life.

Kamma fruition in the Cula Kammavibhanga Sutta

Having established an initial understanding, let us now look at one of the Buddha's classic teachings dealing with the fruition of kamma, extending from the present into a future life.

"See here, young man. Beings are the owners of their kamma, heirs to their kamma, born of their kamma, have kamma as their lineage, have kamma as their support. Kamma it is which distinguishes beings into fine and coarse states."

1.a. A woman or a man is given to killing living beings, is ruthless, kills living beings constantly and is lacking in goodwill or compassion. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and

nurtured within, that person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not reborn in hell, but in the human world, he or she will be short-lived.

b. A woman or man shuns killing and is possessed of goodwill and compassion. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a good bourn, to a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be blessed with longevity.

2.a. A woman or man is given to harming other beings by the hand and the weapon. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not reborn in hell, but as a human being, he or she will be sickly.

b. A woman or man shuns harming other beings. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person arrives at a good bourn, a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be one with few illnesses.

3.a. A woman or man is of ill temper, is quick to hatred, offended at the slightest criticism, harbors hatred and displays anger. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not born in hell, but as a human being, he or she will be ugly.

b. A woman or a man is not easily angered. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a pleasant bourn, a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be of pleasant appearance.

4.a. A woman or man has a jealous mind. When others receive awards, honor and respect, he or she is ill at ease and resentful. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not reborn in hell, but as a human being, he or she will be one of little influence.

b. A woman or a man is one who harbors no jealousy. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a good bourn, to a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be powerful and influential.

5.a. A woman or man is not one who gives, does not share out food, water and clothing. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not reborn in hell, but as a human being, he or she will be poor.

b. A woman or a man is one who practices giving, who shares out food, water and clothing. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a good bourn, to a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be wealthy.

6.a. A woman or man is stubborn and unyielding, proud, arrogant and disrespectful to those who should be respected. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that

person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not reborn in hell, but as a human being, he or she will be born into a low family.

b. A woman or man is not stubborn or unyielding, not proud, but pays respect and takes an interest in those who should be respected. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a good bourn, to a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be born into a high family.

7.a. A woman or man neither visits nor questions ascetics and Brahmins about what is good, what is evil, what is harmful, what is not harmful, what should be done and what should not be done; which actions lead to suffering, which actions will lead to lasting happiness. At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a woeful bourn, the nether worlds, to hell. Or, if not reborn in hell, but as a human being, he or she will be of little intelligence.

b. A woman or man seeks out and questions ascetics and Brahmins about what is good ... At death, on account of that kamma, developed and nurtured within, that person goes to a good bourn, to a heaven realm. Or, if not reborn in heaven, but as a human being, he or she will be intelligent.[\[29\]](#)

In this Sutta, although fruition in a future life is spoken of, yet it is the actions of the present moment, particularly those which have become regular, which are emphasized. Regular actions nurture the qualities of the mind which help to form personality and character. These are the forces which bring about results in direct relation to the causes. Rewards of such actions are not fantastic, such as in doing one single good deed, an act of giving, for example, and receiving some boundless reward fulfilling all wishes and desires. If this sort of attitude prevails it only causes people to do good deeds as an investment, like saving money in a bank and sitting around waiting for the interest to grow; or like playing the lottery, putting down a tiny investment and hoping for a huge reward. As a result people pay no attention to their daily behavior and take no interest in conducting a good life as explained in this Sutta.

Summarizing, the essence of the Cula Kammavibhanga Sutta still rests on the fact that any deliberation about results in a future life should be based on a firm conviction in the kamma, that is, the quality of the mind and of conduct, which is being made in the present moment. The results of actions on a long term basis are derived from and related to these causes.

A basic principle in this regard might be summarized as follows: The correct attitude to results of kamma in future lives must be one which promotes and strengthens a predilection for moral conduct and wisdom development. Any belief in kamma-results which does not strengthen this predilection for goodness, but instead serves to strengthen greed and desire, should be recognized as a mistaken kind of belief which should be corrected.

4

Kamma on the Social Level

The human world is the world of intentional action. Human beings have very sophisticated levels of intention, which, in conjunction with their thought processes, allow them to achieve things which would be impossible for other animals. Although the lower animals, too, possess intention, it is limited to a nominal degree, being largely on the instinctual level.

Thinking is guided by intention. Intention is what fashions the thinking process and, through that, external conditions. Our way of life, whether on the individual level or on the level of societies, both small and large, is directed by intention and the thinking process. It would not be wrong to say that intention, being the essence of kamma, is what directs the unfolding of our human lives.

Now let us look at some examples of how intention affects society. Intention on the negative side is that which is influenced by defilements. There are many kinds of defilements. When these defilements enter into our minds they color the way we think. Here I will mention three kinds of defilements, which play an important role in directing human behavior. They are:

1. *Tanha* -- craving for personal gain.
2. *Mana* -- pride, desire to dominate.
3. *Ditthi* -- clinging to views.

Normally when talking of defilements we tend to summarize them as greed, hatred and delusion, the roots of akusala. Greed, hatred and delusion are more or less defilements on the roots level. *Tanha*, *mana* and *ditthi*, or craving, pride and views, are the active forms of defilements, the roles they play in human undertakings and the form they most often take on the social level.

The way these three defilements affect human activities can be seen even more clearly on the social scale than on the individual level. When people's minds are ruled by the selfish desire for personal gain, aspiring to pleasures of the senses, their actions in society result in contention, deceit and exploitation. The laws and conventions formulated by society to control human

behavior are almost entirely necessitated by these things. And in spite of all efforts, these problems seem to be almost impossible to solve.

A simple example is the drug problem. People have a tendency to be attracted to addictive things, and there are a great number of people who are trapped in this problem. And why is it so hard to deal with? Primarily, because of the drug peddlers. Their desire for the profit to be gained from the drug trade gives rise to the whole industry, and the corruption and violence it breeds. The industry has become so extensive and complex that any efforts to rectify the situation, including efforts to broadcast the dangers of drug abuse, are rendered ineffective. This problem of drug abuse, which is a problem on the social and national scale, arises from tanha.

Pollution is another case in point. Since the indiscriminate dumping of chemicals and waste products presents a danger to the environment and public health, the government must create laws for the control of factories and waste disposal. But those running the industries are not inclined to give up their profits so easily. They find ways to circumvent the laws, and so we find examples of government officials operating through selfishness. With minds dominated by greed, instead of carrying out the task expected of them, they take bribes. The law breakers go on unchecked, as does the pollution, causing strife for the whole of society. Both the presence of pollution, and the difficulty encountered in preventing and controlling it, arise from craving.

Corruption is another social problem which seems impossible to eradicate. This condition fans outwards to cause countless other problems in society, which are all in the end caused by craving. It is impossible to list all the problems caused by tanha.

Tanha also works in conjunction with mana, the craving for power and influence. From ancient times, people have gone to war through this desire for power; sometimes at the instigation of one individual, sometimes through a faction, and sometimes collectively as whole countries. Coupled with the craving for personal gain, the craving for power gives rise to exploitation, nationalism and expansionism with all their subsequent chaos. You could say that the world turns almost entirely at the direction of tanha, craving, and mana, pride. Human history is largely the story of these defilements.

The importance of ditthi in the creation of kamma

However, if we look more deeply into the processes taking place, we will see that the defilement which exerts the most influence is the third one -- ditthi. Ditthi is view or belief, the attachment to a certain way of thinking. Our attitudes and ways of thinking will decide the type of personal gain and influence that we aspire to. When there is the view that a certain condition is desirable and will provide true happiness, craving for personal gain is directed toward that end. Craving and pride generally play a supporting role to ditthi. Ditthi is therefore the most important and powerful of these three defilements.

Social directions are decided by ditthi. A sense of value of any given thing, either on an individual or social basis, is ditthi. With this ditthi as a basis, there are efforts to realize the

object of desire. People's behavior will be influenced accordingly. For example, with the belief that happiness is to be found in an abundance of material goods, our actions and undertakings will tend to this end. This is a wrong view, thus any undertakings resulting from it will also be wrong. All attempts at so-called progress will be misguided and problematic. Material progress always brings problems in its wake, because it is founded on two basically wrong and harmful views:

1. That humanity must conquer nature in order to achieve well-being and find true happiness;
2. That happiness is dependent on material wealth.

These two views are the main forces behind the modern surge for progress.

The kind of civilization which is exerting its influence over the entire world today is founded on the basic premise that mankind is separate from nature. According to this view, Mankind is nature's owner, free to manipulate nature according to his will. In the present time we are beginning to see that many of the problems arising from material progress, particularly the environmental ones, are rooted in this basic misconception.

Guided by wrong view, everything else goes wrong. With right view, actions are guided in the right direction. Thus, desires for personal gain can be beneficial if they are founded on right view, but with wrong view or wrong belief, all resultant actions become harmful. On the individual level, views express themselves as beliefs in the desirability of certain conditions, which in turn lead to efforts to effectuate them. On the social level, we find attitudes adhered to by whole societies. When there is a conviction in the desirability of any given thing, society supports it. This collective support becomes a social value, a quality adhered to by society as a whole, which in turn pressures the members of the society to perpetuate such beliefs or preferences.

It is easy to see the influence social values have on people. Sociologists and psychologists are very familiar with the role played by social values and the effect they have on our minds. From social values, ditthi extends outwards to become belief systems, ideologies, political and economic systems, such as capitalism, communism and so on, and religions. When theories, beliefs and political ideologies are blindly adhered to, they are always products of the defilement of ditthi.

From one person, these ideas fan out to become properties of whole groups and societies. One individual with wrong view can effect a whole society. A case in point is the country of Cambodia. One leader, guided by wrong view, desiring to change the social system of Cambodia, proceeded to try to realize his aim by authorizing the killing of millions of people and turning the whole country upside down. Another example is the Nazis, who believed that the Jewish race was evil and had to be destroyed, and that the Aryan race were to be the masters of the world. From this belief arose all the atrocities which occurred during the Holocaust in World War II.

Then there are economic systems and ideologies, such as Communism and Consumerism: many of the changes that have taken place in the world over the last century have been based on these ideologies. And now it seems that it was all somehow some kind of mistake, we have to turn around and undo the changes. And this causes another momentous upheaval for the population, as can be seen in Russia and the former Soviet States.

One of the ways in which ditthi causes problems on a social level is in the field of religion. When religious ideologies are blindly clung to, human beings resort to exploitation and violence in the name of religion. Wars fought in the name of religion are particularly violent. This kind of clinging has been a great bane to mankind throughout history. The Buddha recognized the importance of ditthi and greatly emphasized it in his teaching. Even belief in religion is a form of ditthi, which must be treated with great caution in order to prevent it from becoming a blind attachment. Otherwise it can become a cause of persecution and violence. This is why the Buddha stressed the importance of ditthi, and urged circumspection in relation to it, as opposed to blind attachment.

On the negative side, intention works through the various defilements, such as those mentioned just now. On the positive side, we have the opposite kind of influences. When people's minds are guided by positive values, the resulting events within society will take a different direction. And so we have the occasional attempts to rectify social problems and create constructive influences and human society does not completely annihilate itself. Sometimes human beings act through kindness and compassion, giving rise to relief movements and human aid organizations. As soon as kindness enters into human awareness, people will undertake all sorts of works for the purpose of helping others.

International incidents, as well as relief movements, are results of intention, fashioned by either skillful or unskillful qualities, proceeding from mental kamma into verbal and bodily kamma. These institutions or organizations then proceed to either create or solve problems on the individual level, the group level, the social level, the national level, the international level and ultimately the global level.

The importance of ditthi, whether as a personal view, a social value or an ideology, cannot be overemphasized. The reader is invited to consider, for example, the results on society and the quality of life if even one social value, that of materialism, were to change into an appreciation of skillful action and inner well-being as the foundations for true happiness.

External influences and internal reflection

When people live together in any kind of group, they naturally influence each other. People are largely influenced by their environment. In Buddhism we call this *paratoghosa* -- literally, "the sound from outside," referring to the influence of external factors, or the social environment. These can be either harmful or beneficial. On the beneficial side, we have the *kalyanamitta*, the good friend. The good friend is one kind of external influence. The Buddha greatly stressed the

importance of a good friend, even going so far as to say that association with good friends was the essence of the Holy Life.

Most people are primarily influenced by external influences of one kind or another. On the individual level, external influences are our contact with others, the influence of which is obvious. Young children, for example, are readily influenced and guided by adults. On the larger scale, beliefs, social values, and the consensus of the majority serve the same purpose. People born into society are automatically exposed to and guided by these influences.

In general we can see that most people simply follow the influences from the social environment around them. An example is India in the time of the Buddha. At that time Brahmanism completely controlled the social system, dividing the whole of society into four castes -- the ruling caste, the intellectual or religious caste (the Brahmins), the merchant caste and the menial caste. This was the status quo for society at that time. Most people born into that society would naturally absorb and unquestioningly accept this situation from the society around them.

But occasionally there arise people who know how to think for themselves. These beings possess insight into society's problems and how they came about, and will initiate action to correct those problems. This involves the use of *yoniso-manasikara*, skillful reflection, which is the ability to recognize the mistaken practices within society and look for ways to improve them, as did the Buddha with the caste system in ancient India. The Buddha pointed out that real worth cannot be decided by a person's birth station, but by actions, good or evil as the case may be. From the Buddha's skillful reflection a new teaching arose, which became known as Buddhism.

Without skillful reflection, human beings are utterly swamped by the influence of external factors, such as religious beliefs, traditions and social values. It is easy to see how traditions and customs mould human attitudes. Most people are completely swayed by these things, and this is the kamma that they accumulate. We could even say that traditions and customs are social kamma that has been accumulated through the ages, and these things in turn mould the beliefs and thoughts of the people within each society.

Every once in a while there will be one who, gauging the social conventions and institutions of the time with reasoned reflection, will instigate efforts to correct mistaken or detrimental beliefs and traditions. These means for dealing with problems will become new systems of thought, new social values and ways of life, which in turn become social currents with their own impetus. In fact, social currents are originated by individuals, and from there the masses follow. Thus we can say that society leads the individual, but at the same time, the individual is the originator of social values and conventions. Thus, in the final analysis, the individual is the important factor.

Personal responsibility and social kamma

How does a socially accepted view become personal kamma? Personal kamma arises at the point where the individual agrees to the values presented by society.

Take, for example, the case of an autocrat who conceives a desire to create an empire. This is a condition arising within one person, but it spreads out to affect a whole society. In this case, what kamma does the society incur? Here, when the king or despot's advisers agree to and support his wishes, and when the people allow themselves to be caught up in the lust for greatness, this becomes kamma for those people also, and becomes kamma on a social scale. It may seem that this chain of events has arisen solely on account of one person, but it is not so. All are involved, and all are kammically responsible, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the extent of their personal involvement and acquiescence. The views and desires conceived by the despot become adopted by the people around him. There is an endorsement, more or less conscious, of that desire by the people, allowing the craving for power and greatness to spread and escalate throughout the population.

This agreement, or endorsement, of social values, is an intentional act on the level of each individual, which for most is done without skillful reflection, and for the most part without awareness. For instance, the concept of "progress" so often spoken about in the present time is a concept based on certain assumptions. But most people do not inquire into the basic assumptions on which this concept is based. Thus the concept of "progress" goes unchallenged. This lack of reflection is also a kind of kamma, as it leads to the submission to the social value concerned.

Here in Thailand, we are accepting the social values introduced to us by the West, which has a dramatic effect on Thai society. Being exposed to this form of belief, Thai people are led into believing that the material progress from the West is desirable. Adopting this way of thinking, their whole way of life is affected, leading to a rejection of religion and a decline in morals.

It is not difficult to see the lack of reflection present in most people in society. Even to understand the workings of things on an elementary level, such as in seeing the cause and effect involved in personal actions, is beyond most people's awareness. Most people follow the crowd. This is the way society usually operates, and this is social kamma.

Responsible social action

All in all, contrary to the widespread image of Buddhism as a passive religion encouraging inaction, responsible social action is rather encouraged in the Buddha's teaching. There are numerous teachings for encouraging social concord, such as the four *sangaha vatthu*, the Conditions for Social Welfare: *dana*, generosity; *piyavaca*, kindly speech; *atthacariya*, helpful action; and *samanattata*, impartiality or equal participation.

However, in Buddhism, all action should ideally arise from skillful mental qualities. A seemingly well-intentioned action can be ruined by the influence of unskillful mental states, such as anger or fear, or it can be tainted through ulterior motives. On the other hand, simply to cultivate skillful mental states without resultant social action is not very productive. So we can look at virtue on two levels: on the mental level we have, for example, the Four Sublime States. These are the bases of altruistic action, or, at the least, of harmonious relations on a social level.

On the second level we have the external applications of these skillful qualities, such as in the four Conditions for Social Welfare. The two levels of virtue are interrelated.

The Four Sublime States are *metta*, goodwill, friendliness; *karuna*, compassion, the desire to help other beings; *mudita*, sympathetic joy, gladness at the good fortune of others; and *upekkha*, impartiality or equanimity.

Goodwill is a mental stance assumed towards those who are in the normal condition, or on an equal plane with ourselves; compassion is a mental attitude toward those who are in distress; gladness is an attitude toward those who are experiencing success; equanimity or impartiality is even-mindedness toward the various situations in which we find ourselves.

In practical terms these four qualities manifest as the Four Conditions for Social Welfare. Dana, giving or generosity, is more or less a basic stance towards others in society, an attitude of generosity, which can be based on goodwill, compassion, or gladness, through giving as an act of encouragement. Generally speaking, although giving refers to material things, it can also be the giving of knowledge or labor.

The second condition for harmony is *piyavaca*, kindly speech, which can be based on all four of the Sublime States. Friendly speech, based on goodwill, as standard behavior in everyday situations; kindly speech, based on compassion, in times of difficulty, as with words of advice or condolence; and congratulatory speech, based on gladness, as in words of encouragement in times of happiness and success. However, when confronted with problems in social situations, kindly speech can be expressed as impartial and just speech, which is based on equanimity.

The third condition is *atthacariya*, helpful action, which refers to the offering of physical effort to help others. In the first factor, generosity, we had the giving of material goods. In the second factor, kindly speech, we have the offering of gentle speech. With this third item we have the offering of physical effort in the form of helpful conduct. This help can be on ordinary occasions, such as offering help in a situation where the recipient is not in any particular difficulty. Help in this instance is more or less a "friendly gesture," and so is based on goodwill. Help can be offered in times of difficulty, in which case it is based on compassion. Help can be offered as an encouragement in times of success, in which case it is based on sympathetic joy or gladness at the good fortune of others. Thus, *atthacariya*, helpful conduct, may be based on any of these three Sublime States.

Finally we have *samanattata*, literally, "making oneself accessible or equal." This is a difficult word to translate. It means to share with other people's pleasures and pains, to join in with them, to be one with them. It refers to sharing, cooperating and joining in. We could say that it means to be humble, such as when helping others in their undertakings even when it is not one's duty, or to be fair, such as when arbitrating in a dispute.

In Buddhism, while social action is encouraged, it should always stem from skillful mental states rather than idealistic impulses. Any social action, no matter how seemingly worthwhile, will be ruined if it becomes tainted with unskillful intentions. For this reason, all action, whether

individual or socially oriented, should be done carefully, with an awareness of the real intention behind it.

Here are some of the Buddha's words on kamma on the social level:

"Then the leaders among those beings came together. Having met, they conferred among themselves thus: 'Sirs! Bad deeds have arisen among us, theft has come to be, slander has come to be, lies have come to be, the taking up of the staff has come to be. Enough! Let us choose one among us to admonish rightly those who should be admonished, to rebuke rightly those who should be rebuked, to banish rightly those who should be banished, and we will apportion some of our wheat to him.' With that, those beings proceeded to approach one being of fine attributes, more admirable, more inspiring and more awesome than any of the others, and said to him, 'Come, Sir, may you rightly admonish those who should be admonished, rightly rebuke those who should be rebuked, and rightly banish those who should be banished. We, in turn, will apportion some of our wheat to you.' Acknowledging the words of those other beings, he became their leader ... and there came to be the word 'king' ..." [30]

* * *

"In this way, bhikkhus, when the ruler of a country fails to apportion wealth to those in need, poverty becomes prevalent. Poverty being prevalent, theft becomes prevalent. Theft being prevalent, weapons become prevalent. When weapons become prevalent, killing and maiming become prevalent, lying becomes prevalent ... slander ... sexual infidelity ... abuse and frivolity ... covetousness and jealousy ... wrong view becomes prevalent." [31]

5

The Kamma that Ends Kamma

In the last part of Chapter 1, four different kinds of kamma were mentioned, classified according to their relationships with their respective results:

1. Black kamma, black result.
2. White kamma, white result.
3. Kamma both black and white, result both black and white.
4. Kamma neither black nor white, result neither black nor white, this being the kamma that ends kamma.[32]

All of the varieties of kamma-results so far described have been limited to the first three categories, white kamma, black kamma, and both white and black kamma, or good kamma and bad kamma. The fourth kind of kamma remains to be explained. Because this fourth kind of kamma has an entirely different result from the first three, it has been given its own separate chapter.

For most people, including Buddhists, any interest in kamma tends to be centered around the first three kinds of kamma, completely disregarding the fourth kind, even though this last kind of kamma is one of the pivotal teachings of Buddhism, and leads to its ultimate goal.

Black, white and black-and-white kamma are generally described as the numerous kinds of action included within the ten bases of unskillful action, such as killing living beings, infringing on the property of others, sexual misconduct, and bad or malicious speech, with their respective opposites as skillful actions. These kinds of kamma are determinants for various kinds of good and bad life experiences, as has been explained above. The events of life in turn activate more good and bad kamma, thus spinning the wheel of samsara round and round endlessly.

The fourth kind of kamma results in exactly the opposite way. Rather than causing the accumulation of more kamma, it leads to the cessation of kamma. In effect this refers to the practices which lead to the highest goal of Buddhism, Enlightenment, such as the Noble Eightfold Path, also known as the Threefold Training (Moral Discipline, Mental Discipline and Wisdom), or the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. Sometimes this fourth kind of kamma is spoken of as the intention, based on non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, to abandon the other three kinds of kamma.

No discussion of kamma should fail to mention happiness and suffering. Kamma is the cause which results in happiness and suffering, and as long as there is kamma, there will be fluctuation between these two states. In aspiring to the highest good which is devoid of every flaw, however, any condition tainted with either happiness or suffering, being subject to fluctuation, is inadequate. All worldly kamma is still tainted with suffering, and is a cause of suffering.

However, this is valid only for the first three kinds of kamma. The fourth kind of kamma is exempt, because it leads to the cessation of kamma, and thus to the complete cessation of suffering. Although good kamma results in happiness, such happiness is tainted with suffering and can be a cause for suffering in the future. But this fourth kind of kamma, in addition to being in itself free of suffering, also gives rise to the untainted and total freedom from suffering. It is thus the purest kind of happiness.

The cessation or quenching of kamma was taught in a number of different religions in the Buddha's time, notably the Nigantha (Jain) Sect. The Niganthas taught the principle of old kamma, the cessation of kamma, and the mortification of the body in order to "wear out" old kamma. If these three principles are not clearly distinguished from the Buddha's teaching they can easily be confused with it. Conversely, distinguishing them clearly from the principles of Buddhism can help to further clarify the Buddha's message. The Niganthas taught:

"All happiness, suffering and neutral feeling are entirely caused by previous kamma. For this reason, when old kamma is done away with by practicing austerities, and no new kamma is created, there will no longer be the influence of kamma-results. With no influence of kamma-results, kamma is done away with. Kamma being done away with, suffering is done away with. When suffering is done away with, feeling is done away with. With no more feeling, all suffering is completely quelled." [33]

The Niganthas believed that everything is caused by old kamma. To be free of suffering it is necessary to abandon old kamma and, by practicing austerities, not accumulate new kamma. But Buddhism states that old kamma is merely one of the factors in the whole cause and effect process. This is an important point.

Kamma can lead to the transcendence of suffering, but it must be the right kind of kamma, the kamma which prevents the arising of more kamma and thus leads to its cessation. Therefore, in order to nullify kamma, instead of merely stopping still or doing nothing, the practicing Buddhist must apply himself to a practice based on right understanding. Correct practice induces independence, clarity and freedom from the directives of desire as it, in hand with ignorance, entangles beings in the search for attainments.

In order to clarify this fourth kind of kamma, its general features may be briefly summarized thus:

(a) It is the path of practice which leads to the cessation of kamma. At the same time, it is in itself a kind of kamma.

(b) It is known as "the kamma which is neither black nor white, having results which are neither black nor white, and which leads to the cessation of kamma."

(c) Non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion are its root causes.

(d) It is based on wisdom and understanding of the advantages and the inadequacies of things as they really are. It is an impeccable kind of action, action that is truly worthwhile, based on sound reason, and conducive to a healthy life.

(e) Because this kind of action is not directed by desire, whether in the form of selfish exploitation, or inaction based on fear of personal loss, it is the surest kind of altruistic effort, guided and supported by mindfulness and wisdom.

(f) It is kusala kamma, skillful action, on the level known as Transcendent Skillful Action.

(g) In terms of practice, it can be called the Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering, the Fourth of the Four Noble Truths, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, or the Threefold Training, depending on the context; it is also referred to in a general sense as the intention to abandon the first three kinds of kamma.

In regard to point (e) above, it is noteworthy that *tanha*, or desire, is seen by most people as the force which motivates action. As far as most people are concerned, the more desire there is, the more intense and competitive is the resultant action; they see that without desire there is no incentive to act, and the result could only be inertia and laziness. This kind of understanding comes from looking at human nature only partially. If used as a guideline for practice, it can cause problems on both the individual and social levels.

In fact, desire is an impetus for both action and inaction. When it is searching for objects with which to feed itself, desire is an impetus for action. This kind of action tends to generate exploitation and contention. However, at a time when good and altruistic actions are called for, desire will become an incentive to inaction, binding the self to personal comfort, even if only attachment to sleep. Thus, it becomes an encumbrance or stumbling block to performing good deeds. If ignorance is still strong, that is, there is no understanding of the value of good actions, desire will encourage inertia and negligence. For this reason, desire may be an incentive for either an exploitative kind of activity, or a lethargic kind of inactivity, depending on the context.

The practice which supports a healthy life and is truly beneficial is completely different from this pandering to selfish desires, and in many cases calls for a relinquishment of personal comforts and pleasures. This kind of practice cannot be achieved through desire (except if we first qualify our terms), but must be achieved through an understanding and appreciation of the advantage of such practice as it really is.

This appreciation, or aspiration, is called in Pali *chanda* (known in full as *kusalachanda* or *dhammachanda*). *Chanda*, or zeal, is the real incentive for any truly constructive actions. However, zeal may be impeded by desire and its attachments to laziness, lethargy, or personal comfort. In this case, desire will stain any attempts to perform good actions with suffering, by resisting the practice through these negative states. If there is clear understanding of the advantage of those actions and sufficient appreciation (*chanda*) of them, enabling the burdening effect of desire to be overcome, *chanda* becomes, in addition to an impetus for action, a cause for happiness.

This kind of happiness differs from the happiness resulting from desire -- it is light and untroubled rather than constrictive and heavy, and conducive to creative actions free of suffering. In this case, *samadhi*, the firmly established mind, comprising effort, mindfulness and understanding, will develop within and directly support such undertakings. This kind of practice is known as "the kamma that ends kamma."

By practicing according to the Noble Eightfold Path, desire has no channel through which to function, and is eliminated. Greed, hatred and delusion do not arise. With no desire, greed, hatred or delusion, there is no kamma. With no kamma there are no kamma-results to bind the mind. With no kamma to bind the mind, there emerges a state of clarity which transcends suffering.

The mind which was once a slave of desire becomes one that is guided by wisdom, directing actions independently of desire's influence.

Here follow some of the Buddha's words dealing with the kamma that ends kamma.

"Bhikkhus, know kamma, know the cause of kamma, know the variations of kamma, know the results of kamma, know the cessation of kamma and know the way leading to the cessation of kamma ... Bhikkhus, intention, I say, is kamma. A person intends before acting through body, speech or mind. What is the cause of kamma? Sense contact is the cause of kamma. What are the variations of kamma? They are, the kamma which results in birth in hell, the kamma which results in birth in the animal world, the kamma which results in birth in the realm of hungry ghosts, the kamma which results in birth in the human realm, and the kamma which results in birth in the heaven realms. These are known as the variations of kamma. What are the results of kamma? I teach three kinds of kamma-result. They are, results in the present time, results in the next life, or results in a future life. These I call the results of kamma. What is the cessation of kamma? With the cessation of contact, kamma ceases. This very Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of kamma. That is, Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right concentration."[\[34\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, when a noble disciple thus clearly understands kamma, the cause of kamma, the variations of kamma, the results of kamma, the cessation of kamma and the way leading to the cessation of kamma, he then clearly knows the Higher Life comprising keen wisdom, which is the cessation of this kamma."[\[34\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, I will expound new kamma, old kamma, the cessation of kamma and the way leading to the cessation of kamma ... What is old kamma? Eye ... ear ... nose ... tongue ... body ... mind should be understood as old kamma, these being formed from conditions, born of volition, and the base of feeling. This is called 'old kamma.'

"Bhikkhus, what is 'new kamma'? Actions created through body, speech and mind in the present moment, these are called 'new kamma.'

"Bhikkhus, what is the cessation of kamma? The experience of liberation arising from the cessation of bodily kamma, verbal kamma and mental kamma, is called the cessation of kamma.

"Bhikkhus, what is the way leading to the cessation of kamma? This is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right View ... Right Concentration. This is called the way leading to the cessation of kamma."[\[35\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, this body does not belong to you, nor does it belong to another. You should see it as old kamma, formed by conditions, born of volition, a base of feeling."[\[36\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, these three kamma-origins, greed, hatred and delusion, are causes of kamma. Whatever kamma is performed on account of greed, is born from greed, has greed as origin, and is formed from greed, results in rebirth. Wherever his kamma ripens, there the doer must experience the fruits of his kamma, be it in the present life, in the next life or in a future life. Kamma performed on account of hatred ... kamma performed on account of delusion ... (the same as for greed)

"Bhikkhus, these three kamma-origins, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, are causes of kamma. Whatever kamma is performed on account of non-greed, is born from non-greed, has non-greed as origin, and is formed from non-greed, is devoid of greed, that kamma is given up, cut off at the root, made like a palm tree stump, completely cut off with no possibility of arising again. Whatever kamma is performed on account of non-hatred ... on account of non-delusion ..."[\[37\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, these three kamma-origins, greed, hatred and delusion, are causes of kamma. Whatever kamma is performed on account of greed, is born from greed, has greed as origin, is formed from greed, that kamma is unskillful ... is harmful ... has suffering as a result. That kamma exists for the arising of more kamma, not for the cessation of kamma. Whatever kamma is done on account of hatred ... on account of delusion ...

"Bhikkhus, these three kamma-origins, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, are causes of kamma. Whatever kamma is done on account of non-greed, is born of non-greed, has non-greed as origin, is formed from non-greed, that kamma is skillful ... not harmful ... has happiness as a result. That kamma leads to the cessation of kamma, not to the arising of kamma. Whatever kamma is done on account of non-hatred ... on account of non-delusion ..."[\[38\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, killing of living beings, I say, is of three kinds. That is, with greed as motive, with hatred as motive and with delusion as motive. Stealing ... sexual misconduct ... lying ... malicious tale-bearing ... abusive speech ... frivolous speech ... covetousness ... resentment ... wrong view, I

say, are of three kinds. They are, with greed as motive, with hatred as motive and with delusion as motive. Thus, greed is a cause for kamma, hatred is a cause for kamma, delusion is a cause for kamma. With the cessation of greed, there is the cessation of a cause of kamma. With the cessation of hatred, there is the cessation of a cause of kamma. With the cessation of delusion, there is the cessation of a cause of kamma."[\[39\]](#)

* * *

"Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of kamma ... What is black kamma, black result? Some people in this world are given to killing, given to stealing, given to sexual infidelity, given to lying, given to drinking intoxicants which lead to heedlessness. This is called black kamma, black result.

"Bhikkhus, what is white kamma, white result? Some people in this world dwell aloof from killing, aloof from stealing, aloof from sexual infidelity, aloof from lying, aloof from the drinking of intoxicants which lead to heedlessness. This is called white kamma, white result.

"Bhikkhus, what is kamma both black and white with result both black and white? Some people in this world create actions through body ... speech ... mind which are both harmful and not harmful. This is called 'kamma both black and white with result both black and white.'

"Bhikkhus, what is kamma neither black nor white, with result neither black nor white, which leads to the cessation of kamma? Within those three kinds of kamma, the intention to abandon (those kinds of kamma), this is called the kamma which is neither black nor white, with result neither black nor white, which leads to the ending of kamma."[\[40\]](#)

* * *

"Listen, Udayi. A bhikkhu in this Teaching and Discipline cultivates the Mindfulness Enlightenment Factor ... the Equanimity Enlightenment Factor, which tend to seclusion, tend to dispassion, tend to cessation, which are well developed, which are boundless, void of irritation. Having cultivated the Mindfulness Enlightenment Factor ... the Equanimity Enlightenment Factor ... craving is discarded. With the discarding of craving, kamma is discarded. With the discarding of kamma, suffering is discarded. Thus, with the ending of craving there is the ending of kamma; with the ending of kamma there is the ending of suffering."[\[41\]](#)

Misunderstandings of the Law of Kamma

Who causes happiness and suffering?

According to the Buddha's words, "Through Ignorance, bodily actions ... verbal actions ... mental actions ... are created, of one's own accord ... through external influences ... knowingly ... unknowingly." There are also instances where the Buddha refuted both the theory that all happiness and suffering are caused by the self (known as *attakaravada*) and the theory that all happiness and suffering are caused by external forces (known as *parakaravada*). This highlights the need to see kamma in its relation to the entire stream of cause and effect. The extent of any involvement, either one's own or of external factors, must be considered in relation to this process. Otherwise the common misunderstanding arises that all events are caused by personal actions, to the exclusion of everything else.

What must be grasped is the difference between kamma in the context of natural law, and kamma in the context of ethics. When speaking of kamma as a natural law, a process that exists in nature and incorporates a wide range of conditioning factors, we do not overemphasize the role of individual action, so we say that kamma is not the only cause of happiness and suffering. But on the level of ethics, the teaching of kamma is meant to be used on a practical basis. Consequently, full responsibility is placed on the individual. This is emphasized in the Buddha's words from the Dhammapada, "Be a refuge unto yourself."

In addition to meaning that we must help ourselves, this injunction also includes our relationship when helped by others. That is, even in the event of help arising from external sources, we are still responsible for accepting such help on all or any of the following three levels: (a) In the invitation, whether intentional or otherwise, whether conscious or not, of such help; (b) In fostering such help through appropriate behavior; (c) And at the very least, in the acceptance of such help. For this reason, the principle of kamma on the level of natural law and on the level of ethics do not conflict, but actually support each other.

Beliefs that are contrary to the law of kamma

There are three philosophies which are considered by Buddhism to be wrong view and which must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of kamma:

1. Pubbekatahetuvada: The belief that all happiness and suffering arise from previous kamma (Past-action determinism).

2. Issaranimmanahetuvada: The belief that all happiness and suffering are caused by the directives of a Supreme Being (Theistic determinism).

3. Ahetu-apaccayavada: The belief that all happiness and suffering are random, having no cause (Indeterminism or Accidentalism).

Concerning this, we have the Buddha's words:

"Bhikkhus, these three sects, on being questioned by the wise, fall back on tradition and stand fast on inaction. They are:

1. The group of ascetics or Brahmins which teaches and is of the view that all happiness, suffering and neutral feeling are entirely a result of kamma done in a previous time.
2. The group of ascetics and Brahmins which teaches and is of the view that all happiness, suffering and neutral feeling are entirely a result of the will of a Supreme Being.
3. The group of ascetics and Brahmins which teaches and is of the view that all happiness, suffering and neutral feeling are entirely without cause.

"Bhikkhus, of those three groups of ascetics and Brahmins, I approach the first group and ask, 'I hear that you uphold this teaching and view ... Is that so?' If those ascetics and Brahmins, on being thus questioned by me, answer that it is so, then I say to them, 'If that is so, then you have killed living beings as a result of kamma committed in a previous time, have stolen as a result of kamma done at a previous time, have engaged in sexual misconduct ... have uttered false speech ... have held wrong view as a result of kamma done in a previous time.'

"Bhikkhus, adhering to previously done kamma as the essence, there are neither motivation nor effort with what should be done and what should not be done ... Not upholding ardently what should be done, nor abandoning what should be abandoned, those ascetics and Brahmins are as if deluded, lacking a control, incapable of having any true teaching. This is our legitimate refutation of the first group of ascetics and Brahmins holding these views.

"Bhikkhus, of those three groups of ascetics and Brahmins, I approach the second group ... and say to them, 'If that is so, then you have killed living beings because of the directives of a Supreme Being ... stolen the goods of others ... engaged in sexual misconduct ... uttered false speech ... have held wrong view because of the directives of a Supreme Being.'

"Bhikkhus, adhering to the will of a Supreme Being as the essence, there are neither motivation nor effort with what should be done and what should not be done ...

"Bhikkhus, of those groups of ascetics and Brahmins, I approach the third ... and say to them, 'If that is so, then you have killed living beings for no reason whatsoever ... stolen the goods of

others ... engaged in sexual misconduct ... uttered false speech ... have held wrong view for no reason whatsoever.'

"Bhikkhus, adhering to accidentalism as being the essence, there are neither motivation nor effort with what should be done and what should not be done ..." [42]

The first of these three schools of thought is that of the Niganthas, about which we can learn some more from the Buddha's words:

"Bhikkhus, there are some ascetics and Brahmins who are of this view, 'All happiness and suffering are entirely caused by previous kamma. For this reason, with the exhausting of old kamma through austerities, there will be no influence exerted by kamma-results. When there is no more influence of kamma-results, kamma is ended. With the ending of kamma there is an ending of suffering. With the ending of suffering there is an ending of feeling. With the ending of feeling, all suffering is eventually extinguished.' Bhikkhus, the Niganthas are of this view." [43]

The following words from the Buddha clearly illustrate the Buddhist view:

"Listen, Sivaka. Some kinds of feeling arise with bile as condition ... with changes in the weather as condition ... with inconstant behavior as condition ... with danger from an external source as condition ... with kamma-results as condition. Any ascetic or Brahmin who is of the view that, 'All feeling is entirely caused by previous kamma,' I say is mistaken." [44]

These words discourage us from going too far with kamma by considering it as entirely a thing of the past. Such a view encourages inactivity; passively waiting for the results of old kamma to ripen and taking things as they come without thinking to correct or improve them. This is a harmful form of wrong view, as can be seen from the Buddha's words above.

Significantly, in the above passage, the Buddha asserts effort and motivation as the crucial factors in deciding the ethical value of these various teachings on kamma.

The Buddha did not dismiss the importance of previous kamma, because it does play a part in the cause and effect process, and thus has an effect on the present in its capacity as one of the conditioning factors. But it is simply one of those conditions, it is not a supernatural force to be clung to or submitted to passively. An understanding of the Principle of Dependent Origination and the cause and effect process will clarify this.

For example, if a man climbs to the third floor of a building, it is undeniably true that his arriving is a result of past action -- namely, walking up the stairs. And having arrived there, it is impossible for him to reach out and touch the ground with his hand, or to drive a car around. Obviously, this is because he has gone up to the third floor. Or, having arrived at the third floor, whether he is too exhausted to continue is also related to having walked up the stairs. His arrival there, the things he is able to do there and the situations he is likely to encounter, are all certainly related to the "old kamma" of having walked up the stairs. But exactly which actions he will perform, his reactions to the situations which he meets there, whether he will take a rest, walk

on, or walk back down the stairs and out of that building, are all matters which he can decide for himself in that present moment, for which he will also reap the results. Even though the action of walking up the stairs may still be influencing him (for example, with his strength sapped he may be unable to function efficiently in any given situation), whether he decides to give in to that tiredness or try to overcome it are all matters which he can decide for himself in the present moment.

Therefore, old kamma should be understood in its relation to the whole cause and effect process. In terms of ethical practice, to understand the cause and effect process is to be able to learn from old kamma, understanding the situation at hand, and to skillfully make a plan of action for improving on and preparing for the future.

Can kamma be erased?

At one time the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, there are those who say 'Whatever kamma is made by this man, he will receive identical results thereof.' If such were the case, there could be no higher life, no path could be perceived for the successful ending of suffering.[\[a\]](#)

"But with the view, 'When kamma based on a certain kind of feeling is made (pleasant or unpleasant, for example), results arise in conformity with that feeling,' the higher life can be, there is a way for the ending of suffering.

"Bhikkhus, for some people, only a little bad kamma can lead to rebirth in hell, but for others that same small amount of bad kamma will produce results only in the present moment, and even then, only the most extreme aspects of it will become apparent, not the minor.

"What kind of person is it who, for only a little bad kamma, goes to hell? There are those who have not trained their actions, have not trained in moral restraint, have not trained their minds and have not developed wisdom. They are of little worth, are of small status and dwell discontented over minor kamma results. This kind of person it is who, over just a little bad kamma, can go to hell (like putting a lump of salt into a very small vessel).

"What kind of person is it who, for exactly the same amount of bad kamma, receives fruit only in the present, and even then, the minor aspects of that kamma do not manifest, only the major? There are those who have trained their actions, have trained in moral restraint, have trained their minds and have developed wisdom. They are not of little worth, they are great beings, they have a measureless abiding. For this kind of person, just the same kind of minor bad kamma gives results only in the present, and even then the minor aspects of that kamma do not manifest, only the major (like putting a lump of salt into a river)."[\[45\]](#)

* * *

"Listen, householder, some teachers give the teaching and are of the view that those who kill living beings must without exception go to the woeful states, falling to hell; that those who steal must without exception go to the woeful states, falling to hell; that those who commit adultery must without exception go to the woeful states, falling to hell; that those who lie must without exception go to the woeful states, falling to hell. Disciples of those teachers, thinking, 'Our teacher gives the teaching and is of the view that those who kill living beings must all fall into hell,' conceive the view thus, 'I have killed living beings. Therefore I, too, must go to hell.' Not relinquishing that speech and that view, he indeed goes to hell, just as if pushed there by force.

"As for the Tathagata, fully enlightened Buddha, he arises in the world ... He speaks in dispraise of killing living beings ... stealing ... adultery ... lying, in many ways, and teaches, 'Killing of living beings ... stealing ... adultery ... lying should be abandoned.' A disciple of the Teacher, reflecting thus, 'The Blessed One speaks in dispraise of killing living beings ... in many a way, and teaches the abandoning of killing living beings. I have killed many beings already. That killing of living beings by me is not good, is not worthy. I will suffer on account of those actions, and on their account I will not be beyond reproof.' Reflecting in this way, he gives up killing of living beings, and is one who abandons the killing of living beings from that moment on. Thus does he abandon that bad kamma ...

"He abandons the killing of living beings ... lying ... malicious tale-bearing ... coarse speech ... frivolous speech ... covetousness ... enmity ... wrong view. He is one endowed with Right View, he is a Noble Disciple with a mind free of greed, free of aversion, not deluded but possessed of self awareness and firm mindfulness. He dwells with a mind full of goodwill, spreading to the first ... second ... third ... the whole four directions, above, below, spreading out wide to the whole world, to all beings in all places, with a mind full of goodwill that is expansive, grand, boundless, free of enmity and ill will. Having so thoroughly developed the Mind Deliverance through Goodwill, any moderate amount of kamma previously done will no longer manifest ..."[46]

These words have been quoted to prevent misunderstandings in relation to the fruition of kamma. The present extract is only a small portion of the material available, as to present it all would take up too much space.

Do kamma and not-self contradict each other?

There is one question which, though only occasionally asked, tends to linger in the minds of many newcomers to the study of Buddhism: "Do the teachings of kamma and not-self contradict each other?" If everything, including body and mind, is not-self, then how can there be kamma? Who is it who commits kamma? Who receives the results of kamma? These doubts are not simply a phenomenon of the present time, but have existed from the time of the Buddha, as can be seen in the following example:

A bhikkhu conceived the following doubt,

"We know that body, feeling, perception, volitional impulses and consciousness**[b]** are not self. If so, then who is it who receives the results of the kamma made by this 'non-self'?"

At that time, the Blessed One, knowing the thoughts of that bhikkhu, addressed the bhikkhus thus:

"Bhikkhus, it may be that some foolish people in this Teaching and Discipline, with mind fallen into ignorance and confused by desire, might conceive the teaching of the Master to be rationalized thus: 'We know that body, feeling, perception, volitional impulses and consciousness are not self. If that is so, who is it who receives the results of the kamma created by this "non-self"?' All of you now, having been thoroughly instructed by me, consider these matters: is form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Lord."

"Is what is impermanent (a cause for) happiness or suffering?"

"Suffering, Lord"

"Of that which is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and normally subject to degeneration, is it proper to say that 'this is mine, this is me, this is my self'?"

"No, it is not proper, Lord."

"For that reason, form, feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness, of whatever description, are merely form, feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness. They are not 'mine,' not 'me,' not 'my self.' Reflect on this as it is with wisdom. The learned, Noble Disciple, seeing in this way, does not attach to form, feeling, perception, volitional impulses or consciousness. He is free of those things, and has no further task to do."[\[47\]](#)

Before examining this scriptural reference, consider the following illustration: Suppose we are standing on the bank of a river, watching the water flow by. The water flows in a mostly flat area, therefore it flows very slowly. The earth in that particular area is red, which gives this body of water a reddish tint. In addition to this, the water passes many heavily populated areas, from where people have long thrown in refuse, which, in addition to the industrial waste poured into the water by a number of recently built factories, pollutes the water. The water is therefore uninhabitable for most animals; there are not many fish in it. Summarizing, the body of water we are looking at is reddish, dirty, polluted, sparsely inhabited and sluggish. All of these features together are the characteristics of this particular body of water. Some of these characteristics might be similar to other streams or rivers, but the sum total of these characteristics is unique to this stream of water.

Presently we are informed that this body of water is called the Tah Wung River. Different people describe it in different ways. Some say the Tah Wung River is dirty and doesn't have many fish. Some say the Tah Wung River flows very slowly. Some say that the Tah Wung River is red-colored.

Standing on the river's bank, it seems to us that the body of water we are looking at is actually complete in itself. Its attributes, such as being sluggish, red-colored, dirty, and so on, are all caused by various conditioning factors, such as the flowing water contacting the red earth. In addition, the water which we are looking at is constantly flowing by. The water which we saw at first is no longer here, and the water we are now seeing will quickly pass. Even so, the river has its unique features, which do not change as long as the relevant conditioning factors have not changed.

But we are told, then, that this is the Tah Wung River. Not only that, they say that the Tah Wung River is sluggish, dirty, and short of fish. Just looking, we can see no "Tah Wung River" other than this body of water flowing by. We can see no "Tah Wung River" possessing this body of water. Yet they tell us that the Tah Wung River breaks up the red earth as it passes, which makes the water turn red. It's almost as if this "Tah Wung River" does something to the red earth, which causes the earth to "punish" it by turning its water red.

We can see clearly that this body of water is subject to the process of cause and effect governed by its various conditioning factors: the water splashing against the red earth and the red earth dissolving into the water is one causal condition, the result of which is the red-colored water. We can find no "body" doing anything or receiving any results. We can see no actual Tah Wung River anywhere. The water flowing past us now flows right on by, the water seen previously is no longer here, new water constantly taking its place. We are able to define that body of water only by describing its conditioning factors and the events which arise as a result, causing the features we have observed. If there was an actual and unchanging Tah Wung River, it would be impossible for that flow of water to proceed according to its various determining factors. Finally we see that this "Tah Wung River" is superfluous. We can speak about that body of water without having to bother with this "Tah Wung River." In actual fact there is no Tah Wung River at all!

As time goes by we travel to another district. Wishing to describe the body of water we saw to the people there, we find ourselves at a loss. Then we recall someone telling us that that body of water was known as the Tah Wung River. Knowing this, we can relate our experience fluently, and the other people are able to listen with interest and attention. We tell them that the Tah Wung River has dirty water, not many fish, is sluggish, and red-colored.

At that time, we realize clearly that this "Tah Wung River," and the role it plays in the events we describe, are simply conventions of language used for convenience in communication. Whether the convention of Tah Wung River exists or not, and whether we use it or not, has no bearing whatsoever on the actions of that body of water. That body of water continues to be a process of interrelated cause and effect reactions. We can clearly distinguish between the convention and the actual condition. Now we are able to understand and use the convention of speech with ease.

The things which we conventionally know as people, to which we give names, and refer to as "me" and "you," are in reality continuous and interconnected streams of events, made up of countless related constituent factors, just like that river. They are subject to countless factors, directed by related determinants, both from within that stream of events and from without. When

a particular reaction takes place in a causal way, the fruit of that action arises, causing changes within the flow of events.

The conditions which are referred to as kamma and *vipaka* are simply the play of cause and effect within one particular stream of events. They are perfectly capable of functioning within that stream without the need for the conventions of name, or the words "me" and "you," either as owners or perpetrators of those actions, or as receivers of their results. This is reality, [c] which functions naturally in this way. But for convenience in communication within the social world, we must use the convention of names, such as Mr. Smith and so on, for particular streams of events.

Having accepted the convention, we must accept responsibility for that stream of events, becoming the owner, the active perpetrator and the passive subject of actions and their results, as the case may be. But whether we use these conventions or not, whether we accept the labels or not, the stream of events itself functions anyway, directed by cause and effect. The important point is to be aware of things as they are, distinguishing between the convention and the condition itself. One and the same thing, in the context of its actual nature, is one way, but when spoken of in conventional terms it must be referred to in another way. If we have an understanding of the actual reality of these things we will not be deluded or confused by the conventions.

Both reality and convention are necessary. Reality (often referred to as *paramattha*) is the natural state. Conventions are a useful and practical human invention. Problems arise when we confuse the two, clinging to the reality and trying to make it follow conventions. Within the actual reality there is no confusion, because the principle naturally functions by itself, not being subject to anybody's ideas about it -- it is people who become confused. And because reality is not confused, functioning independently of people's desires, it frustrates those desires and makes people even more confused and frustrated. Any problem occurring is purely a human one.

As can be seen in the passage above, the bhikkhu who conceived this doubt was confusing the description of the reality, which he had learned, with the convention, to which he still clung. This was the cause of his bewilderment and doubt. Referring to the original wording, it goes something like this: "If kamma is created by not-self, what self is it that receives the fruits of kamma?" The first part of the sentence is spoken according to his acquired knowledge of the reality, while the second part is spoken according to his own habitual perception. Naturally they don't fit.

From the foregoing, we can summarize thus:

- The teachings of not-self and kamma are not at all contradictory. On the contrary, not-self lends weight to the teaching of kamma. Because things are not-self, there can be kamma, and kamma can function. When the process of events is operating, all the factors involved must arise, cease and interact unhindered, so that the stream of events can proceed. There can be no permanent or actual entity to block this flow. If there was a self, there could be

no kamma, because a self (by definition) is not subject to cause and effect. Nothing can effect its existence, or cause the self to be other than what it is. In the end we would have to divide the individual into two levels, such as is held by the sassataditthi (belief in an intrinsic self) sects, who believe that the self who creates and receives the fruits of kamma is merely the external or superficial self, while the real self, or essence of the self, lies unchanging within.

- The creation of kamma and its results in the present time is done without the need for an agent or a recipient. We should consider thus: "Which factors are operating here? What relationships are involved? What events are arising within the stream as a result, and how are they effecting changes within the stream?" When a cause, known as kamma, or action, arises, there follows the result, known as *vipaka*, within that stream of events. We call this "cause and effect." This process is not dependent on an owner of those actions, or a doer and a recipient of results as an additional, extraneous entity. Kamma is the flow of cause and effect within that stream of events, unlike the conventions which are pasted over them.

When there is an agreement to call that stream of events Mr. Smith or Miss Brown, there arises an owner of actions, a doer and a recipient of results. However, the stream of events proceeds regardless, completely perfect within itself as far as the cause and effect process goes. It does not depend on names in order to function.

When it is time to speak in the context of a stream of events, describing its operation, its causes and its results, then we can so speak. When it is time to speak in the context of conventions, describing actions and the fruits of actions in personal terms, we can speak thus also. With right understanding, we do not confuse the two levels.

Even with regard to inanimate objects, such as the river above, most people still manage to cling to conventions as actual entities. How much more so when it comes to human beings, which are more complex and intricate junctions of causal processes, involving mental factors. As for these mental factors, they are extremely subtle. Even impermanence is incomprehensible to many people. There are those who say, for instance, "Who says memory is impermanent and unstable? Memory is permanent, because wherever and whenever it arises, it is always memory, it never changes."

Some people may agree with this line of reasoning, but if the argument is applied to a material object the error becomes more obvious. It is like saying, "Who says the body is impermanent? The body is permanent and unchanging, because wherever and whenever the body arises, it is always the body, it never changes." It is easier to see the mistake in this latter argument, but actually both arguments are equally mistaken. That is, both confuse memory, for instance, and the label "memory," or body and the label "body." The arguments suggest that memory and the body are stable and unchanging, but in fact what they are saying is that the names "memory" and "body" are (relatively) stable and unchanging.

Studying the law of kamma solely on the level of convention sometimes leads to a simplistic view of things, such as believing that a certain person, having committed such-and-such kamma,

on such-and-such a day, ten years later receives such-and-such bad result. The cause and effect process referred to jumps over a span of ten years all in one step. The total stream of events involved is not taken into account, and so it is difficult to see the real process involved. Studying the same case in terms of the natural stream of events helps to see the operation of cause and effect relationships more completely and in more detail, revealing the real significance of the results which have arisen and how they have come about.

Suppose a certain Mr. Brown has an argument with his neighbor and kills him. Although he goes into hiding, eventually he is arrested and convicted. Later, even after having been freed at the end of his prison term, Mr. Brown still experiences remorse on account of his bad actions. He is often haunted by the image of the murder victim. His facial features and physical bearing change, becoming agitated, fearful and depressive. These mental states, coupled with his strong physical bearing, together cause him to become even more violent and bad-tempered. As time goes on his physical features take on coarse and hostile characteristics. He hides his suffering with aggressive behavior, becoming a danger to society and to himself, unable to find any real happiness.

In this example, we can say simply that Mr. Brown has committed bad kamma and suffered the results of his actions. This is speaking conventionally, and it is readily understood by most people. It is a way of communication, facilitating the exchange of ideas, but it speaks merely of the external appearance of things, or the grosser results of the relevant factors which are concealed within. It does not pierce the true essence of the matter, of the interrelated factors reacting according to the natural laws.

However, if we speak in terms of reality, we can speak of the essence in its entirety, referring to it as a process of events. For example, we could say that within the operation of this set of five *khandhas*, a mind state based on anger arose. There followed the mental proliferation in accord with that anger, leading to physical action. Conceiving in this way habitually, the mind began to assume those tendencies. Physical repercussions from external sources were experienced, adding to the unpleasant feeling, and so on.

Speaking according to the conditions in this way, we have all the necessary information without the need for reference to Mr. Brown or any kind of self. The process contains in itself natural elements of various kinds arising and reacting with each other to produce actions and reactions, without the need for a doer or a receiver of results.

Whether speaking according to the conditions as given here, or according to the convention as related above, the reality of the situation is identical -- neither is deficient or more complete -- but the description of things as a natural condition is given in terms of the natural facts, without the appendages of conventional imagery.

In any case, even with these examples, there may still be some doubt on the matter, so it might be helpful to conclude with a story:

Tit Porng[d] went to visit the Venerable Abbot of the nearby monastery. At one point, he asked:

"Eh, Luang Por, the Buddha taught that everything is not-self, and is without an owner -- there is no-one who commits kamma and no-one who receives its results. If that's the case, then I can go out and hit somebody over the head or even kill them, or do anything I like, because there is no-one committing kamma and no-one receiving its results."

No sooner had Tit Pornng finished speaking, when the Abbot's walking stick, concealed somewhere unknown to Tit Pornng, swung down like a flash. Tit Pornng could hardly get his arm up fast enough to ward off the blow. Even so, the walking stick struck squarely in the middle of his arm, giving it a good bruise.

Clutching his sore arm, Tit Pornng said, "Luang Por! Why did you do that?" His voice trembled with the anger that was welling up inside him.

"Oh! What's the matter?" the Abbot asked offhandedly.

"Why, you hit me! That hurts!"

The Abbot, assuming a tone of voice usually reserved for sermons, slowly murmured: "There is kamma but no-one creating it. There are results of kamma, but no-one receiving them. There is feeling, but no-one experiencing it. There is pain, but no-one in pain ... He who tries to use the law of not-self for his own selfish purposes is not freed of self; he who clings to not-self is one who clings to self. He does not really know not-self. He who clings to the idea that there is no-one who creates kamma must also cling to the idea that there is one who is in pain. He does not really know that there is no-one who creates kamma and no-one who experiences pain."

The moral of this story is: if you want to say "there is no-one who creates kamma," you must first learn how to stop saying "Ouch!"

Footnotes:

- a. An example of this kind of belief: If you break down a termite mound in this life, in a future life you will inevitably have your house broken down by those very same termites, possibly reborn as human beings. [[Back to text](#)]
- b. The five *khandhas*, or aggregates of existence. [[Back to text](#)]
- c. The word "reality" might seem somewhat arbitrary to those not familiar with Buddhism. In the context of this work, we could define it more clearly as "the natural world as distinct from human conventional appendages." [[Back to text](#)]
- d. Tit Pornng: "Tit" is a Thai name for one who has ordained as a bhikkhu for some time and later disrobed. "Luang Por," literally meaning Venerable Father, is a term of respect given to venerated monks. [[Back to text](#)]

7

In Conclusion

The practical value of the teaching of kamma can be summarized thus:

- It establishes an understanding of actions and their results as subject to cause and effect, rather than lucky charms and auspicious objects.
- It demonstrates that the success of any aspiration is dependent on action, encouraging self-reliance and diligence.
- It develops a sense of responsibility -- to one self by giving up bad actions, and towards others by acting kindly towards them.
- It nurtures the understanding that all people have a natural and equal right, either to let themselves degenerate, or to improve and develop themselves.
- It shows that mental qualities, abilities and behavior are the measuring sticks of human baseness or refinement, and that discrimination according to caste or race are unnecessary and harmful.
- It shows how to learn from old kamma (past actions), by considering actions according to reason; not simply finding fault with others or external situations, but looking into one's own actions, ascertaining how to correct them and improve oneself, and determining the most useful actions for any given situation.
- It puts the future, in the form of personal responsibility, back into the hands of each individual.

These values can be considered in the light of the Buddha's words presented here:

The general meaning

"Bhikkhus, intention, I say, is kamma. With intention as the forerunner, kamma is created through body, speech and mind."[\[48\]](#)

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"All beings are the owners of their kamma, heirs to their kamma, born of their kamma, related to their kamma, supported by their kamma. Kamma it is which divides beings into coarse and refined states."[\[49\]](#)

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"Whatever seed one plants, one reaps the fruit thereof. Who does good receives good, who does evil receives evil."[\[50\]](#)

* * *

"The fool treats himself like an enemy, creating bad kamma, a cause for misery. Actions which lead to distress, a face wet with tears and distraction, are not good kamma."[\[51\]](#)

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"Actions which lead not to distress, but to a heart bright and cheerful, are good kamma. Knowing what kamma is useful, one should quickly act thereon."[\[51\]](#)

Intelligence over superstition

"If it were possible to cleanse evil kamma simply by bathing in a river, then the frogs, fish, otters, crocodiles and other river-dwelling animals would certainly be destined for rebirth in a heaven realm ... If these rivers were capable of carrying away your evil kamma, then they could probably also carry away your good kamma."[\[52\]](#)

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"Benefit slips by while the fool counts the stars. Benefit is the harbinger of benefit, of what use are the stars?"[\[53\]](#)

* * *

"For whosoever there is right action, that is a favorable time, an auspicious time, an auspicious morning, an auspicious dawning, an auspicious moment, an auspicious occasion; and in that action there is veneration of the holy. The bodily kamma ... verbal kamma ... mental kamma of

such a one are auspicious, and his wishes are auspicious. Having created auspicious kamma, that person experiences only auspicious results."[\[54\]](#)

Action rather than prayer

"Yearn neither for the past, nor anticipate the future. The past is gone, the future yet to come. One who sees clearly the present moment, certain and unwavering, should strive to maintain that awareness. Practice diligently today, who knows whether tomorrow will bring death? No-one can bargain with the Lord of Death and his hordes. One who practices in such a way, even for one night, ardent, lazy neither day nor night, is praised by the Peaceful One."[\[55\]](#)

* * *

"Listen, householder, these five conditions are desirable, worthy of favor, worthy of pleasure, and are hard to come by in this world. They are longevity ... pleasant appearance ... happiness ... status ... heaven. These five conditions, I say, are not to be had by mere supplication or aspiration. If these five conditions were obtainable through mere supplication or aspiration, then who in this world would not have them? Listen, householder, the Noble Disciple, desiring long life, should not waste his time supplicating or merely indulging in the wish for longevity. The Noble Disciple desiring longevity should maintain the practice which produces longevity. Only the practice which produces longevity is capable of procuring longevity. That Noble Disciple will thus be one who has longevity, both divine and human ... he who desires pleasant appearance ... happiness ... status ... heaven, should develop the practice which produces pleasant appearance ... happiness ... status ... heaven ..."[\[56\]](#)

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"Bhikkhus, even though a bhikkhu were to conceive the wish, 'May my mind be freed from the outflows,' if he does not diligently devote himself to the training of the mind, he will be unable to free the mind from the outflows. Just like a mother hen who refuses to sit on her eggs, to warm, to incubate them. Even though that hen might conceive the wish, 'May my chicks, using their feet and beaks, break out safely from these eggs,' it would be impossible for those chicks to do so."[\[57\]](#)

Nonadherence to race or class

"I do not say that one becomes a Brahmin on emerging from the womb. That is simply what the Brahmins say. Such a person still has defilements. I say that it is rather the one who has no defilements and clinging who is a Brahmin.

"Name and family are established in this world as merely worldly conventions. They arise from the views adhered to over the ages by ignorant beings. Those ignorant beings say they are Brahmins because of their birth, but one does not become either Brahmin or non-Brahmin through birth. One is a Brahmin through action (kamma), is a non-Brahmin through action. One is a farmer through action, one is an artist through action, a merchant through action, a servant through action, a thief through action, a King through action. The wise, skilled in the Principle of Dependent Origination, understanding kamma and its results, know kamma clearly as it is ... that the world proceeds according to kamma, all beings fare according to kamma. Beings are bound together by kamma, just as a running cart is bound by its couplings."[\[58\]](#)

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"One is not evil because of birth, and is not a Brahmin because of birth, but is evil because of kamma, and is a Brahmin because of kamma."[\[59\]](#)

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"From among these four castes -- the Noble, the Brahmin, the merchants and the plebeians, all who have left home and gone forth in the Teaching and Discipline of the Tathagata, will dispense with name and family, and all become equally recluses, Sons of the Sakyans."[\[60\]](#)

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"From among these four castes, any who have become bhikkhus, freed of the outflows, who have completed the training, done what was to be done and laid down the burden; who have attained the true benefit, the freedom from the fetters, and liberation through true wisdom ... they are more excellent than any of those castes."[\[61\]](#)

Self reliance

"You must do the practice yourselves. The Tathagata only points the way."[\[62\]](#)

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"Self is the mainstay of self, who else could be your mainstay? Having trained the self well, one attains a mainstay hard to come by."[\[63\]](#)

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"Purity and impurity are personal responsibilities. No one else can make you pure."[\[64\]](#)

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"Bhikkhus, be a refuge unto yourselves, do not cling to anything else. Take the Dhamma as your refuge, take nothing else as your refuge."[\[65\]](#)

A caution for the future

"Women, men, householders and those gone to homelessness should regularly reflect, 'We are the owners of our kamma, the heirs of our kamma, born of our kamma, descended from our kamma, supported by our kamma. Whatever kamma is done by us, whether good or bad, we will receive the results thereof.'"[\[66\]](#)

* * *

"If you fear suffering, do not make bad kamma, either in public or in private. If you make bad kamma, even if you fly into the air, you will be unable to escape suffering."[\[67\]](#)

* * *

"Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, employees and associates ... none of these can you take with you, you must cast them all aside.

"But whatever kamma is made by you, whether by body, speech or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that kamma. That kamma will follow you, just as the shadow follows its owner.

"Therefore, do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings in the hereafter."[\[68\]](#)

