

THE WORKING OF KAMMA

“By kamma is this world led.”

— Atthasālinī

The working of kamma is an intricate law which only a Buddha can fully comprehend. To obtain a clear understanding of this difficult subject it is necessary to acquaint oneself with thought-processes (*cittavīthi*) according to Abhidhamma.

Mind or consciousness, the essence of the so-called being, plays the most important part in the complex machinery of man. It is mind that either defiles or purifies one. Mind in fact is both the bitterest enemy and the greatest friend of oneself.

When a person is fast asleep and is in a dreamless state, he experiences a kind of consciousness which is more passive than active. It is similar to the consciousness one experiences at the moment of conception and at the moment of death (*cuti*). The Buddhist philosophical term for this type of consciousness is *bhavaṅga* which means factor of life, or indispensable cause or condition of existence. Arising and perishing every moment, it flows on like a stream not remaining the same for two consecutive moments.

We do experience this type of consciousness not only in a dreamless state but also in our waking state. In the course of our life we experience *bhavaṅga* thought-moments more than any other type of consciousness. Hence *bhavaṅga* becomes an indispensable condition of life.

Some scholars identify *bhavaṅga* with subconsciousness. According to the *Dictionary of Philosophy* subconsciousness is “a compartment of the mind alleged by certain psychologists and philosophers to exist below the threshold of consciousness.”

In the opinion of Western philosophers subconsciousness and consciousness co-exist. But, according to Buddhist philosophy, no two types of consciousness co-exist.³⁰⁵

305. According to Buddhist philosophy there is no moment when we do not ordinarily experience a particular kind of consciousness, hanging on to some object—whether physical or mental. The time limit of such consciousness is termed one thought-moment. Each thought-moment is followed by another. The rapidity of the succession of such thought-moments is hardly conceivable by the ken of human knowledge. It pleases the commentators to say that during the time occupied by a flash of lightning billions and billions of thought-moments may arise.

Nor is *bhavaṅga* a sub-plane. It does not correspond to F. W. Myer's subliminal consciousness either. There does not seem to be any place for *bhavaṅga* in Western philosophy. Perhaps we may be using these philosophical terms with different meanings.

Bhavaṅga is so called because it is an essential condition for continued existence. Life-continuum has been suggested as the closest English equivalent for *bhavaṅga*.

This *bhavaṅga* consciousness, which one always experiences as long as it is uninterrupted by external stimuli, vibrates for a thought-moment and passes away when a physical or mental object enters the mind. Suppose, for instance, the object presented is a physical form. Now, when the *bhavaṅga* stream of consciousness is arrested, sense door consciousness (*pañcadvārāvajjana*), whose function is to turn the consciousness towards the object, arises and passes away. Immediately after this there arises visual consciousness (*cakkhuvīññāṇa*) which sees the object, but yet knows no more about it. This sense operation is followed by a moment of the reception of the object so seen (*sampaṭicchana*). Next arises the investigating thought-moment (*santīraṇa*) which momentarily examines the object so seen. This is followed by the determining thought-moment (*voṭṭhapana*) when discrimination is exercised and free will may play its part. On this depends the subsequent psychologically important stage *javana*. It is at this stage that an action is judged; whether it be moral or immoral, kamma is performed at this stage. If viewed rightly (*yoniso manasikāra*), it becomes moral; if wrongly (*ayoniso manasikāra*), immoral.

Irrespective of the desirability or the undesirability of the object presented to the mind, it is possible for one to make the *javana* process moral or immoral. If, for instance, one meets an enemy, anger will arise automatically. A wise person might, on the contrary, with self-control, radiate a thought of love towards him. This is the reason why the Buddha states (Dhp. 165):

By self is evil done,
By self is one defiled,
By self is no evil done,
By self is one purified.
Both defilement and purity depend on oneself.
No one is purified by another.

It is an admitted fact that environment, circumstances, habitual tendencies and the like condition our thoughts. On such occasions free will is subordinated. There exists however the possibility for us to overcome those external forces and produce moral and immoral thoughts exercis-

ing our own free will.

An extraneous element may be a causative factor, but we ourselves are directly responsible for the actions that finally follow.

It is extremely difficult to suggest a suitable rendering for *javana*.

Apperception is suggested by some. Impulse is suggested as an alternative rendering, which seems to be less satisfactory than apperception. Here the Pali term is retained.

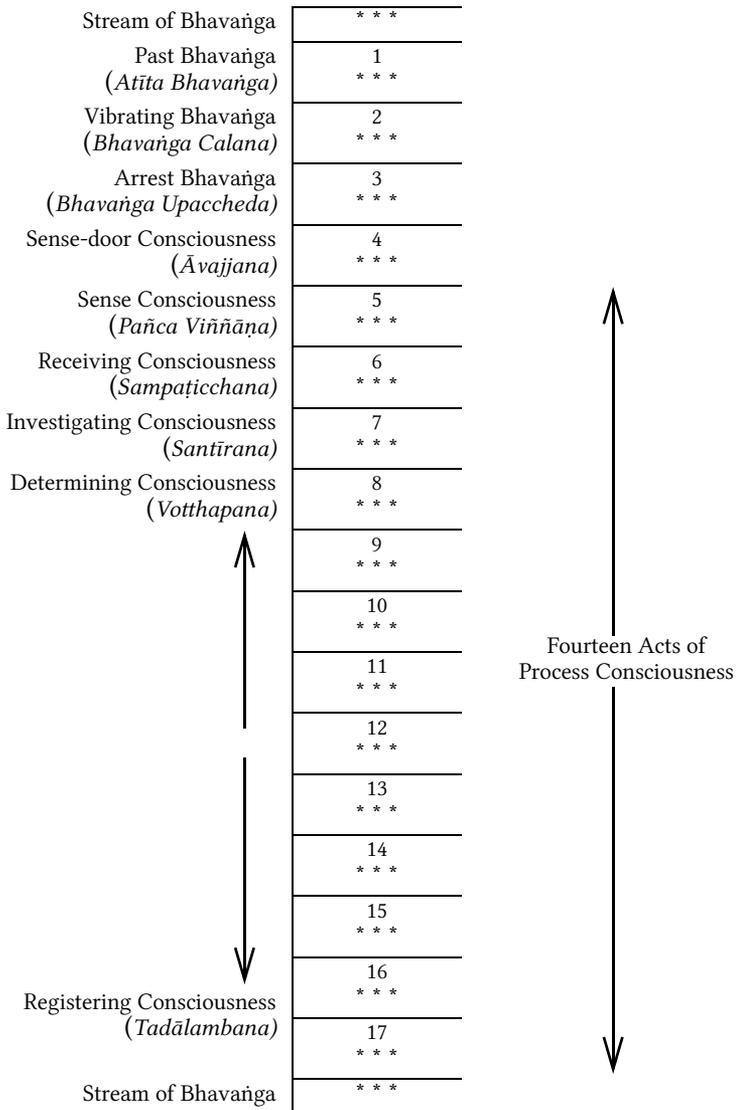
Literally, *javana* means running. It is so called because, in the course of a thought-process, it runs consequently for seven thought-moments, or, at the time of death, for five thought-moments with an identical object. The mental states occurring in all these thought-moments are similar, but the potential force differs.

This entire thought-process which takes place in an infinitesimal part of time ends with the registering consciousness (*tadālabana*) lasting for two thought-moments. Thus one thought-process is completed at the expiration of seventeen thought-moments.

Books cite the simile of the mango tree to illustrate this thought-process: A man, fast asleep, is lying at the foot of a mango tree with his head covered. A wind stirs the branches and a fruit falls beside the head of the sleeping man. He removes his head covering, and turns towards the object. He sees it and then picks it up. He examines it, and ascertains that it is a ripe mango fruit. He eats it, and swallowing the remnants with saliva, once more resigns himself to sleep.

The dreamless sleep corresponds to the unperturbed current of bhavaṅga. The striking of the wind against the tree corresponds to past bhavaṅga and the swaying of the branches to vibrating bhavaṅga. The falling of the fruit represents the arrest bhavaṅga. Turning towards the object corresponds to sense-door advertent consciousness; sight of the object, to perception; picking up, to receiving consciousness; examination, to investigating consciousness; ascertaining that it is a ripe mango fruit, to determining consciousness.

The actual eating resembles the javana process, and the swallowing of the morsels corresponds to retention. His resigning to sleep resembles the subsidence of the mind into bhavaṅga again.



Note: The triple asterisks beneath the numbers represent the three sub-moments of each mind-moment; arising, presence, and dissolution.

DIAGRAM 3: A Thought-Process

Of the seven thought-moments, as stated above, the effect of the first thought-moment, the weakest in potentiality, one may reap in this life itself. This is called ‘immediately effective’ (*diṭṭha-dhammavedaniya kamma*). If it does not operate in this life, it becomes ineffective (*ahosi*).

The next weakest is the seventh thought-moment. Its effect one may reap in the subsequent birth. Hence it is termed ‘subsequently effective’ kamma (*upapajja vedanīya kamma*), which, too, automatically becomes ineffective if it does not operate in the second birth.

The effect of the intermediate thought-moments may take place at any time in the course of one’s wanderings in saṃsāra until the final emancipation. This type of kamma is termed ‘indefinitely effective’ (*aparāpariyavedanīya*).

There is thus a classification of kamma with reference to its time of operation:

1. *Diṭṭhadhammavedanīya kamma* (immediately effective kamma)
2. *Upapajjavedanīya kamma* (subsequently effective kamma)
3. *Aparāpariyavedanīya kamma* (indefinitely effective kamma), and
4. *Ahosi kamma* (ineffective kamma).

Immediately Effective kamma:

Illustrations:

The result of a good kamma reaped in this life:

A husband and his wife possessed only one upper garment to wear when they went out-of-doors. One day the husband heard the Dhamma from the Buddha and was so pleased with the doctrine that he wished to offer his only upper garment, but his innate greed would not permit him to do so. He combatted with his mind and, ultimately overcoming his greed, offered the garment to the Buddha and exclaimed “I have won, I have won.” The king was delighted to hear his story and in appreciation of his generosity presented him thirty-two robes. The devout husband kept one for himself and another for his wife and offered the rest to the Buddha.³⁰⁶

The result of a bad kamma reaped in this life:

A hunter who went hunting to the forest, followed by his dogs, met by the wayside a bhikkhu who was proceeding on his alms round. As the hunter could not procure any game, he thought it was due to the unfortunate meeting of the bhikkhu. While returning home he met the same bhikkhu and was deeply enraged at this second encounter. In spite

306. *Buddhist Legends*, (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*), pt. 2, p. 262.

of the entreaties of the innocent bhikkhu the hunter set the dogs on him. Finding no escape therefrom, the bhikkhu climbed a tree. The wicked hunter ran up to the tree, and pierced the soles of the bhikkhu's feet with the point of an arrow. The pain was so excruciating that the robe the bhikkhu was wearing, fell upon the hunter completely covering him. The dogs, thinking that the bhikkhu had fallen from the tree, devoured their own master.³⁰⁷

Subsequently Effective kamma:

A millionaire's servant returned home in the evening after his laborious work in the field, to see that all were observing the eight precepts as it was the full moon day. Learning that he also could observe them even for half a day, he took the precepts and fasted at night. Unfortunately he died on the following morning and as a result of his good action was born as a deva.³⁰⁸

Ajātasattu, son of King Bimbisāra, was born immediately after his death, in a state of misery as the result of killing his father.

Indefinitely Effective kamma:

No person is exempt from this class of kamma. Even the Buddhas and arahants may reap the effects of their past kamma.

The arahant Moggallāna in the remote past, instigated by his wicked wife, attempted to kill his mother and father.³⁰⁹ As a result of this he suffered long in a woeful state, and in his last birth was clubbed to death by bandits.

To the Buddha was imputed the murder of a female devotee of the naked ascetics.

This was the result of his having insulted a *paccekabuddha* in one of his previous births.

The Buddha's foot was slightly injured when Devadatta made a futile attempt to kill him. This was due to his killing a step-brother of his in a previous birth with the object of appropriating his property.

There is another classification of kamma according to function (*kicca*):

1. *Janaka kamma* (reproductive kamma),
2. *Upatthambhaka kamma* (supportive kamma),
3. *Upapīḍaka kamma* (counteractive kamma),

307. *Buddhist Legends*, p. 282.

308. *Ibid.*, pt. i. p. 278.

309. According to some books he actually killed them.

4. *Upaghātaka kamma* (destructive kamma).

Every subsequent birth, according to Buddhism, is conditioned by the good or bad kamma which predominated at the moment of death. This kind of kamma is technically known as reproductive (*janaka*) kamma. The death of a person is merely "the temporary end of a temporary phenomenon." Though the present form perishes another form which is neither absolutely the same nor totally different takes its place according to the thought that was powerful at the death moment since the kammic force which hitherto actuated it is not annihilated with the dissolution of the body. It is this last thought-process which is termed 'reproductive kamma' that determines the state of a person in his subsequent birth.

As a rule the last thought-process depends on the general conduct of a person. In some exceptional cases, perhaps due to favourable or unfavourable circumstances, at the moment of death a good person may experience a bad thought and a bad person a good one. The future birth will be determined by this last thought-process, irrespective of the general conduct. This does not mean that the effects of the past actions are obliterated. They will produce their inevitable results at the appropriate moment. Such reverse changes of birth account for the birth of vicious children to virtuous parents and of virtuous children to vicious parents.

Now, to assist and maintain or to weaken and obstruct the fruition of this reproductive kamma another past kamma may intervene. Such actions are termed 'supportive' (*upatthambhaka*) kamma and 'counteractive' (*upapīḍaka*) kamma respectively.

According to the law of kamma the potential energy of the reproductive kamma can be totally annulled by a more powerful opposing past kamma, which, seeking an opportunity, may quite unexpectedly operate, just as a counteractive force can obstruct the path of a flying arrow and bring it down to the ground. Such an action is termed 'destructive' (*upaghātaka*) kamma which is more powerful than the above two in that it not only obstructs but also destroys the whole force.

As an instance of the operation of all the four, the case of Venerable Devadatta who attempted to kill the Buddha and who caused a schism in the Sangha may be cited.

His reproductive good kamma destined him to a birth in a royal family. His continued comfort and prosperity were due to the action of the supportive kamma. The counteractive kamma came into operation when he was subjected to such humiliation as a result of his being excommunicated from the Sangha. Finally the destructive kamma brought his life to a miserable end.

The following classification is according to the priority of effect (*vipākadānavasena*):

1. *Garuka* kamma,
2. *Āsanna* kamma,
3. *Āciṅṇa* kamma, and
4. *Katattā* kamma.

The first is *garuka kamma* which means a weighty or serious action. It is so called because it produces its effects for certain in this life or in the next.

On the moral side the weighty actions are the *jhānas* or ecstasies, while on the immoral side they are the subsequently-effective heinous crimes (*ānantariya kamma*)—namely, matricide, parricide, the murder of an arahant, the wounding of the Buddha, and the creation of a schism in the Sangha.

If, for instance, any person were to develop the *jhānas* and later to commit one of these heinous crimes, his good kamma would be obliterated by the powerful evil kamma. His subsequent birth will be conditioned by the evil kamma in spite of his having gained the *jhānas* earlier. For example, Venerable Devadatta lost his psychic powers and was born in a woeful state because he wounded the Buddha and caused a schism in the Sangha.

King Ajātasattu, as the Buddha remarked, would have attained the first stage of sainthood if he had not committed parricide. In this case the powerful evil kamma obstructed his spiritual attainment.

When there is no weighty kamma to condition the future birth a 'death-proximate' (*āsanna*) kamma might operate. This is the action one does, or recollects, immediately before the dying moment. Owing to its significance in determining the future birth, the custom of reminding the dying person of his good deeds and making him do good on his death-bed still prevails in Buddhist countries.

Sometimes a bad person may die happily and receive a good birth if fortunately he remembers or does a good act at the last moment. This does not mean that although he enjoys a good birth he will be exempt from the effects of the evil deeds he has accumulated during his lifetime.

At times a good person, on the other hand, may die unhappily by suddenly remembering an evil act or by conceiving a bad thought, perchance compelled by unfavourable circumstances.

'Habitual' (*āciṅṇa*) kamma is the next in priority of effect. It is the kamma that one constantly performs and recollects and towards which one has a great liking.

Habits whether good or bad become second nature. They more or less tend to mould the character of a person. At leisure moments we often engage ourselves in our habitual thoughts and deeds. In the same way at the death-moment, unless influenced by other circumstances, we, as a rule, recall to mind our habitual thoughts and deeds.

The last in this category is 'cumulative' (*katattā*)³¹⁰ kamma which embraces all that cannot be included in the foregoing three. This is as it were the reserve fund of a particular being.

The last classification is according to the plane in which the effects take place. They are:

1. Evil actions (*akusala*) which may ripen in the sense sphere (*kāmaloka*).
2. Good actions (*kusala*) which may ripen in the sense sphere.
3. Good actions which may ripen in the realms of form (*rūpaloka*), and
4. Good actions which may ripen in the formless realms (*arūpaloka*).

Evil Actions that may Ripen In The Sense Sphere

There are ten evil actions caused by deed, word, and mind which produce evil kamma. Of them three are committed by deed—namely, killing (*pāṇātipāta*), stealing (*adinnādāna*), and sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācāra*).

Four are committed by word—namely, lying (*musāvāda*), slandering (*pisunavācā*), harsh speech (*pharusavāca*), and frivolous talk (*samphappalāpa*).

Three are committed by mind—namely, covetousness (*abhijjhā*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), and false view (*micchādiṭṭhi*).

Killing means the intentional destruction of any living being. The Pali term *pāna* strictly means the psycho-physical life pertaining to one's particular existence. The wanton destruction of this life force, without allowing it to run its due course, is *pāṇātipāta*. *Pāna* means that which breathes. Hence all animate beings, including animals, are regarded as *pāna*, but not plants³¹¹ as they possess no mind. Bhikkhus, however, are forbidden to destroy even plant life. This rule, it may be mentioned, does not apply to lay-followers.

310. Literally, 'because done.'

311. "In plants there is no transmission of stimuli by nerves. Nerves are unknown to them as nerve-centres." Dr. Karl V. Frisch—*You and Life*. p. 125.

The following five conditions are necessary to complete the evil of killing: i. a living being, ii. knowledge that it is a living being, iii. intention of killing, iv. effort to kill, and v. consequent death.

The gravity of the evil depends on the goodness and the magnitude of the being concerned.

The killing of a virtuous person or a big animal is regarded as more heinous than the killing of a vicious person or a small animal because a greater effort is needed to commit the evil and the loss involved is considerably great.

The evil effects of killing are: brevity of life, ill-health, constant grief due to the separation from the loved, and constant fear.

Five conditions are necessary for the completion of the evil of stealing: namely, i. another's property, ii. knowledge that it is so, iii. intention of stealing, iv. effort to steal, and v. actual removal.

The inevitable consequences of stealing are: poverty, misery, disappointment, and dependent livelihood.

Four conditions are necessary to complete the evil of sexual misconduct: namely, i. the thought to enjoy, ii. consequent effort, iii. means to gratify, and iv. gratification.

The inevitable consequences of sexual misconduct are: having many enemies, union with undesirable wives and husbands, and birth as a woman or an eunuch.

Four conditions are necessary to complete the evil of lying: namely, i. an untruth, ii. deceiving-intention, iii. utterance, and iv. actual deception.

The inevitable consequences of lying are: being subject to abusive speech and vilification, untrustworthiness, and stinking mouth.

Four conditions are necessary to complete the evil of slandering: namely, i. persons that are to be divided, ii. the intention to separate them or the desire to endear oneself to another, iii. corresponding effort, and iv. the communication.

The inevitable consequence of slandering is the dissolution of friendship without any sufficient cause.

Three conditions are necessary to complete the evil of harsh speech: namely, i. a person to be abused, ii. angry thought, and iii. the actual abuse.

The inevitable consequences of harsh speech are: being detested by others though absolutely harmless, and having a harsh voice.

Two conditions are necessary to complete the evil of frivolous talk: namely, i. the inclination towards frivolous talk, and ii. its narration.

The inevitable consequences of frivolous talk are defective bodily organs and incredible speech.

Two conditions are necessary to complete the evil of covetousness, namely, i. another's possession, and ii. adverting to it, thinking 'would this be mine!'

The inevitable consequence of covetousness is non-fulfilment of one's wishes.

Two conditions are necessary to complete the evil of ill will: another person, and the thought of doing harm.

The inevitable consequences of ill will are ugliness, manifold diseases, and detestable nature.

False view is seeing things wrongly. False beliefs such as the denial of the efficacy of deeds are also included in this evil. Two conditions are necessary to complete this evil: perverted manner in which the object is viewed, and the understanding of it according to that misconception.

The inevitable consequences of false view are base desires, lack of wisdom, dull wit, chronic diseases, and blameworthy ideas.

According to Buddhism there are ten kinds of false views:³¹²

1. There is no such virtue as 'generosity' (*dinnaṃ*). This means that there is no good effect in giving alms.
2. There is no such virtue as 'liberal alms giving (*itthaṃ*), or
3. Offering gifts to guests (*hutaṃ*). Here, too, the implied meaning is that there is no effect in such charitable actions.
4. There is neither fruit nor result of good or evil deeds.
5. There is no such belief as 'this world' or
6. 'A world beyond' i.e., those born here do not accept a past existence, and those living here do not accept a future life.
7. There is no mother or
8. Father, i.e., there is no effect in anything done to them.
9. There are no beings that die and are being reborn (*opapātika*).
10. There are no righteous and well disciplined recluses and brahmins who, having realised by their own super-intellect this world and world beyond, make known the same. (The reference here is to the Buddhas and arahants).

312. The Pali text runs as follows:

"N'atthi dinnam, natthi ittham, n'atthi hutaṃ, n'atthi sukaṭadukkaṭānaṃ kam-mānaṃ phalam vipāko, n'atthi ayam loko, n'atthi paraloko, n'atthi mātā, n'atthi pitā, n'atthi sattā opapātikā, n'atthi loke samaṇa-brāhmaṇā sammaggatā sam-māpaṭipannā ye imaṅ'ca lokaṃ paraṅ'ca lokaṃ sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedenti. See Dhammasaṅgaṇī, p. 233. *The Expositor*, pt. ii. 493, and *Buddhist Psychology*, p. 355.

Good Kamma That May Ripen in the Sense Sphere

There are ten kinds of such meritorious actions (*kusalakamma*):

1. generosity (*dāna*),
2. morality (*sīla*),
3. meditation (*bhāvanā*)
4. reverence (*apacāyana*),
5. service (*veyyāvaccā*).
6. transference of merit (*pattidāna*),
7. rejoicing in others' good actions (*anumodanā*),
8. hearing the doctrine (*dhamma savana*),
9. expounding the doctrine (*dhammadesanā*), and
10. straightening one's own views (*diṭṭhujjukamma*).

Sometimes these ten moral actions are regarded as twelve by introducing sub-divisions to (7) and (10).

Praising of others' good actions (*pasamsā*) is added to rejoicing in others' merit (*anumodanā*). Taking the three refuges (*saraṇa*) and mindfulness (*anussati*) are substituted for straightening of one's views.

'Generosity' yields wealth. 'Morality' gives birth in noble families and in states of happiness. 'Meditation' gives birth in realms of form and formless realms, and helps to gain higher knowledge and emancipation. 'Transference of merit' acts as a cause to give in abundance in future births. 'Rejoicing in others' merit' is productive of joy wherever one is born. Both 'expounding and hearing the Dhamma' are conducive to wisdom. 'Reverence' is the cause of noble parentage. 'Service' produces large retinue. 'Praising others' good works' results in getting praise to oneself. 'Seeking the three refuges' results in the destruction of passions. 'Mindfulness' is conducive to diverse forms of happiness.

Kusala Kamma That May Ripen in the Realms of Form

These are the following five³¹³ kinds of (*rūpa-jhānas*) or ecstasies which are purely mental:

- i. The first jhāna moral consciousness which consists of initial application (*vitakka*), sustained application (*vicāra*), pleasurable interest (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), and one-pointedness (*ekaggata*).

313. According to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* there are five *rūpa jhānas*, but the *Visuddhimagga* mentions four jhānas. There is no great difference between the two interpretations. In the former the jhānas are divided into five according to the five constituents. In the latter the second jhāna consists of the final three constituents without the first two.

- ii. The second jhāna moral consciousness which consists of sustained application, pleasurable interest, happiness, and one-pointedness.
- iii. The third jhāna moral consciousness which consists of pleasurable interest, happiness and one-pointedness.
- iv. The fourth jhāna moral consciousness which consists of happiness and one-pointedness, and
- v. The fifth jhāna moral consciousness which consists of equanimity (*upekkhā*) and one-pointedness.

These jhānas have their corresponding effects in the realms of form.

Kusala Kamma That May Ripen in the Formless Realms

These are the four *arūpa* jhānas which have their corresponding effects in the formless realms—namely:

- 1. Moral consciousness dwelling in the ‘infinity of space’ (*ākāsānañcāyatana*),
- 2. Moral consciousness dwelling on the ‘infinity of consciousness’ (*viññāṇañcāyatana*),
- 3. Moral consciousness dwelling on ‘nothingness’ (*ākiñcaññāyatana*), and
- 4. Moral consciousness wherein ‘perception neither is nor is not’ (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*).³¹⁴



314. For details, see *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ed.