

## CHAPTER 21

# NATURE OF KAMMA

“As you sow the seed so shall you reap the fruit.”

— Saṃyutta Nikāya



Is one bound to reap all that one has sown in just proportion? Not necessarily! In the Aṅguttara Nikāya the Buddha states:

“If any one says that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case there is no religious life nor is an opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow. But if any one says that what a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case there is a religious life and an opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow.”<sup>315</sup>

In Buddhism therefore there is every possibility to mould one’s kamma.

Although it is stated in the Dhammapada (v. 127) that “not in the sky, nor in mid-ocean nor entering a mountain cave is found that place on earth, where abiding one may escape from [the consequence of] an evil deed,” yet one is not bound to pay all the arrears of past kamma. If such were the case, emancipation would be an impossibility. Eternal suffering would be the unfortunate result.

One is neither the master nor the servant of this kamma. Even the most vicious person can by his own effort become the most virtuous person. We are always becoming something and that something depends on our own actions. We may at any moment change for the better or for the worse. Even the most wicked person should not be discouraged or despised on account of his evil nature. He should be pitied, for those who censure him may also have been in that same position at a certain stage. As they have changed for the better he may also change, perhaps sooner than they.

Who knows what good kamma he has in store for him? Who knows his potential goodness?

Aṅgulimāla, a highway robber and the murderer of more than a thousand of his brethren became an arahant and erased, so to speak, all his past misdeeds.

Ālavaka, the fierce demon who feasted on the flesh of human beings, gave up his carnivorous habits and attained the first stage of sainthood.

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315. Aṅguttara Nikāya, part i. 249. See Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, p. 218.

Ambapāli, a courtesan, purified her character and attained arahantship. Asoka, who was stigmatised as *Canda* (wicked), owing to his ruthlessness in expanding his empire, became Dharmāsoka, or Asoka the Righteous, and changed his career to such an extent that today “Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses, serenities, royal highnesses and the like the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star.”<sup>316</sup>

These are a few striking examples which serve to show how a complete reformation of character can be effected by sheer determination.

It may so happen that in some cases a lesser evil may produce its due effect, while the effect of a greater evil may be minimised.

The Buddha says:

“Here, O bhikkhus, a certain person is not disciplined in body, in morality, in mind, in wisdom, has little good and less virtue, and lives painfully in consequence of trifling misdeeds. Even a trivial act committed by such a person will lead him to a state of misery.

“Here, O bhikkhus, a certain person is disciplined in body, in morality, in mind, in wisdom, does much good, is high-souled and lives with boundless compassion towards all.

“A similar evil committed by such a person ripens in this life itself and not even a small effect manifests itself (after death), not to say a great one.”<sup>317</sup>

“It is as if a man were to put a lump of salt into a small cup of water. What do you think, O bhikkhus? Would now the small amount of water in this cup become salty and undrinkable?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“And why?”

“Because, Lord, there was very little water in the cup, and so it became salty and undrinkable by this lump of salt.

“Suppose a man were to put a lump of salt into the river Ganges. What think you, O bhikkhus? Would now the river Ganges become salty and undrinkable by the lump of salt?”

“Nay, indeed, Lord.”

“And why not?”

“Because, Lord, the mass of water in the river Ganges is great, and so it would not become salty and undrinkable.”

“In exactly the same way we may have the case of a person who does some slight evil deed which brings him to a state of misery, or, again, we may have the case of another person who does the same triv-

316. H. G. Wells, *Outline of History*.

317. The reference here is to an arahant who is not subject to any future sorrow.

ial misdeed, yet he expiates it in his present life. Not even a small effect manifests itself (after death), not to say a great one.

“We may have the case of a person who is cast into prison for the theft of a half-penny, penny, or for a hundred pence or, again, we may have the case of a person who is not cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, for a hundred pence.

“Who is cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence? Whenever any one is poor, needy and indigent, he is cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence.

“Who is not cast into prison for a half-penny, or for a penny, or for a hundred pence?

“Whenever any one is rich, wealthy, and affluent, he is not cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, for a hundred pence.

“In exactly the same way we may have the case of a person who does some slight evil deed which brings him to a state of misery, or again we may have the case of another person who does the same trivial misdeed, and expiates it in the present life. Not even a small effect manifests itself (after death), not to say a great one.”<sup>318</sup>

### *Cause of Adverse Results*

Good begets good, but any subsequent regrets on the part of the doer in respect of the good done, deprive him of the due desirable results.

The following case may be cited in illustration:

On one occasion King Pasenadi of Kosala approached the Buddha and said:

“Lord, here in Sāvattihī a millionaire householder has died. He has left no son behind him, and now I come here, after having conveyed his property to the palace. Lord, a hundred *lakhs* in gold, to say nothing of the silver. But this millionaire householder used to eat broken scraps of food and sour gruel. And how did he clothe himself? For dress he wore a robe of coarse hemp, and as to his coach, he drove in a broken-down cart rigged up with a leaf-awning.”

Thereupon the Buddha said:

“Even so, O King, even so. In a former life, O King, this millionaire householder gave alms of food to a paccekabuddha called Tagarasikhi. Later, he repented of having given the food, saying within himself: ‘It would be better if my servants and workmen ate the food I gave for alms.’ And besides this he deprived his brother’s only son of his life for the sake of his property. And because this millionaire householder gave alms of food to the paccekabuddha Tagarasikhi, in requital for this

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318. Aṅguttara Nikāya pt. i. p. 249—See Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, p. 227.

deed, he was reborn seven times in heavenly blissful states. And by the residual result of that same action, he became seven times a millionaire in this very Sāvattihī.

“And because this millionaire householder repented of having given alms, saying to himself: ‘It would be better if my servants and workmen ate the food.’ Therefore as a requital for this deed, he had no appreciation of good food, no appreciation of fine dresses, no appreciation of an elegant vehicle, no appreciation of the enjoyments of the five senses.

“And because this millionaire householder slew the only son of his brother for the sake of his property, as requital for this deed, he had to suffer many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years, many hundreds of thousand of years of pain in states of misery. And by the residual of that same action, he is without a son for the seventh time, and in consequence of this, had to leave his property to the royal treasury.”<sup>319</sup>

This millionaire obtained his vast fortune as a result of the good act done in a past birth, but since he repented of his good deed, he could not fully enjoy the benefit of the riches which kamma provided him.

### ***Beneficent and Maleficent Forces***

In the working of kamma it should be understood that there are beneficent and maleficent forces to counteract and support this self-operating law. Birth (*gati*), time or conditions (*kāla*), personality or appearance (*upadhī*) and effort (*payoga*) are such aids and hindrances to the fruition of kamma.

If, for instance, a person is born in a noble family or in a state of happiness, his fortunate birth will sometimes hinder the fruition of his evil kamma.

If, on the other hand, he is born in a state of misery or in an unfortunate family, his unfavourable birth will provide an easy opportunity for his evil kamma to operate.

This is technically known as *gati sampatti* (favourable birth) and *gati vipatti* (unfavourable birth).

An unintelligent person, who, by some good kamma, is born in a royal family, will, on account of his noble parentage, be honoured by the people. If the same person were to have a less fortunate birth, he would not be similarly treated.

King Dutthagamani of Sri Lanka, for instance, acquired evil kamma by waging war with the Tamils, and good kamma by his various reli-

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319. Saṃyutta Nikāya, pt. i. p. 91. See Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, p. 296, and Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha*, p. 248.

gious and social deeds. Owing to his good reproductive kamma he was born in a heavenly blissful state. Tradition says that he will have his last birth in the time of the future Buddha Metteyya. His evil kamma cannot, therefore, successfully operate owing to his favourable birth.

To cite another example, King Ajātasattu, who committed parricide, became distinguished for his piety and devotion later owing to his association with the Buddha. He now suffers in a woeful state as a result of his heinous crime. His unfavourable birth would not therefore permit him to enjoy the benefits of his good deeds.

Beauty (*upadhi sampatti*), and ugliness (*upadhi vipatti*) are two other factors that hinder and favour the working of kamma.

If, by some good kamma, a person obtains a happy birth but unfortunately is deformed, he will not be able fully to enjoy the beneficial results of his good kamma. Even a legitimate heir to the throne may not perhaps be raised to that exalted position if he happens to be physically deformed. Beauty, on the other hand, will be an asset to the possessor. A good-looking son of a poor parent may attract the attention of others and may be able to distinguish himself through their influence.

Favourable time or occasion and unfavourable time or occasion (*kalā sampatti* and *kalā vipatti*) are two other factors that effect the working of kamma; the one aids, and the other impedes the working of kamma.

In the case of a famine all without exception will be compelled to suffer the same fate. Here the unfavourable conditions open up possibilities for evil kamma to operate. The favourable conditions, on the other hand, will prevent the operation of evil kamma.

Of these beneficent and maleficent forces the most important is effort (*payoga*). In the working of kamma effort or lack of effort plays a great part. By present effort one can create fresh kamma, new surroundings, new environment, and even a new world. Though placed in the most favourable circumstances and provided with all facilities, if one makes no strenuous effort, one not only misses golden opportunities but may also ruin oneself. Personal effort is essential for both worldly and spiritual progress.

If a person makes no effort to cure himself of a disease or to save himself from his difficulties, or to strive with diligence for his progress, his evil kamma will find a suitable opportunity to produce its due effects. If, on the contrary, he endeavours on his part to surmount his difficulties, to better his circumstances, to make the best use of the rare opportunities, to strive strenuously for his real progress, his good kamma will come to his succour.

When ship-wrecked in deep sea, the Bodhisatta Mahā Janaka made a great effort to save himself, while the others prayed to the gods and left their fate in their hands. The result was that the Bodhisatta escaped while the others were drowned.

These two important factors are technically known as *payoga sampatti* and *payoga vipatti*.

Though we are neither absolutely the servants nor the masters of our kamma, it is evident from these counteractive and supportive factors that the fruition of kamma is influenced to some extent by external circumstances, surroundings, personality, individual striving, and the like.

It is this doctrine of kamma that gives consolation, hope, reliance, and moral courage to a Buddhist.

When the unexpected happens, difficulties, failures, and misfortunes confront him, the Buddhist realises that he is reaping what he has sown, and is wiping off a past debt. Instead of resigning himself, leaving everything to kamma, he makes a strenuous effort to pull out the weeds and sow useful seeds in their place for the future is in his hands.

He who believes in kamma, does not condemn even the most corrupt, for they have their chance to reform themselves at any moment. Though bound to suffer in woeful states, they have the hope of attaining eternal peace. By their deeds they create their own hells, and by their own deeds they can also create their own heavens.

A Buddhist who is fully convinced of the law of kamma does not pray to another to be saved but confidently relies on himself for his emancipation. Instead of making any self-surrender, or propitiating any supernatural agency, he would rely on his own will-power and work incessantly for the weal and happiness of all.

This belief in kamma, “validates his effort and kindles his enthusiasm,” because it teaches individual responsibility.

To an ordinary Buddhist kamma serves as a deterrent, while to an intellectual it serves as an incentive to do good.

This law of kamma explains the problem of suffering, the mystery of the so-called fate and predestination of some religions, and above all the inequality of mankind.

We are the architects of our own fate. We are our own creators. We are our own destroyers. We build our own heavens. We build our own hells.

What we think, speak and do, become our own. It is these thoughts, words, and deeds that assume the name of kamma and pass from life to life exalting and degrading us in the course of our wanderings in *samsāra*.

Says the Buddha,

Man's merits and the sins he here hath wrought:  
That is the thing he owns, that takes he hence,  
That dogs his steps, like shadows in pursuit.  
Hence let him make good store for life elsewhere.  
Sure platform in some other future world,  
Rewards of Virtue on good beings wait.

—*Kindred Sayings*, i. p. 98

