

CHAPTER 31

KAMMIC DESCENT AND KAMMIC ASCENT

Kamma differentiates beings into high and low states.

— Majjhima Nikāya



Is kammic descent possible? In other words, can a man be born as an animal?

The Buddhist answer may not be acceptable to all, for Buddhism does recognise this possibility.

Material forms, through which the life-continuum expresses itself, are merely temporary visible manifestations of the kammic energy. The present physical body is not directly evolved from the past physical form, but is the successor of this past form—being linked with it through the same stream of kammic energy.

Just as an electric current can be manifested in the forms of light, heat and motion successively—one not necessarily being evolved from the other—so this kammic energy may manifest itself in the form of a deva, man, animal, or other being, one form having no physical connection with the other. It is one's kamma that determines the nature of one's material form, which varies according to the skilfulness or unskilfulness of one's past actions, and this again depends entirely on the evolution of one's understanding of reality. Instead of saying that man becomes an animal, or vice versa, it would be more correct to say that the kammic force which manifested itself in the form of man may manifest itself in the form of an animal.

In the course of our wanderings in saṃsāra—to speak in conventional terms—we gather various experiences, receive manifold impressions, acquire diverse characteristics. Our every thought, word, or deed is indelibly recorded in the palimpsest-like mind. The different natures we thus acquire in the course of such successive births whether as men, devas, animals or petas, lie dormant within us, and as long as we are worldlings these undestroyed natures may, at unexpected moments, rise to the surface “in disconcerting strength” and reveal our latent kammic tendencies.

It is quite natural for us to remark after witnessing an unexpected outburst of passion in a highly cultured person: “How could he have

done such a thing? Who would have thought that he would commit such an act!"

There is nothing strange in this misdemeanour of his. It is just a revelation of a hidden part of his intricate self. This is the reason why men normally of lofty motives are sometimes tempted to do things which one would least expect of them.

Devadatta, for example, a noble prince by birth, a leading member of the holy order, was possessed of supernormal powers. Overcome by jealousy, latent in him, he made several attempts to kill his own master the Buddha.

Such is the intricate nature of man. One's immediate past is not always a true index to one's immediate future. Every moment we create fresh kamma. In one sense we are truly what we were, and we will be what we are. In another sense we are not absolutely what we were, and we will not be what we are. Who was yesterday a criminal may today become a saint, who today is holy may tomorrow turn out to be a wretched sinner.

We can safely and rightly be judged by this eternal present. Today we sow the seeds of the future. At this very moment we may act the part of a brute and create our own hell, or, on the other hand, act the part of a superman and create our own heaven. Each present thought-moment conditions the next thought-moment. The subsequent birth also, according to Buddhist philosophy, is determined by the last thought-process we experience in this life. Just as through the course of one's life each thought perishes, giving up all its potentialities to its successor, even so the last thought-process of this life ends, transmitting all its acquired characteristics and natures to the succeeding moment—namely, the first thought-moment (*paṭisandhi viññāṇa*) in the subsequent birth.

Now, if the dying person cherishes a base desire or idea, or experiences a thought, or does an act which befits an animal, his evil kamma will condition him to birth in animal form. The kammic force which manifested itself in the form of a man will manifest itself in the form of an animal. This does not imply that thereby all his past good kammic tendencies are lost. They too lie dormant seeking an opportunity to rise to the surface. It is such good kamma that will later effect birth as a human being.

The last thought-process does not, as a rule, depend on the sum-total of our actions in our lifetime. Generally speaking, a good person gets a good birth, and a bad person, a bad one. Under exceptional circumstances, however, the unexpected may happen.

Queen Mallikā,³⁸² for example, led a good life, but as the result of experiencing an evil thought at her dying moment, she was born in a state of woe. As her good kamma was powerful the expiation lasted only for a few days.

“Is this justifiable?” one might ask.

If a holy person, due to some provocation, were to commit a murder, he would be charged as a murderer. His past good actions would no doubt stand to his credit and have their due effect, but the brutal act could not be obliterated by his past good. Perhaps his past good record would tend to mitigate the sentence, but never could it acquit him altogether of his heinous crime. This unexpected event would compel him to live in an uncongenial atmosphere amongst similar criminals. Is this fair? Imagine how one single immoral act may degrade a noble man!

On one occasion two ascetics Puṇṇa and Seniya who were practising ox-asceticism and dog-asceticism came to the Buddha and questioned him as to their future destiny:

The Buddha replied:

In this world a certain person cultivates thoroughly and constantly the practices, habits, mentality, and manners of a dog. He, having cultivated the canine practices, habits, mentality, and manners thoroughly and constantly, upon the breaking up of the body, after death, will be reborn amongst dogs. Certainly if he holds such a belief as this—‘by virtue of this practice, austerity or noble life, I shall become a god or a deity of some kind’—that is a false belief of his. For one who holds a false belief I declare that there is one of two future states—the state of torment or the animal kingdom. Thus, failing a state of torment, successful canine asceticism only delivers one to companionship with dogs.³⁸³

In the same way the Buddha declared that he who observes ox-asceticism will, after death, be born amongst oxen. So there is the possibility for a kammic descent in one bound in the so-called evolutionary scale of beings.

But the contrary, a kammic ascent, is also possible.

When, for instance, an animal is about to die, it may experience a moral consciousness that will ripen into a human birth. This last thought-process does not depend wholly on any action or thought of the animal, for generally speaking, its mind is dull and it is incapable of doing any moral action. This depends on some past good deed done during a former round of its existence which has long been prevented from

382. Wife of King Kosala who lived in the time of the Buddha.

383. Kukuruvatika Sutta (MN 57).

producing its inevitable results. In its last moment the animal therefore may conceive ideas or images which will cause a human birth.

Poussin, a French writer, illustrates this fact by the law of heredity: "A man may be like his grandfather but not like his father. The germs of disease have been introduced into the organism of an ancestor, for some generations they remain dormant. But suddenly they manifest themselves in actual diseases."

So intricate is the nature of this doctrine of kamma and rebirth!

Whence we came, whither we go, and when we go, we know not. The fact that we must go we know for certain.

Our cherished possessions, our kith and kin follow us not—nay, not even our bodies which we call our own. From elements they came, to elements they return. Empty fame and vain glory vanish in thin air.

Alone we wander in this tempest-tossed sea of saṃsāra wafted hither and thither by our own kamma, appearing here as an animal or man and there perchance as a god or Brahmā.

We meet and part and yet we may meet again incognito. For seldom do we find a being who, in the course of our wandering, had not at one time been a mother, a father, a sister, a son, a daughter.

"If a man," says the Buddha, "were to prune out the grasses, sticks, boughs, and twigs in this India and collecting them together, should make a pile laying them in a four inch stack, saying for each: 'This is my mother, this is my mother's mother,'—the grasses, sticks, boughs, twigs in this India would be used up, ended but not the mothers of that man's mother."

So closely bound are we during our journeyings in saṃsāra.

The countless lives we have led and the innumerable sufferings we were subject to in the infinite past are such that the Buddha remarks:

"The bones of a single person wandering in saṃsāra would be a cairn, a pile, a heap as Mount Vepulla, were there a collector of these bones and were the collections not destroyed.

"Long time have you suffered the death of father and mother, of sons, daughters, brothers and sisters, and while you were thus suffering, you have verily shed tears upon this long way, more than there is water in the four oceans.

"Long time did your blood flow by the loss of your heads when you were born as oxen, buffaloes, rams, goats, etc.

"Long time have you been caught as dacoits or highwaymen or adulterers, and through your being beheaded, verily more blood has flowed upon this long way than there is water in the four oceans.

“And thus have you for long time undergone sufferings, undergone torment, undergone misfortune, and filled the graveyards full, verily long enough to be dissatisfied with every form of existence, long enough to turn away and free yourself from them all.”³⁸⁴



384. See *The Book of The Gradual Sayings I*, pp. 31–34.