

Kamma, self and liberation

And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? Mindfulness as a factor of Awakening, investigation of qualities... persistence/energy...rapture...tranquillity...concentration... equanimity as a factor of Awakening. [A. 4.238]

An important aspect of Dhamma is about acknowledging that in us which feels, gets hurts, complains, aspires and is motivated for good or bad. We need to spend time enquiring into it, steadying it and releasing it from hindrances and afflictions. We can feel slighted or welcomed by people's behaviour, useless or in demand with regard to a work or family situation. These felt meanings' carry a meaning that forms who we seem to be – a winner, a no-account, a trusted partner, a loner or whatever. People will commit huge amounts of their resources, and even risk their lives to get to be a winner with that 'top of the world' feeling. And at the other end of the spectrum, there are suicides and the self-destructive behaviour of those who feel they are hopeless.

These felt meanings are volatile: they move our hearts and affect how we act. Yet real as it all these feelings seem, they do change; and if I follow them then who I seem to be changes in accordance with them. When I am being 'me, the harassed, overworked' my manner will have a different flavour than when I'm 'me, welcoming you to my home.' Actually, I have quite a few selves, or subsidiary personalities, which take centre stage dependent on the situation, pressures and natural conditions like health. My world-view and motivation may change between one of these personae (these selves that we have within us) and the next – sometimes I can hardly believe it when someone reports back to me what I said when I was in a difficult mood. In fact, I might comment that 'I wasn't quite myself then.'

These ranging personae, of which any one can be occupying the 'me' space at a given time, are based on felt meanings that arise around one's role, function, and relationship – as well as on physical health and current attitude. The most residual ones, the ones that really feel like me, are the ones carried in the heart: 'I am the one who has to do all the work (and receives no recognition)'; 'I am the one who can't manage and needs others to make decisions for me...' and so on. They direct us through event after event, and yet we might not even recognize them as such because the mind will imagine that the feeling is being created not from some internal bias, but from the situation that's occurring around us. Or, after a while, as one finds oneself in yet another re-run of the damaging relationship or in charge of another project that failed because we again underestimated what was needed, the assumption can grow that this bias is our true self. The potentially crippling reaction can set in that 'I am weak-willed' or 'I'm a complete idiot.'

However, there is a wiser and more useful way of understanding the personal predicament. It touches into the Buddha's teachings on kamma, and is supported by the meditations that we've been working with. And it can bring around deep changes for the better.

What is 'kamma'?

Kamma (or 'karma,' meaning 'action') refers to the cause and effect of our intentions, to action that occurs because of intention, i.e. the mind is bent on that action. Such actions leave results in terms of memories and habits. This result is called 'vipaka' or 'old kamma.' So we live within a continuum of action and result, (kamma-vipaka), in which whatever we do while conscious of doing it leaves a

result in the mind. These results may be experienced as the reactions and responses of others, or as effects on our physical well-being, but the deepest result is mental. That is, our actions have a psychological and emotional result that shapes our minds. After all, this is the way we learn: we do something and from the results – from the feedback that other people or our bodies or our own minds give us – we notice whether that action gave us well-being or pain. Through contact, that feedback gets lodged as a memory, a perception or felt meaning. It's a detail on our psychological road map of how to proceed through life. That detail, a memory, or a piece of behaviour becomes one strand in the weave of our identity. That's how your mind gets shaped, for good or for ill. And so one result of kamma, good or bad, is the sense of self.

Now maybe the mapping gets messed up. It can be the case that the feedback we received from others was skewed – you know, you told the truth, but someone got annoyed. Still on your map, you're cautious about going down that track again. Worse still, somebody gave you a hard time, not because of what you did, but because they were having a bad day and you got in the way. This happens a lot. We all get affected by other people's kamma and this is very confusing. You weren't doing anything wrong in your own eyes and someone takes a swing at you. Maybe your mother or your father was upset at the time. Maybe the kids at school ridiculed your ears or your voice or your clothes or your skin colour because they thought it was fun, or their parents didn't like blacks or Jews or Albanians. So you end up hurt or bitter and frustrated because of what other people do – and that affects the way you are in the world. You have all kinds of dangerous territory on your map. The result is you develop a persona accordingly: a 'self' with a mental bent towards fear, or towards trying to be liked, or towards bitterness and violence.

Another problem is that we don't always learn that well: we get a short-term boost and don't notice the long-term results of, for instance, drinking alcohol. Or we get the happy buzz of buying new things and don't take into account the long-term effects on our bank account. Our instincts aren't always based on wise reflection, so confused assumptions about other people or a lack of clarity as to cause and effect are more common sources of bad kamma than a deliberately harmful intent.

The main point of the teaching on kamma isn't who you were in a previous life – you can't practise with that. Nor is a teaching of predestination, or about divining the future: no Awakening in any of that. It's telling us that what we do while conscious of doing it is something we need to be clear about and work with. If we are consciously motivated by compassion, or by aversion, or by fear (even if someone else has planted that fear in our minds) then those qualities get established in our minds. And every time you act from a felt meaning and mental inclination, the persona that goes with it takes a bigger position in your mind and heart. As you act, so you become. That's kamma, cause and effect. And that's what 'not-self' implies – what we seem to be, our self, is a dynamic of causes and effects and not some unchanging entity.

Two clear messages come through from this teaching: one is to get clear about action and especially to look into the motivations behind it. Whether we are motivated by anxiety, affection, bitterness or just plain unknown random reaction, these give rise to an anxious, affectionate, bitter or confused personality trait. Continue along those lines and that's who you sense yourself as being. Therefore meditate, get to know what's going on under the lid, what makes you tick. Be mindful and allow the immediate impulse to be witnessed, let pass, be questioned, or enhanced. That's the first message.

The second is to know what is good, what you want to live with, what you want to base your life upon. Because any day that life may end, and you don't want to be dying with grudges and anxieties in your heart. If you take the Buddha's word on it, those tendencies that are dominant in your mind when you die will dictate the way another 'you' comes into being in the future. This seems reasonable to me, as it's what happens in this life. But if you don't accept that, still, you'd sooner live in this life without anxiety and regret.

Perceptions are old kamma

From the above it follows that if we're keen on getting clear as to why we act and what's really going on with all those split-second assumptions of feeling trusted or nervous, the focus is on two strands of mental behaviour. One is felt meaning or perception, the other is the mental activity that informs and responds to that, both of which we've touched on before. So: the broad term 'perception' (saññā) refers to both the initial impression of a sense-object, and the felt meaning that is our 'take' on what that thing is. So we might both agree that a stretch of sparkling flowing stuff is the sea – that's the initial reference; but the felt meaning is subjective. One person might see it as dangerous, while another sees it as a lovely place to bathe: the mapping is in accordance with each person's previous experience. Both maps have some truth in them, but holding on to one generates conflict with the other.

It's the activity called 'contact' (which has both a sensory impression aspect and a heart-based meaning aspect to it) that establishes perceptions. So where there's a lot of heart-involvement, the felt meanings get very subjectively mapped. This is very much the case with perceptions of people. When we meet other people, many value judgements and personal biases are bound to occur – this is someone I can trust, need to win over, can help, better be on guard against, etc. Any of these may be so – all perceptions have some truth in them – but can we suspend and reflect on the habitual interpretation, the one that first leaps to mind, before acting on it? Can we check the map in the light of mindful awareness? Maybe that impression is pointing to an aspect of another person to bear in mind, or maybe it's telling us something about our own standpoint and bias.

The one who is most subject to our heart-biases is living in our own body, speech and heart: good old me – whatever I have decided I am, will never be, and deserve to be. And of course there's also the 'me' sense that arises dependent on how I'm seen by others. As meditators, we watch and feel these felt meanings and personae. We sense them as transient and in process. We sense them as things that occupy consciousness, but not as belonging to or defining some true and lasting self. If any one of them were really me, then who is the self that's watching them? That reflection offers us the opportunity to respond to perception, to calm it, accept it, or look into it rather than to keep following or repressing it.

Thus, we're not obliged to react to the world or the self we seem to be right now. We don't have to make more habitual kamma out of what's happening, or what others do. One of the memorable sayings of the Buddha is: 'We live happily, friendly even amongst those who are hostile' [Dhp. 197]. In other words, when we're among people who dislike us, we can sense that their attitude is their kamma and leave it there. Their bias doesn't have to take over our own hearts and minds. And we might feel after a few moments (or hours or years) that we could make some good kamma around such impressions. We could clear our own fear and anger. Then, once we've seen how reactive and edgy our own minds can get, we could make peace with, be compassionate and generous – even to people who've hurt us. Why not? We're not being asked to approve of others, just to finish with the grudges and start afresh. This is a big step, but it is what is most truly grand and worthy about humans. We can step out of history and we can step forward in a different way. And in ourselves there's the joy: 'Oh, that mean feeling, that twenty-year-old surge of blame or guilt or vengefulness – it's gone.' We've ended a piece of old kamma and the mind feels spacious, settled and agile. So the encouragement is to Awaken to kamma, to end old kamma rather than try to sort out whose fault it is. This is the ongoing process of liberation.

Activities

In the course of that enquiry, we can get a useful handle on the second strand of mental behaviour, sankhāra – ‘activities’ or ‘formations.’ They’re activities because they’re the agents of kamma. Intention is the leader of these, but it’s not on its own. Activities are everything that causes or is liable to cause, action. What this means is that all those qualities that seem to be ‘I’ as an agent (as in ‘I do, I speak, I feel’) are not, and aren’t issuing from, a solid being but are repeated activities; programs if you like. But when these programs get established, they have solidity: hence ‘formations.’ Furthermore all those moods and states that seem to be ‘me’ or ‘my self’ as an object (as in ‘my real self is a tragic romantic’, or ‘a misunderstood genius’) are formed programs of sorrow, frustration or self-importance. Heart-contact (classically called ‘designation contact’) will etch these on our personal map and thereby establish the perceptual references that we judge current experience by. So a mishap gets read as ‘Life is tragic’; or ‘No one understands me.’ True enough in a way, but no-one understands anyone all of the time; and life is also comic, resilient, and the optimal occasion for Awakening. So the perception is a truth of our own mapping, and the mistake is turning it into an activity.

Other activities, of attention and contact, play a part in this, because attention frames an experience, and contact establishes the perception of it as an accurate impression. So, with regards to attention – if you’re not attending to something the contact doesn’t happen; you don’t get a perception, and you don’t get a corresponding intention. (As when you’re watching a movie: you don’t notice that your leg’s going numb, so you don’t get the impulse to move.) Also if contact doesn’t place something accurately in terms of your store of perceptions – if you see someone who reminds you of a friend from childhood, when they’re not – you get an inappropriate response. To take another example: say you’re out walking in the country with a friend, and she suddenly stops dead in her tracks, points ahead and comes out with a Latin name. What you see is a pretty bird sitting in a bush. So you think the name refers to the bird, when in fact it’s the name of the bush. You both ‘saw’ the same thing, but because your respective attentions framed different details of the scene, you had different sense-contact experiences. As it turns out she is a botanist, and gets very excited at the sight of this rare plant, it means a lot to her. But you’ve seen birds like that many times and think ‘So what.’ So the designation contacts differ, dependent on personal history. To take it a step further: her utterance came from an eager (though misguided) intention to share her joy. You think, ‘Why not call it a yellowhammer, like everybody else does? Who’s she trying to impress!’ So here the intentions get skewed and misinterpreted; she wonders why you’ve gone dismissive – which triggers things in her, and you think she’s being highfalutin or showing off, and that triggers things in you.

This is an example of a kammic process. What we have to acknowledge is that the navigator (attention) can’t read that well (or is looking elsewhere), the mapmaker (contact) isn’t accurate, and the driver (intention) has their own ideas and latent tendencies. This is not good news for the road through life.

Yet it is a cause for Awakening. For starters, it’s good to remember that all this is not-self; and to take to heart the practice whereby you can witness and shift intention, attention and contact. First of all, take intention. What you may notice about those responses and impulses is that they arise dependent on perceptions. Some are re-runs of basic programs and personal history. Some arise through accessing states of tension or numb-ness in the body rather than through particular thoughts or present-day scenarios. (These embodied states can carry a large amount of ‘kammic mapping,’ therefore one should work around such areas with sensitivity.) Some are directly disagreeable, such as anger, depression or grief. Emotion can be stimulating and lift us up, but it also uses up huge resources of energy. The search for happy feelings can get us into some addictive pastimes and impair our capacity for responsibility and fellow-feeling. And yet, our life is structured around these activities; and carrying out intentions is what a meaningful life is all about. Indeed so. So we can and

do intend towards the clear, the compassionate, the generous. Through wise intention there's the possibility of shifting our activities into a better program.

Meditative training is about doing just this; it's about using activities skilfully. So we cultivate intentions of clarity and kindness. And we cultivate deep attention. These allow us to contemplate contact, perception and any intentions that consequently arise in terms of good, bad, suffering, or well-being. In this way the twofold meditative activity of calm and insight (samatha-vipassanā) comes into play.

Then what becomes clear that these activities operate through three channels – body, heart and thought. With some practice we can notice how one affects the others and we get some perspective on their very convincing and compulsive programs. Especially the clutching one that keeps creating a sense of self. That's the one to work on for the release from suffering.

The kamma of meditation

As we've seen, kamma is carried out by activities, and so is the release from kamma. For this, in the meditative process, we discern and work with activities in all the channels. First there's the bodily activity, which gives rise to the sense of 'where I am.' It's the activity, governed by breathing, of having a vital and grounded body, a sense of being located in a physical context. That means there will be many 'fight, flight, feed on this' reflexes ready to fire. Secondly, there's the mental/heart activity that presents us with moods, feelings, perceptions and intuitions. This tells us 'how I am.' And finally, there's the 'what I'm going to do (or should do) about all this': a bubbling energy of thoughts and attitudes. This is our 'head sense', our ability to conceive and articulate, the verbal activity. When these sankhāra are running, they form our habitual and habituating responses with corresponding thinking, mood and body tone. So: we recognize a task that needs to be done – and our thinking system starts whirring; we see someone we are fond of – and a surge rises up in our hearts; there is a sense of threat or danger – and our bodily sense tenses up. Whether the intention behind them is good or bad, confused or wise, they manifest in a dynamic way and we can witness them in terms of body, heart and thought.

Of the three activities, the heart activity is the most crucial, because this is where conscious action, fresh kamma, originates. Every action originates with a felt meaning, a mental perception that contact places in the heart and which may trigger verbal or physical action. Designation contact places us on our kammic map. Actually it's more like landing on a trampoline of cause and effect: something touches the heart and we bounce into a reaction. However we can get off the thing. If we get the heart to discern, to restrain, and to step back from its habits, we can first of all adjust our bounce, and have some choice in terms of what kamma we create. And that initial non-involvement gives us another choice: to investigate a perception and impulse and stop bouncing up and down. Sense-contact doesn't have to dump us on our kammic trampoline. 'From the ceasing of contact is the ceasing of kamma' as the Buddha puts it [A.6.63].

So the cycle of kamma-vipaka can be changed, or stopped altogether through releasing the heart from the grip of activities. Towards this end, using the body is great because although you may have run out of the capacity to feel much patience and compassion for a boss who's been surly and demanding for ten years, or with a three-year-old who's throwing his breakfast at the wall and screaming while you're trying to get his sister dressed...you can still breathe in and out. And know 'this is where I am, right now.' It doesn't seem to resolve the situation, but it takes you out of the bounce of felt meanings and emotions and 'fix it, do something' programs to a place where you can gather your resources. From there, you can witness and not take the whole scene so personally. This kind of thing has happened and will happen to others; this too will pass and you're not obliged to

solve the situation or make it work. Know the feeling as a feeling, be with that urge to scream and lash out – as an activity rather than as me and mine. Let it arise and pass. You don't have to be a character in someone else's movie – or even in your own. You don't even have to take on the 'I should be capable, assured, in charge and able to master this' program and persona. You can put aside the maps and act, or wait, with mindfulness and clear comprehension. You've started freeing up a bit of old kamma.

Awakening and 'not-self'

So freeing oneself from old kamma begins with not letting the old pattern trap you into becoming its stooge. You just feel the activity for what it is. In meditation you can contemplate the activities that move the heart through feeling them in the body – just think of your pet love or hate and feel the flush that happens. And as you feel it, let it move and pass. You'll probably feel yourself becoming charged up, tight or hot or bristling, you may even recognize the mood of the persona who arises with that activity. Do you need to be/want to be bounced into that person...again? Well, sometimes we do. Much of the time we either want to become the loved and enriched person that floods our nerve endings, or we feel we have no choice but to be weighed-down loser that the world seems to make us. However we can choose to contemplate these possibilities. Stepping back into mindful awareness, you can feel how that person is going nowhere but round and round. That's what we call 'samsāra' – happy or unhappy, it's the business of going round and round. Then know that for what it is. When you get the point that there's only a virtual self in that round, an appearance that doesn't arrive at anywhere final, maybe the momentum pauses. There may be an emotional shift, or a sense of relief. Subsequently you can act with clarity with a clearer view.

In this kind of enquiry, if you're really just exploring how it is, rather than trying to find something, the only mental kamma that you add is that of mindfulness and investigation. This is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma, in that it doesn't establish a new perception of, 'He is one of those' or, 'I am an obsessive person.' Mindfulness and investigation helps us to experience the storehouse of perceptions, impressions and felt meanings as programs that run through the body-mind system. Other factors of Awakening follow on the deeper you penetrate the activities. Applied persistent energy keeps you engaged with the process, and keeps your inner hero alive. Its vigour builds up the power of the mind so that we can stand back from habitual activity. This results in the three factors that provide vitality and firmness – rapture, calm and concentration. When the mind is firm and calm, then there is the factor of equanimity directed towards activities; even the good and useful ones you can know are just that, not something to make into a person. That means you can have a good idea without having to shout it from the rooftops. And you can have a helpful insight, or a state of con-centration, without getting conceited and obnoxious about it all.

Even these skilful Dhamma activities are not solid three-dimensional realities, they aren't me or mine. Every place where there's a grip around an activity, it feels like 'me' and the basis for stress is established. So there's a deep learning that has to be done that affects our way of being. In a nutshell, the point is to relax the activity that clings to activities...even to the good ones. Because of course, we're not trying to ultimately get rid of activities, and just sit there like a turnip. Just as we need to have perceptions to get some sketch of what things mean, we also have to come up with an activity as a response. The key point is to get free of the clinging, because it's that which blindly binds perceptions to activities in a habit-forming way. That's kamma.

It should be easy once you know the problem, but kamma has an addictive quality.

Kamma is addictive because we're used to sankhāra showing and telling us who we are. Even if our self-view is wretched, the hunger to be something is such an ingrained reflex that we operate around it. Just like a junkie ordering his/her life around getting the next fix: it's never going to be enough, it

costs us and we should really snap out of it, but it takes some doing. Beyond what we like to be, there is a reflex to be something solid and permanent that kicks in by itself. This is the reflex of 'becoming.' It provides the support for and is the result of grasping. It wants to be something, some self – and whether that is a millionaire who has far more money than they need, or an athlete who runs their body to rags, or a depressive who has a much darker view of themselves than is balanced and true, that instinct pushes us along into self. The rarest experience for a human being isn't bliss, but feeling that they (and life) are 'good enough.' Becoming is insatiable: it always wants more, a new success, a bigger deal, another future. The Buddha said this can go on for lifetimes: he called the process 'further becoming' – which is about as interesting as chewing the same piece of meat for a thousand years. It's only ignorance that keeps us at it!

The subtle aspect of this from the spiritual seeker's point of view is that it's not possible that 'I can get enlightened.' From the position of a solid 'me' trying to gain something, we can't experience full liberation – because that view of self is an activity. It too is a reflex and an addiction. However, we can come out of the addiction by being filled with the deep potential of the factors of Awakening. These provide the inner stability and richness that means the mind doesn't have to keep leaning on the activities, and identifying with feelings, energies and attitudes for support. It doesn't have to be solid thing; when balance is established, the mind can be a process, and one that leads off the bouncy trampoline of kamma.

So generating these factors is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. Therefore, mindfulness and investigation are crucial. Applied energy and patience are also necessary because some activities have very convincing and compulsive patterns. There's 'righteous me, stuck in an unfair world.' Then again there's the inner tyrant who gives us scathing indictments and endless naggings over our laziness, stupidity, weakness and all-round hopelessness. These are important pieces of mental kamma to get free of – and you do so through contemplating the activities with the firmness, bright-heartedness and enthusiasm that comes from non-involvement. Yes, vigour is needed: just sitting there going through the same mental pattern time and time again isn't going to bring release. It can even etch the program deeper. So when you're getting stuck, stay out of that place, regroup around your skills with breathing or get the assistance of another person's mindful awareness. That's what teachers and spiritual friends are for.

As we acknowledge how stuck all of us can get, equanimity arises. This is a very spacious kind of love that neither approves nor disapproves, but offers all the empathic space that we need to allow us to sense our kammic programs without attachment. Then our apparent winning and losing selves can march through without judgement and be seen for what they are. This view offers a life-changing opportunity: when you experience your passions, nagging anxieties and defence strategies as just old kamma, you can step out of them. You don't have to keep offering board and lodging to hungry ghosts that leave the place in a mess. Instead, in the process of releasing old kamma, you live in a fuller, more spacious and assured way – just because you're not carrying so much stuff around.