

## Nature of karma

Source: **(Catukka) Mallikā Sutta**, beauty, wealth and power as karmic fruits, translated and annotated by Piya Tan © 2009, 2025<sup>1</sup>.

### 1 Nature of karma

#### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

**The (Catukka) Mallikā Sutta** (A 4.197) is an account of queen Mallikā's<sup>2</sup> visit to the Buddha and questioning him on karma [§1.2] that would often be on the mind of many people, that is, why we “are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, (reborn) in the heavens, in the suffering states”—we are faring in accordance with our karma.<sup>3</sup>

This opening is close to that of **the Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135.3), but which deals with karma in greater detail. Only those passages of the (Catukka) Mallikā Sutta dealing with anger and irritability [§§2.1, 3.1] and lack of them [§§4.1, 5.1], jealousy [§2.3, 4, 5.3] and lack of it [§3.3, 5.3], generosity [§§2.2, 3.2, 5.2] and lack of it [§§3.2, 4.2], have close parallels there.<sup>4</sup>

The (Catukka) Mallikā Sutta deals only with beauty, influence and wealth. The theme of the Buddha's teaching to Mallikā is that we are rooted in our past conduct [§§2-6].

If we were habitually angry and easily angered, then we are likely to be reborn ugly in some form. If we were habitually jealous of others, we are unlikely to be influential. If we have been regularly selfish and ungenerous, we are likely to be reborn poor.

On the other hand, if we were not easily angered, then, we are likely to be reborn beautiful. If we were not habitually jealous, we are likely to be reborn with great influence. If we have been regularly generous to others, we are likely to attain great wealth when reborn.

When the Buddha finishes his instruction, Mallikā thus declares how she must have fared karma-wise in her past lives [§§7-14]. She then declares how she would conduct herself thenceforth [§15-18], and finally goes for refuge [§19].

#### 1.2 THE 2 ASPECTS OF KARMA

The karmic model presented in the (Catukka) Mallikā Sutta is said, in philosophical terms, to be consequentialist, which emphasizes on the *results* of the action. In simple terms, this means that an action is worth doing if its result is good, but should be avoided if it is bad. This is in fact the basis of the pre-Buddhist notion of karma [2.2], that is, of merit (*puñña*). This is the conception of karma that is popular in a worldly sense, but which the Buddha provisionally accepts, insofar as it serves as a bridge towards the truly Buddhist conception of karma.

The essentially Buddhist conception of karma can be said to be that of “**virtue ethics**,” that is, it contributes to a better person and a happier life.<sup>5</sup> This is in fact another way of looking at ethical training, the first of the three Buddhist trainings.<sup>6</sup> But, in a strict Buddhist context, it should also include mental training (mindfulness and meditation): while the first training encompasses the discipline of *body* and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/39.10-Catukka-Mallika-S-a4.197-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> On queen Mallikā, see **(Piya) Mallikā S** (S 3.8/1:75 = U 5.1/47) @ SD 38.7 (1).

<sup>3</sup> See eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,95-98/1:81-83), SD 8.10.

<sup>4</sup> Ie at M 135,9-14/3:204 f (SD 4.15).

<sup>5</sup> See **Virtue ethics**, SD 18.11.

<sup>6</sup> The 3 trainings (*ti,sikkhā*) are trainings in moral virtue, in mental concentration and in wisdom: see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6.

speech, the second training is about *the mind*. These three—body, speech and mind—are the 3 karmic doors, the avenues of human actions.<sup>7</sup>

The proper training of the 3 doors are famously laid out in the model of **the 10 wholesome courses of action** (*kusala kamma, patha*), that is, three of the body (refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct), four of speech (refraining from lying, from divisive speech, from harsh speech, from frivolous chatter), and three of the mind (refraining from covetousness, from ill will, from wrong views). Unlike the “merit” or *puñña* model, which is mostly external, dealing mostly with our physical and social being or “material happiness,” the “wholesome” or *kusala* model covers all *the three doors*, that is, the body, speech, and the mind. The focus, however, is on the last, the mind, as it is through mental cultivation that we finally and fully attain awakening and liberation.

## 2 Related suttas on karma

### 2.1 ISAYO SAMUDDAKA SUTTA (S 11.10)

Here we are tempted to see a simplistic view of karma that seems to work by way of a deterministic trade-off as “good begets good, bad begets bad” or “as we sow, so we shall reap,” as stated, for example, in the **Isayo Samuddaka Sutta** (S 11.10).<sup>8</sup> This in fact seems to be the popular notion of karma outside of Buddhism, even in the Buddha’s time, as, for example, taught by Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta [2.2].

According to an ancient Indian story, this famous saying on karma is actually part of a curse used by some seaside rishis on the asura leader, Sambara (later called Vepacitti), for destroying their dwelling every time the asuras battled the devas. In fact, it has nothing to do with karma as we know it in Buddhism. The rishis’ curse worked on its own, it seems, and hurt the asuras as planned by the rishis.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.2 SAṆKHA, DHAMA SUTTA (S 42.8)

Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta views that anyone at all who kills, steals, commits sexual misconduct, or lies, is bound for hell. The Buddha rejects this as being simplistic and deterministic since it seems as if it is the frequency of an action that would destine us for hell. Since we more frequently do none of these things, none of us would go apparently to hell!

It is how we regard such unwholesome actions, that is, enjoying them and habitually doing them, that would propel us into a suffering state. However, if we examine such actions of ours, realizing their negativity, regretting them, and then aspiring to rise above them, we would be able to turn away from the suffering states.

This happiness is ascertained when we cultivate the 4 divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity).<sup>10</sup> We should pervade such a wholesome state everywhere unconditionally like a conch-blower blowing a conch, its sound pervading all around.<sup>11</sup>

**2.3 LOṆA, PHALA SUTTA** (A 3.99) stands as a very vital counterpoint of the early Buddhist teaching on karma against that of the brahminical sacrificial efficacy. The Sutta, in fact, opens with the Buddha’s outright rejection of the notion that ‘Whatever karma a person performs, he would experience *that same karma*.’ Good does *not* beget good, not in kind or same measure anyway.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290) + SD 5.7 (2.2.2).

<sup>8</sup> Also called **Sambara Samuddaka S** or simply **Samuddaka S**: see S 11.10/1:22 f @ SD 39.2. See also **Loṇa, phala S** (A 3.99/1:249-253) @ SD 3.5 (1).

<sup>9</sup> See **Loṇa, phala S** (A 3.99/1:249-253), SD 3.5.

<sup>10</sup> On the 4 divine abodes, see **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5.

<sup>11</sup> S 42.8/4:317-322 @ SD 57.9.

<sup>12</sup> A 3.99/1:249-253 @ SD 3.5.

This is actually common sense. Let's say, I have done you a kind deed: does that mean you owe me that same kind deed which needs to be repaid? Karma is not something that is really within our control, and yet there is a natural justice about it. I may not get an exact recompense from you for my good deed to you, but the good that I have done *adorns* me: it *makes* me good. In other words, I *am* my deeds.

Here, it is easy for us to see the vital difference between being and having. A powerful man may *have* much wealth, a lot of things and many friends, but a lone simple money-free monastic *is* still most truly happy even without them, or *because* he is free of them. We may be *measured* by what we have, but we are *defined* and *liberated* by what we are.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On having and being, see **Love**, SD 38.4 (2.3; 8).