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(Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta

The Discourse on Karma (in detail) | A 4.232

Theme: Four types of karma in terms of their quality and results

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1 The 3 doors and types of karma

1.1 Karma, in terms of their **quality**, are usually divided into two types, that is,

(1) Unwholesome or unskillful karma (*akusala kamma*), those actions that are not good, or are bad; specifically, actions that are rooted in the unwholesome roots (*akusala mula*), namely, greed, hatred and delusion.

(2) Wholesome or skillful karma (*kusala kamma*), those actions that are good; specifically, actions that are rooted in the three wholesome roots (*kusala mula*), namely, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion.

1.2 Alternatively, karma can be classified according to the “door” (*dvāra*), that is, path or channel, through which they occur, of which there are three, namely:

- (1) Bodily karma (*kāyika kamma*): intentional actions through the body (including body language).
- (2) Verbal karma (*vacī kamma*): intentional actions through speech (including silence).
- (3) Mental karma (*mano kamma*): intentional actions through the mind (that is, through ideas and thinking and mental processes).

1.3 When we combine both the classifications of karma above, we have altogether **6 kinds of karma**:

- (1) Wholesome bodily karma,
- (2) Wholesome verbal karma;
- (3) Wholesome mental karma;
- (4) Unwholesome bodily karma,
- (5) Unwholesome verbal karma; and
- (6) Unwholesome mental karma.

1.4 Of the 3 types of karma—bodily, verbal and mental—it is mental karma which is considered the most morally significant in its effects, as declared by the Buddha in **the Upāli Sutta** (M 56):

Imesaṃ kho ahaṃ tapassi tiṇṇaṃ kammānam evaṃ paṭivibhattānam evaṃ paṭivisiṭṭhānaṃ mano,kammaṃ mahā,sāvajjatarāṃ paññāpemi pāpassa kammaṃ kiriyāya pāpassa kammaṃ pavattiyā, no tathā kāya,kammaṃ no tathā vacī,kammaṃ ti

“Of these three kinds of action, Tapassī, thus analysed, thus discerned, the Tathagata declares *mental action* to be the most blameable for the doing, the occurrence, of evil action; not so bodily action, nor verbal action.”¹ (M 56,4/1:373), SD 27.1

¹ Here, the Buddha evidently wants to show the essential role of intention (*cetanā*), as a mental factor, in the operation of karma, and that without intention, bodily and verbal actions produce no karma. Comy however remarks that the Buddha says this in reference to the wrong view about fixed consequences (*niyata,micchā,diṭṭhi*), and quotes **Micchā,diṭṭhi S**: “Bhikshus, I see no single thing as greatly blameworthy as wrong view. Attachment to

Mental karma is the most significant because it is the origin of all other karma. Thought precedes action through body and speech. Bodily and verbal deeds are derived from mental karma (Dh 1-2).²

2 Karma, their quality and results

2.1 QUALITIES OF KARMA

2.1.1 Comparison

karma type	<i>kusala/akusala</i>	<i>puñña/apuñña</i>	ideal types
1 Dark [black] karma with dark [black] result	akusala (unwholesome)	apuñña (bad)	“blind” ordinary people (<i>andha puthujjana</i>)
2 bright [white] karma, with bright [white] result	kusala (wholesome)	“instrumental”: puñña (good) rebirth & fortune in this world	“good” ordinary people (<i>kalyāṇa puthujjana</i>) living deva-like lives: instrumentally <i>kusala</i> & teleologically <i>puñña</i>
3 Both dark and bright karma with dark and bright result	mixed	mixed	“good” ordinary people, some humans, some devas, some hell-beings
4 Neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright result	kusala : practicing of the noble eightfold path	“teleological”: ³ puñña preparing one for liberation (nirvana)	the learners of the path (<i>sekha</i>): instrumentally <i>puñña</i> & teleologically <i>kusala</i> (the karma that ends all karmas) ⁵
[5] Beyond karma	“ <i>kusala</i> ”	<i>puñña, pāpa, pahīna</i> (having abandoned both good and bad) ⁴	the arhats (<i>arahata</i>): awakened activity

Table 2. Karma types, their fruits and the arhat

wrong view, bhikkhus, is greatly blameworthy” (*Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aññaṃ eka, dhammam pi samanupassāmi evaṃ mahā, sāvajjaṃ yathayidaṃ bhikkhave micchā, diṭṭhi. Micchā, diṭṭhi, paramāni bhikkhave mahā, sāvajjāni ti*, A 1.18.3/1:33) (MA 3:54). Such wrong views are described in **Apañṇaka S** (M 60,5/1:401, 13/1:404, 21/1:407).

² See **Karma**, SD 18.1(3).

³ **Velez de Cea** gives this valuable conceptual distinction: “By instrumental actions I mean actions leading to favourable conditions for cultivating nirvāṇic virtues and by teleological I mean actions actually displaying nirvāṇic virtues or virtues characteristic of the Buddhist ideal of sainthood” (2004:128). In simpler terms, “teleological” means relating to a purpose (in life or spiritual attainment); here, it means connected to the goal of attaining nirvana. See (2.3) here for their interrelationship.

⁴ For Sutta refs, see SD 18.7(8.1).

⁵ **Kukkura, vatika S** (M 57,11/1:391), SD 23.11.

The Kukkura,vatika Sutta (M 57) and **the (Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta** (A 4.232) classify karma into 4 categories according to their quality and result.⁶ **Martin Adam**, instructively discusses this classification in his paper, “Groundwork for a metaphysic of Buddhist morals: A new analysis of *puñña* and *kusala*, in the light of *sukka*” (2005), that is, the topic of the 4 kinds of karma according to their results. From my own understanding of the Pali Canon and Adam’s discussion, I have worked out a schema to graphically give us a better understanding of the subject [Table 2].

2.1.2 Afflictive formations

The 4 categories are elaborated in Table 2. In the following categories, according to **the Kukkura,-vatika Sutta** (M 57), the term “dark” (*kaṇha*) refers to “afflictive” (*sa,vyāpajjha*) bodily, verbal and mental formations,⁷ and “bright” (*sukka*) to “unafflictive” (*avyāpajjha*) formation.⁸ The afflictive formations are the intentions behind the 10 courses of unwholesome karma, thus, as explained in **the Sammā Ditṭhi Sutta** (M 9.4):⁹

Afflictive formations

bodily afflictive formations
verbal afflictive formations
mental afflictive formations

Unwholesome courses of action¹⁰

killing, stealing, sexual misconduct;
false speech, slander, harsh speech, frivolous talk;
covetousness, ill will, wrong view.

2.1.3 Determinants of karma

2.1.3.1 These afflictive formations, in other words, are the underlying volition of our unwholesome or “dark” actions, and are conditioned by the 3 unwholesome roots: greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Their opposites are the unafflictive¹¹ formations or “bright” actions, that is, the motivational roots underlying wholesome or “bright” states: generosity (*dāna*), lovingkindness (*mettā*) and wisdom (*paññā*).¹²

2.1.3.2 In fact, as Martin Adam points out, these are the *determinants* of the “brightness” of an action, and he is careful to define the term *determinant*:

Now the notion of some factor *being a determinant* for something else is importantly ambiguous. It can mean “that which determines” as well as “that which one uses to determine.” Here it is understood in the former sense. Clearly the two senses are not equivalent. The criteria by which we judge an action to be good or bad do not necessarily constitute the causes of the action’s *being* good or bad. Indeed more usually they are the effects as, for example, is arguably the case with regard to the injury or non-injury an action actually does to others. These indicators are more readily observed than the mental state of the agent. We may judge an action as morally bad, based on our observation of the injury it does. But from a Buddhist perspective we would

⁶ M 57,7-11/1:389-391 (SD 23.11) & A 4.232/2:230-232 (SD 4.13).

⁷ *Kāya,saṅkhāra, vacī,saṅkhāra, mano,saṅkhāra*; here a formation is *abhisāṅkhāra*: see **Saṅkhāra**, SD 17.6(5.6).

⁸ M 57,7-11/1:389-391 @ SD 23.11.

⁹ M 9,4/1:47 (SD 11.14).

¹⁰ *Akusala kamma,patha*.

¹¹ “Unafflictive” (*avyāpajjha*) is throughout used as the opposite of “afflictive” (*vyāpajjha*). “Unafflictive” refers to the opp of “afflictive,” whereas “non-afflictive” means “that which is *not* afflictive, including neither afflictive nor non-afflictive, ie, neutral karma.”

¹² On the roots (*mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69/1:201-205), SD 18.2.

have to modify our judgment upon learning that the results were accidental. We would then say that the action was “regrettable,” or give it some other description with no implication of *moral* judgment upon the action itself. This point needs to be borne in mind when evaluating the arguments of scholars assessing the nature of Buddhist morality. The distinction is not always recognized; the criteria actually employed for judgment are often confused with the causal factors in virtue of which the action *is* good or bad. An analogy here would be illness. We do not confuse a fever, which is an effect, with its cause. A person has a fever because of their underlying condition of illness. A person is not ill because they have a fever. The fever is an indicator of the illness, not a causal determinant. (Adam 2005:6)

2.1.3.3 Dark karma, then, has unpleasant (*dukkha*) present and future effects on the doer, and it also constitutes actions that are unwholesome (*akusala*), rooted in mental afflictions that block the mind from insight into its own true nature. **Bright karma**, on the other hand, brings about only pleasant (*sukha*) present and future states, and it constitutes wholesome (*kusala*) actions, rooted in unafflicted mental states that conduce to insight into reality and to liberation.

2.1.4 Analysis of the 4 kinds of karma

According to the (Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta, the 4 categories of karma in terms of quality and result are as follows (incorporating details discussed thus far):¹³

(1) **Dark [black] karma with dark result** (*kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇha, vipākam*). “Dark” (*kaṇha*) karma are unwholesome (*akusala*) and bad (*apuñña = pāpa*), and as such generate unpleasant and unfortunate present and future states and experiences. This category refers to bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions that are unwholesome, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants. Such actions go against the 5 precepts, that are the basic code of moral conduct for a harmonious society, and which a practitioner constantly reminds himself to abide by.

(2) **Bright [white] karma, bright result** (*kammaṃ sukkaṃ sukka, vipākam*). “Bright” (*sukka*) karma are wholesome (*kusala*) and good (*puñña*), and as such generate pleasant and fortunate present and future states and experiences. This category refers to bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions which are not harmful, such as practicing in accordance with the 10 bases of skillful action, that is, abstaining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from lying, from slander, from harsh (or abusive) speech, from frivolous talk, from covetousness, from ill will and from wrong view. The Sutta says that “When he is touched by such contacts free from ill will, he enjoys feelings free from ill will that are extremely pleasurable—like the Subha, kiṇhā devas.”¹⁴

(3) **Dark and bright karma with dark and bright result** (*kammaṃ kaṇha, sukkaṃ kaṇha, sukka, vipākam*). These are bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions which are partly unwholesome,

¹³ These nn are basically a digest of what has been discussed so far. For more details, see nn of **Ariya Magga S** (A 4.235) @ SD 50.18 (1.2.1).

¹⁴ The Subha, kiṇhā devas inhabit the 3rd dhyana form sphere. Although **Nānā Karaṇa S 1** (A 4.123/2:127 @ SD 23.8a) states that their lifespan is 4 aeons, Comy (AA 3:126) actually states that it is 64 aeons to conform with later Theravāda cosmology. See A:ÑB 293 n55.

partly not. As examples of beings with such karma, the Sutta mentions “humans or some devas¹⁵ or some hell-beings.”¹⁶

(4) **Neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result** (*kammaṃ akaṇham-āsukkaṃ akaṇha,asukka,vipākaṃ*), which leads to the cessation of karma, that is, to arhathood. **The Sikha Moggalāna Sutta** says that this kind of karma “leads to the cessation of karma.” (A 4.233)¹⁷ **The Ariya,magga Sutta** (A 4.235) explains this in terms of the development of the noble eightfold path,¹⁸ while **the (Kamma) Bojjhaṅga Sutta** (A 4.236) speaks in terms of the development of the 7 awakening factors (*satta bojjhaṅga*).¹⁹

The Commentary says that it is the volition present in the 4 supramundane paths leading to the end of the cycle of life and death (AA 3:213). In short, this is the intention—that is, the mind of the saints of the path—to transcend the 3 kinds of karma mentioned above. The point is clear: “a mind that is pure is naturally open to the possibility of self-understanding and spiritual freedom.” (Adam 2005:6)

2.2 VIRTUE ETHICS²⁰

2.2.1 A number of British scholars, such as Damien Keown and Peter Harvey, have argued that early Buddhist ethics (including its conception of karma) is *non-consequentialist*, that is, the early Buddhist tradition does not generally regard the moral goodness of an action to be dependent on the results that follow from the action: an action is good or bad in itself.²¹

Take, for example, if A were to leave a chair in the hallway (it does not matter whether A has forgotten to put it away, or purposely leaves it there), and B were to trip over it in the dark and hurt himself badly, technically speaking A would not be accountable for what happens to B. (Of course, if B were a good person, he would apologize and be more mindful the next time.)

2.2.2 Keown, in another important paper, “Karma, character, and consequentialism,” states that “Buddhist ethics is best understood in terms of virtue-mediated character transformation” (1996:329, also 346). In the *Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Keown gives this explanation in relation to virtue ethics of early Buddhism:

One important conclusion to be drawn from the Abhidharmic analysis is that virtues and vices—since they are *dharmas*—are objective and real. They are not part of the realm of mental constructions (*prajñapti*), but are actually “found” within the psyche. This means that Buddhist ethics is naturalistic: good and bad are not abstractions to be apprehended by observers according to their various intuitions and sensibilities. Nor can morals be reduced to questions of taste

¹⁵ Comy: The devas of the sense-world who are happy in their own sphere, but unhappy when they observe the still greater happiness of the higher devas (AA 3:213).

¹⁶ Comy: Pretas with divine mansions (*vemānika petā*), and also nagas (terrestrial serpent beings), harpies (*supaṇṇā*, half-human half-bird), elephants, horses, etc, who are sometimes happy, sometimes suffering (AA 3:213). The nagas and harpies are traditional enemies, often at war against one another (they are of course mythical beings). For an interesting example, see the case of the Sāvattī seth in **Aputtaka S 2** (S 3.20/1:91-93), SD 23.12. See also **Karma**, SD 18.1 (5.3.2).

¹⁷ A 4.233/2:233 (SD 18.7(9.3)).

¹⁸ A 4.235/2:235 f (SD 50.18).

¹⁹ A 4.236/2:236 f (SD 50.34).

²⁰ For a detailed study, see **Virtue ethics**, SD 18.11a.

²¹ Hence, Buddhist moral ethics is not utilitarian either (ie not merely concerned with consequences): D Keown **1992:23, 107-128**, 168, 176, 179-182, 202, 232; **1996:329-350**; & P Harvey **2004:49**.

or personal preference, as suggested by Emotivism. A final implication of this objectivisation of ethics is that relativism is ruled out: what is to count ultimately as good and bad is not determined by accidental factors but grounded in the reality of human nature. Since human nature is everywhere the same the moral teachings of Buddhism are of universal extent and will hold good at all times and in all places. The corollary of this is that Buddhist ethics cannot be a self-contained system which is intelligible only in its own terms or within its own frame of reference.

(Keown 1992:64)

2.2.3 **Martin Adam**, in his paper (2005), makes an interesting study of the three pairs of key terms of Buddhist virtue ethics, as follows:

- A *puñña* and *apuñña/pāpa* (good and bad);
- B *kusala* and *akusala* (wholesome and unwholesome), and
- C *sukka* and *kaṇha* (bright and dark).

Adam explains the interrelationship of these terms as follows:

... It would seem that A, B, and C, when used as adjectives qualifying actions, all refer to exactly the same extensional set—but with varying connotations. In the universe of discourse that is *action*, they would seem to *denote* exactly the same phenomena. However they each have *connotations* of different value domains, the karmatic, the nirvāṇic (or soteriological) and the moral/epistemic respectively. Pair A, *puñña* and *apuñña*, connotes the experiential result of the action. Pair B, *kusala* and *akusala*, connotes the quality of the action with respect to wisdom and awakening. Pair C, *sukka* and *kaṇha*, is importantly ambiguous, simultaneously pointing towards both the moral quality and epistemic character of the action itself. The moral connotation links us to the karmatic; the epistemic connects us to the soteriological or nirvāṇic. Thus according to the understanding outlined so far, there is an easy correspondence to make among the three sets of antonyms. The former member of each pair would be translatable as “good,” the latter as “bad.” In *puñña*, *kusala*, and *sukka* we would appear to have three words referring to exactly the same set of actions. Because of its double implication of morality and knowledge the term *sukka* functions to bridge the conceptual gap between *puñña* and *kusala*. These results appear to support Keown’s view that *puñña* and *kusala* refer to exactly the same set of phenomena.

(Adam 2005:6 f)

2.2.4 In this connection, it is useful to restate **Velez de Cea’s** conceptual distinction: “By instrumental actions I mean actions leading to favourable conditions for cultivating nirvāṇic virtues and by teleological I mean actions actually displaying nirvāṇic virtues or virtues characteristic of the Buddhist ideal of sainthood” (2004:128).

While his definition as it is, is valuable in our understanding of the 4 karmic categories, its value is enhanced

by refining the very distinction between the instrumental and the teleological. This refinement is based on the notion that one and the same action can be considered both instrumental and teleological, depending on the end towards which the agent’s intention is principally related. So while actions of Category 4 are indeed teleologically nirvāṇic (*kusala*), they are also correctly viewed as instrumentally karmatic (*puñña*), the notion of “instrumentality” being understood as referring to the unintended effects of the action. Category 4 actions participate in *nirvāṇa*; but unless the agent reaches this goal he or she will be reborn. Such actions will have had the

inevitable effect of leading to a higher rebirth, even though this result will have been gained inadvertently. This beneficial result for the person *did not inform his or her intention*.

As for Category 2 actions, these have the unintended effect of leading one closer to *nirvāṇa*. But they also inevitably lead to positive future experiences for the agent, such as a pleasant rebirth. Such a concern for oneself informs the agent's intention. The agent's mental state is self-centered and does not "participate in" the final goal of *nirvāṇa*; in some basic sense it is not based in the awareness of this possibility of selflessness. The agent's actions therefore lead to pleasant future experiences, such as a better rebirth. Such a result is inevitable. There is a telos inherent in the natural order of things. We can therefore speak of such actions as teleologically *puñña* or teleologically karmatic.

Note that this way of talking assumes that the key determinant (in the causal sense) of an action's being either Category 2 or 4 is indeed the quality of awareness that marks the intention of the agent. In most circumstances an ordinary person is motivated by a concern informed by the delusion of self; one's moral conduct is motivated by the desire to benefit oneself (e.g., with a higher rebirth, the prospect of pleasure, etc.)

But an inversion happens upon entry into the Noble Eightfold Path: actions are thereafter marked by the first intimation of *nirvāṇa*; they are now indelibly "experienced as" leading to this final goal. They are informed by the wisdom that sees through the delusion of self. These actions are teleologically *kusala* (inevitably leading to *nirvāṇa*) and instrumentally *puñña* (unintentionally leading to a higher rebirth).²²

By refining the tool provided by Velez de Cea, we reach the conclusion that all *kusala* action is *puñña* and all *puñña* action is *kusala*—but in two different ways:

Category 2: teleologically *puñña* and instrumentally *kusala*, (*sukka*, not *kaṇha*); the action of ordinary people.

Category 4: instrumentally *puñña* and teleologically *kusala*, (neither *sukka* nor *kaṇha*); the virtuous action of disciples in higher training.

A final inversion occurs upon Awakening, when the telos is realized. At this point one can no longer properly speak of action (*karma*) at all. (Adam 2005:19)

2.3 THE STATE OF AN ARHAT

2.3.1 Adam then goes on to discuss the fourth category of action—*neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright result*—in detail, in connection with the term *kusala*. As this has been discussed in detail elsewhere,²³ I shall here simply summarize Adam's observations. In the Pali Canon, *kusala* (wholesome) has an interesting double connotation of both "beginning" and "ending." It indicates wholesome mental states *produced by* wisdom and leading to awakening (as the awakening factors),²⁴ and as such is closely associated with the Buddha's path.²⁵

²² Adam: "Another way of putting these results is as follows: as long as an action is not dark it is wholesome. If it is not dark and is bright then it is instrumentally wholesome (and teleologically meritorious: it has the effect of situating one in a better circumstance to attain *nirvāṇa*, but this was not the intention). If it is not dark and not bright then it is teleologically wholesome (and instrumentally meritorious: it has positive karmic effects, but these were not intended)" (2005:15 n19).

²³ See **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7(6).

²⁴ See **L S Cousins** 1996:145, who also points out that it is only later, in commentarial literature, that this meaning is generalized to refer to morally "good" or "wholesome" states (1996:156).

²⁵ L S Cousins 1996:154.

2.3.2 *Kusala* furthermore not only appears as a qualifier of action (*kamma*), but also as a qualifier of mental states (not associated with physical action), especially those arising through meditation (such as the dhyanas). (*Puñña*, however, is a term that usually refers to actions that are intended to bring about pleasant results.)²⁶ Adam refers to these two as *the intentional* and *the non-intentional*, respectively. He defines *intention* as that which is “associated with action”; as such, *non-intentional* is here used to indicate mental states not associated with action. By *non-intentional* Adam does not mean “unintentional” or that the state lacks an intentional object of consciousness, but that “to indicate an awakened quality of awareness which does not understand itself in terms of possible future positive or negative results for oneself” (2005:14).

2.3.3 *Kusala*, as such, is a broad term for any *mental state* associated with wisdom, including non-intentional states such as the dhyanas, but much else that are wholesome.²⁷ As Ānanda points out to the rajah Pasenadi in **the Bāhitika Sutta** (M 88): “The Tathagata, maharajah, has abandoned all unwholesome states and possesses wholesome states.”²⁸

In **the Samaṇa,maṇḍika Sutta** (M 78), the Buddha describes the arhat as an “individual who is accomplished in what is wholesome, who has perfect wholesomeness, attained to the supreme attainment, an invincible recluse.”²⁹

Yet the arhat is said to be one who has abandoned both *puñña* and *pāpa* [Table 2], that is, he will not be reborn. The arhat is sometimes said to be *kusala*. So here *kusala* and *puñña* are not coextensive: the state of an arhat may be regarded as *kusala*, but it cannot be *puñña*. As noted by Adam, one is tempted to speak of “actionless action” or even “spontaneous deed,” that is selflessly directed to the benefit of the many (a notion well developed in the Mahāyāna).³⁰

2.3.4 Keown seems to argue that because the arhat is as good (*kusala*) as it is possible to be so, his happiness neither increases nor decreases. Keown associates happiness with *puñña*, which he calls the “experiential indicator or epiphenomenon” of *kusala*. Because the arhat’s happiness neither increases nor decreases—that is, it is of a supramundane quality—the arhat is said to have abandoned *puñña* and *pāpa*.

Puñña is a function of progress in *kusala*, since an *Arahat* no longer progresses in *kusala* it is meaningless to speak of him as producing *puñña*. He will, of course, continue to enjoy the secondary consequences of his virtue while he lives, but the experiential *quantum* of these consequences cannot be increased or decreased as they can for a non-*Arahat*.

(Keown 1996:124)

²⁶ Historically, the term *kusala* is mainly used in reference to the Buddha’s path, but conceptually, *puñña* is also applicable here. Cousins suggests that the Buddha and the early saints would have no reason to object to the notion of *puñña*, even though they understood it differently from their contemporaries (1996:155). Scholars like Velez de Cea, however, misconstrue *puñña* and *kusala* to “refer to two different kinds of actions” (2004:130). See Adam 2005:14 n12.

²⁷ All *puñña* are *kusala*, but not all *kusala* are *puñña*.

²⁸ *Sabbākusala,dhamma,pahīno kho mahārāja, tathāgato kusala,dhamma,samannāgato ti* (M 88,17/2:116), qu in Keown 1992:118.

²⁹ *Purisa,puggalaṃ sampanna,kusalaṃ parama,kusalaṃ uttama,patti,pattarṃ samaṇaṃ ayojjhaṃ* (M 78,9/2:25 f), SD 18.9.

³⁰ See Adam 2005:14 n15.

The arhat, as such, does not fall into any of the four categories, for the simple fact that they are still *karmic* categories: categories ABC are worldlings, and category D comprises the learners (saints on the path, short of the arhat).

2.4 RELATED TEACHINGS AND SUTTAS

2.4.1 The seed-like nature of karma

2.4.1.1 From our discussion thus far, we can see how karma acts both as cause and effect, as seed and fruit. Once a seed is planted with the right conditions, it sprouts and grows producing more of its kind. In fact, **the (Kamma) Nidāna Sutta** (A 3.33) says:

Bhikshus, just as seeds that are undamaged, not rotten, unspoiled by wind and sun, viable, well planted in a good field, sown in well-prepared soil—if a person were to burn them in a fire, the fire were to reduce them to ashes, the ashes then winnowed in a strong wind, or let them be carried away by swift currents in a stream,³¹ then, bhikshus, these seeds—cut off at the root, made barren like a palm-tree stump, destroyed so that it is unable to grow any more—will not be able to arise again, not sprout and not flourish.³² (A 3.33,2.3/1:135 f), SD 4.14

2.4.1.2 Here, the phrase, “will not be able to arise again, etc,” should be carefully noted: the action arisen from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion should be understood, not as an ordinary wholesome action, but as “karma that is neither dark nor white, with neither dark nor bright results, that leads to the destruction of karma,” that is, the mind set on cultivating the noble eightfold path. Worldly karma arising from the three wholesome roots, on the other hand, brings about “bright karma with bright result,” bringing wholesome fruits resulting in a happy rebirth.

2.4.2 Related suttas

2.4.2.1 The key passages of **the (Vitthāra) Nidāna Sutta** hint at several of the main links of the cycle of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*).³³ Because of volitional formations (*saṅkhārā*), there is rebirth in accordance with one’s karma. Such a world is an aggregate of consciousness and name-and-form. Once rebirth occurs, there is contact, from which arises feeling. What we experience in this world in many ways reflect the nature of our actions in previous existences.

³¹ “If a person were to burn them...swift currents in a stream,” *tāni puriso agginā daheyya, agginā dahitvā masiṃ kareyya, masiṃ karitvā mahāvāte vā opuṇeyya, nadiyā vā sīgha, sotāya pavāheyya*. As in **Mahā Rukkhā S** (S 12.56,4/2:88).

³² In positive terms, non-greed is charity, renunciation, detachment, non-hate is lovingkindness, and non-delusion is wisdom.

³³ **Dependent arising. The 12 links** of the dependent arising are as follows: with ignorance as condition, (volitional) formations arise; with formations as condition, consciousness arises; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form arises; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense-bases arise; with the six sense-bases as condition, contact arises; with contact as condition, feeling arises; with feeling as condition, craving arises; with craving as condition, clinging arises; with clinging as condition, existence arises; with existence as condition, birth arises; with birth as condition, there arise decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering (**Acela Kassapa S 1**, S 12.17/2:20 f), SD 18.5. See **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61), SD 6.8 Intro & **Na Tumha S** (S 12.37), SD 5.14.

2.4.2.2 Structurally, the (Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta is identical to **the (Kamma) Ariya Magga Sutta** (A 4.235).³⁴ They differ only in their last sections on the “neither-dark-nor-bright karma” with like result “that conduces to the destruction of karma” [§5].

While **A 4.235** has the noble eightfold path as its last section, **A 4.232** has “this intention to abandon” all the 3 kinds of karma mentioned. From this parallel structure, we can rightly deduce that the noble eightfold path is the equivalent, or rather the practice in full, for the intention to abandon the 3 kinds of karma.

2.4.2.3 The (Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta should be studied in connection with **the Sañcetanika Sutta** (A 10.206) which is about the destruction of karma,³⁵ and **the (Kamma) Nidāna Sutta** (A 3.33) which uses the famous similes of the seeds.³⁶

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(Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta Discourse on Karma (in detail)

A 4.232

[230]

1 Bhikshus, having understood them personally through direct knowledge, I have declared these 4 types of karma.

What are the four?

The 4 kinds of karma

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) There is, bhikshus, dark [black] karma with dark result. | <i>kamma kaṇha kaṇha, vipāka</i> |
| (2) There is, bhikshus, bright [white] karma with bright result. | <i>kamma sukka sukka, vipāka</i> |
| (3) There is, bhikshus, [231] dark and bright karma with dark and bright result. | <i>kamma kaṇha, sukka kaṇha, sukka, vipāka</i> |
| (4) There is, bhikshus, neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright result, karma which leads to the destruction of karma. | <i>akaṇha, asukka akaṇha, asukka, vipāka</i> |

(1) Dark karma with dark result

2 And what, bhikshus, is **dark karma with dark result**?³⁷

2.2 Here, bhikshus, one³⁸

³⁴ A 4.235/2:236 f (SD 50.18).

³⁵ A 10.206/5:292-297 (SD 3.9).

³⁶ A 3.33/1:134-136 (SD 4.14).

³⁷ *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇha, vipakaṃ.*

³⁸ “One,” *ekacco*, a certain (being).

commits [creates]³⁹ afflictive⁴⁰ bodily formation [karma];
 commits afflictive verbal formation;
 commits afflictive mental formation.

*kāya, saṅkhāraṃ abhisankharoti
 vacī, saṅkhāraṃ abhisankharoti
 mano, saṅkhāraṃ abhisankharoti*

- 2.3 Having committed *afflictive* bodily formation,
 having committed *afflictive* verbal formation,
 having committed *afflictive* mental formation,

one arises in an *afflictive* world.

- 2.4 When one has arisen into an afflictive world, afflictive contacts⁴¹ touch one.⁴²

- 2.5 When one is touched by such afflictive contacts,
 one suffers afflictive feelings⁴³ that are entirely painful—as in the case of hell-beings.⁴⁴

- 2.6 This, bhikshus, is *dark karma with dark result*.

(2) Bright karma with bright result

- 3** And what, bhikshus, is **bright karma with bright result**?⁴⁵

- 3.2 Here, bhikshus, one commits unafflictive⁴⁶ bodily formation,⁴⁷
 commits unafflictive verbal action,
 commits unafflictive mental action.

- 3.3 Having committed *unafflictive* bodily action,
 having committed *unafflictive* verbal action,
 having committed *unafflictive* mental action,,

one arises in an *unafflictive* world.

- 3.4 When one has arisen in an unafflictive world, *unafflictive* contacts touch one.

- 3.5 When one is touched by such *unafflictive* contacts,
 one feels *unafflictive* feelings that are entirely pleasurable—

³⁹ “Commits [creates],” *abhisankharoti*, ie “confer potential energy to something” (CPD), “arrange, prepare.”

⁴⁰ “Afflictive,” *sa, vyāpajjhaṃ*. Comy glosses as “with suffering” (*sa, dukkhaṃ*, AA 3:212).

⁴¹ “Contacts,” *phassā*, ie dependent on the sense-organ and sense-object, sense-consciousness arises: the meeting of the three is contact (**Madhu, piṇḍika S**, M 18,16/1:111 f), SD 6.14. In short, these contacts are sense-experiences.

⁴² “Contacts ... touch one,” *phassā phusanti*, ie he is confronted by various acts of ill will.

⁴³ “He suffers feelings connected with ill will,” *sa, vyāpajjhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyati*. Comy: He suffers feelings connected with affliction (*s’ābādhaṃ*) (AA 3:212). The word *ābādha* has a range of meanings: pain, affliction, trouble, illness, sickness, disease, distress (CPD).

⁴⁴ “As in the case of hell-beings,” *seyyathā’pi sattā nerayikā*. Bodhi: “In this passage (and the counterparts below) we can discover several of the main links in the formula of dependent origination: volitional formations bring about rebirth into an appropriate world (which is ultimately a constellation of consciousness and name-and-form), and once rebirth is established, contact gives rise to feeling. The sutta establishes that the world in which we arise, and the affective quality of our experience within that world, reflect the nature of our actions in previous existences.” (A:B 296 n86). In other words, one need not actually fall into “hell” (as a place beyond here and now) to suffer hellish pains.

⁴⁵ *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ kaṇha, sukkaṃ kaṇha, sukka, vipakaṃ*. Here, the Pali is *vipakaṃ*, which is singular; hence, we need to take “result” as an uncountable noun. Such karmic results can be *either* painful or pleasant or perceived as painful or pleasant, depending on the mental state of the person.

⁴⁶ “Unafflictive” (*avyāpajjha*) is throughout used as the opposite of “afflictive” (*vyāpajjha*). “Unafflictive” refers to the opp of “afflictive,” whereas “non-afflictive” means “that which is *not* afflictive, as well as the neither afflictive nor not afflictive, ie, neutral karma.”

⁴⁷ “Bodily formation,” *kāya, saṅkhāra = kāya, kamma* (bodily karma).

as in the case of the Subha,kinhā devas.⁴⁸

3.6 This, bhikshus, is *bright karma with bright result*.

(3) Dark and bright karma with dark and bright result

4 And what, bhikshu, is **dark and bright karma with dark and bright result**?⁴⁹

4.2 Here, bhikshus, one commits

bodily formation that is afflictive and that is unafflictive,
verbal formation that is afflictive and that is unafflictive,
mental formation that is afflictive and that is unafflictive.

4.3 Having committed bodily formation that is *afflictive* and that is *unafflictive*,
having committed verbal formation that is *afflictive* and that is *unafflictive*,
having committed mental formation that is *afflictive* and that is *unafflictive*

one arises in a world that is both *afflictive* and *unafflictive*.

4.4 When one has arisen in a world that is afflictive and unafflictive, both *afflictive* and *unafflictive* contacts touch one.

4.5 When one is touched by afflictive and unafflictive contacts,
one feels *afflictive* and *unafflictive* feelings,
those that are painful and those that are pleasant,
those filled and mixed with pain and pleasure⁵⁰—

as in the case of humans, and some devas,⁵¹ and some lower-world beings.⁵²

4.6 This, bhikshus, is *dark and bright karma with dark and bright result*.

(4) Neither dark nor bright karma with neither dark nor bright result

5 And what, bhikshus, is **neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result that conduces to the destruction of karma**?⁵³

⁴⁸ The Subha,kinhā devas (“radiant glory”) inhabit the highest of 3rd dhyana heavens. Although (Nānā, karaṇa) Puggala S 1 (A 4.123), SD 23.8a, states that their lifespan is 4 aeons, Comy (AA 3:126) says that it is 64 aeons to conform with later Theravāda cosmology. See A:ÑB 293 n55. Those who habitually cultivate gladness (*muditā*) to the level of the 3rd dhyana are said to be reborn there: see Nānā, karaṇa Mettā S 1 (A 4.128,3), SD 33.9.

⁴⁹ *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ kaṇham kaṇha, vipakaṃ*. Here, the Pali is *vipakaṃ*, which is singular; hence, we need to take “result” as an uncountable n. Such karmic results can be *either* painful or pleasant *or* perceived as painful or pleasant, depending on the mental state of the person.

⁵⁰ *So sa, vyāpajjhehi pi avyāpajjhehi pi phassehi phuṭṭho samāno sa, vyāpajjham pi avyāpajjham pi vedanaṃ vedi-yati vokiṇṇaṃ saṅkiṇṇaṃ sukha, dukkhaṃ*.

⁵¹ Comy: The devas of the sense-world who are happy in their own sphere, but unhappy when they observe the still greater happiness of the higher devas (AA 3:213).

⁵² *Seyyathā’pi manussā ekacce ca devā ekacce ca vinīpātikā*. Comy: Pretas with divine mansions (*vemānika petā*), nagas (terrestrial serpent beings), harpies (*supaṇṇā*, half-human half-bird), and elephants, horses, etc, who are sometimes happy, sometimes suffering (AA 3:213). The nagas and harpies are traditional enemies, often at war with one another (they are, of course, mythical beings).

⁵³ *Katamañ ca bhikkhave kammaṃ akaṇham-asukkaṃ akaṇha, asukka, kamma-k, khayāya saṃvattati*. Except for this whole section, this Sutta (A 4.232) is structurally identical to A 4.235 (SD 50.16), differing only in the wording of its last section on the “neither-dark-nor-bright karma”: see SD 50.18 (1.1.2).

- 5.2 Therein, bhikshus,
 this intention to abandon dark karma with dark result,
 this intention to abandon bright karma with bright result,
 this intention to abandon dark and bright karma with dark and bright result—

5.2 *Tatra, bhikkhave,*
yam p'idam⁵⁴ kammaṃ kaṇham kaṇhavipākaṃ tassa pahānāya yā cetanā,
Yam p'idam kammaṃ sukkaṃ sukkavipākaṃ tassa pahānāya yā cetanā,
Yam p'idam kammaṃ kaṇhasukkaṃ kaṇhasukkavipākaṃ tassa pahānāya yā cetanā.

this, bhikshus, is called *karma that is neither-dark-nor-bright karma with neither-dark-nor-bright result that conduces to the destruction of karma.*⁵⁵

6 Bhikshus, these are the 4 types of karma that I have declared, having understood them personally through direct knowledge.

— evaṃ —

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⁵⁴ Only Be *yam idam* throughout.

⁵⁵ See Intro (2.1) above.

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