

SD 64.12c

Kiriyaṇḍī Sutta

The Discourse on One Who Teaches Action

A 2.33

Theme: Karmic accountability

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The Kiriyaṇḍī Sutta (A 2.33) records the Buddha as teaching “non-doing” (*akiriya*) and “action or doing” (*kiriya*). By **non-doing** or omission is meant that one should *neither* act *nor* intend what is un- wholesome (*akusala*)—that is rooted in *greed, hatred or delusion*—through the body, speech and mind; by **doing** or commission is meant that one should only act or intend what is wholesome (*kusala*)—that is rooted in *non-greed, non-hatred, or non-delusion*—through the body, speech and mind.

The brahmin who questions the Buddha, deeply satisfied with his answers, goes for refuge.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

According to the Sutta Commentary, **a certain brahmin** intent on debating with the Buddha, builds an earthen house to find peace in concentration in a noisy part of the city. He comes up with a devious “twin-horned question” (*ubhato koṭikaṃ pañhaṃ*); that is, whichever way the Buddha answers he would be shown to be wrong.

However, the Buddha, understanding the brahmin’s intention, gives an unexpected answer which transcends the brahmin’s dilemmas.

The brahmin, being intelligent and honest, is delighted with the Buddha’s answer, and goes for refuge.

2 Sutta commentary

This whole section is a slightly paraphrased translation of the Aṅguttara Commentary on **the Kiriyaṇḍī Sutta** (AA 2:122,20-123,21). Seemingly superfluous comments have been omitted.

2.1 THE BRAHMIN’S TWIN HORNED QUESTION

2.1.1 A certain brahmin

A certain brahmin approached the Buddha thinking:

“It is said that the recluse Gotama is able to answer whatever has been said, there is no way anyone could prove him wrong when questioning him.¹

I will craft a question to defeat him.”

After eating some fine food, he closed the door of his room, sat down and began to think.

2.1.2 The brahmin’s earthen house

Then it occurred to the brahmin:

“This place is very loud and noisy; the mind cannot concentrate. I will have an earthen house (*bhūmi-ghara*) built.” Having had an earthen house built, he entered it. Then, he thought:

¹ *Samaṇo kira gotamo kathitaṃ viṣajjeti, pucchāyassa virajjhanam nāma n’atthi.*

“If asked thus, he will answer thus; if asked thus, he will answer thus,”
rejecting one point, coming up with another, but he could not settle on anything at all for the whole day.

2.1.3 The twin-horned question

2.1.3.1 Thus, with this endeavor, four months passed. Then, he thought of a twin-horned question.
[1.2]

Thus, it occurred to him:

“I will approach the recluse Gotama and ask, ‘What doctrine do you profess (*kiṃ, vādi*)?’

If he says, ‘I profess a doctrine of **action**,’ I will refute him, saying,

‘Do you profess then the doing of all unwholesome things?’

If he says, ‘I profess a doctrine of **inaction**,’ I will refute him, saying,

‘Do you profess the non-doing of wholesome things?’

2.1.3.2 For when asked this twin-horned question, he will be able neither to swallow it nor to spit it out.

Thus, victory will be mine, and it will be the recluse Gotama’s defeat.”

Rising up, he clapped his hands, left the earthen house, and made a proclamation in the city; for he thought:

“It is not fitting to go alone when asking such a question.”

Surrounded by all the city-dwellers, he approached the Blessed One.

2.2 THE BRAHMIN QUESTIONS THE BUDDHA

2.2.1 The Sutta Commentary

2.2.1.1 “What does master Gotama teach?” (*kiṃ, vādi bhavaṃ gotama*) means “What is your view?”

“What does he declare?” (*kiṃ akkhāyī*) means “What practice do you proclaim to your disciples?”

2.2.1.2 Then the Blessed One, knowing that he had come after preparing a question for four months, puffed up with the conceit that “I have seen the question of the recluse Gotama’s defeat,” shattering that question with a single word, said,

“I teach a doctrine of doing [action], brahmin,” and so on. [§3]

2.2.1.3 Then the brahmin, giving up his conceit, asked the Blessed One:

“But how? (*yathā, kathaṃ pana*)” and so on. The rest of this is clear in meaning.

The traditional commentary ends here.

2.2.2 The Buddha shatters the brahmin’s twin-horned dilemma

2.2.2.1 The Commentary relates the brahmin planning his **twin-horned dilemma** as follows:

“If he [the Buddha] says, ‘I profess a doctrine of **doing [action]**,’ I will refute him, saying,

‘Do you profess the doing of all unwholesome things?’

If he says, ‘I profess a doctrine of **non-doing [inaction]**,’ I will refute him, saying,

‘Do you profess the non-doing of wholesome things?’” [2.1.3.1]

This duality may work if the Buddha teaches a ritualistic form of doing and non-doing, that is, the deed is seen purely as an external expression of one’s body (action and speech) without the intervention of the mind; that is, without the dynamic of **intention** (*cetanā*).

2.2.2.2 Clearly the Buddha rejects such ritualistic notions [2.2.2.1], since the Buddha teaches that “**Karma is intention, I say!**” (*cetanā’haṃ kammaṃ vadāmi*).² Whether one acts or not, the efficacy of that action or non-action depends on one’s intention. This means that when such **karma**—encompassing both action and non-action through the body, or speech or the mind—is rooted in *greed, hatred, or delusion*, it is unwholesome (*akusala*), but when it is rooted in *non-greed, non-hatred or non-delusion*, it is wholesome (*kusala*).

Hence, in **the Kiriyaṇḍī Sutta** (A 2.33) the Buddha declares to the brahmin that he teaches a dynamic concept of karma, thus:

“Brahmin, I teach **non-doing** of misconduct [bad conduct] of the body, of speech, and of the mind;
I teach *non-doing* with regard to the numerous kinds of bad unwholesome qualities.
Brahmin, I teach **doing** of good conduct of the body, of speech, and of the mind;
I teach *doing* of the numerous kinds of [good] wholesome qualities. [§4]

2.3 THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING ON KARMA

2.3.1 *Puñña* and *pāpa*

2.3.1.1 What we broadly understand as good and evil/bad are translated as 2 pairs of Pali terms, that is, *puñña* (meritorious or good) and *pāpa* (evil or bad), and *kusala* (wholesome) and *akusala* (unwholesome). The *puñña/pāpa* dichotomy is older, found in Brahmanism, the older religions and popular belief. **Kusala** originally means “skilled, skillful,” such as in some art, craft or work, and to go on to be adept or expert at it. The Buddha used the term *kusala* to refer to the conduct and mind that is skillful in distinguishing evil and good, *avoiding evil, cultivating the good and thus freeing the mind* (Dh 183).³

2.3.1.2 The pre-Buddhist beliefs in “good” (*puñña*) and “evil” (*pāpa*), especially in the Vedic or brahminical systems, referred to the proper observance of the right rituals for various life-cycle events, marking birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. Such rituals included making expensive or elaborate offerings to brahmin priests (who were the only ones allowed to perform such rituals). The brahmins taught that only with the performance of such proper rituals (Skt *karma*) that one would live a “good” life, and that one’s ancestors would go to heaven.

The Buddha rejected such ritualistic notions of karma as false views regarding the hereafter. The morality of one’s action is defined by one’s **intention** (*cetanā*): when one intends evil then one’s action, speech or thought is *evil*; when one intends good then one’s action, speech or thought is *good*. Hence, no one purifies another; moreover, karma, good or bad, merits or demerits, cannot be transferred.⁴

2.3.1.3 The Buddha taught followers of the old Indian religions to adjust their beliefs in *puñña/pāpa* with less emphasis on ritual and priestcraft, to move away from actions that are *pāpa* (bad or evil)—such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxication—and cultivate *puñña* (good or merit)

² **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63/3:415), SD 6.11; SD 48.1 (9.1.3).

³ SD 54.2c (2.1.2). On Dh 183, see SD 51.21 (1.2).

⁴ Sadly, this wrong belief in “**merit transfer**” is widely taught today mostly by Sinhalese priests in connection with last rites, which include monetary donations to the priests. It is vital to reject and correct this wrong view, and to understand personal accountability of karma, and “dedicate merits” with lovingkindness as taught by the Buddha. See SD 2.6a (6), 2.6b (3), 2.7 (1, 4); SD 61a (2.6.3) (18).

—keeping the precepts, cultivating the mind, and freeing the mind. To help one live a good moral life, one should cultivate **lovingkindness** (*mettā*) to unconditionally accept others and cultivate compassion.

With a wholesome foundation of moral virtue, one then cultivates a calm and clear mind of joy and peace (or equanimity). With the calm and clarity of such mental concentration, one then is able to see directly into true reality, and to know how to free the mind from craving and ignorance by seeing impermanence, suffering and nonself.

Essentially, this summarizes the practice of the wholesome (*kusala*) [2.3.2.2].

2.3.1.4 The Buddha adopted the term **pāpa** because of its common usage, but rejected its brahmin-biased ideologies and its false and unhelpful senses (such as being ritual-based, replacing them with self-accountable notions of evil and bad). In the Buddhist sense, *pāpa*, “evil, bad, wrong,”⁵ overlaps in meaning with *akusala*, “unwholesome” but with a significant difference [2.3.2.1].

Both *pāpa* and *akusala* include the habitual breaking of the precepts—killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, falsehood and intoxication—and any act that is rooted in greed, or hatred or delusion. Hence, the Buddha famously instructs us thus:

<i>sabba,pāpass</i> ⁶ <i>akaraṇaṃ</i>	the not doing of any evil;
<i>kusalass’ upasampadā</i>	promoting the wholesome;
<i>sacitta,pariyodapanam</i> ⁷	the purification of one’s own mind—
<i>etam buddhāna sāsanaṃ</i>	this is the teaching of the buddhas. (Dh 183) ⁸

Line c of Dh 183 is explained by the Commentary as “the purification of one’s mind of the 5 mental hindrances,”⁹ that is, of (1) sensual desire (*kama-c, chanda*), (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*), (3) sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*), (4) restlessness and worry (*uddhacca, kukkuccha*), and (5) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*).¹⁰

In **line a**, we see **pāpa** used in the sense of *akusala*—clearly to fit the 8 syllables of a śloka. Thus we see *kusala* in **line b**; in Buddhist usage, *kusala* has a broader positive sense than the old term *puñña*, a near-synonym [2.3.1.1].

We see a similar usage in this Dhammapada verse:

<i>Yathā’pi puppha,rāsimhā</i>	Just as from a heap of flowers
<i>kayirā māla,guṇe bahū</i>	one may make many garlands,

⁵ **Pāpa** (n) Sn 23, 662; Dh 117 opp *puñña*; pl **pāpāni** Sn 399, 452, 674; Dh 119, 265; **pāpaka** (adj) bad, wicked, evil, wretched, V 1:8; A 1:149, 207, 5:418 *pāpa akusala citta*; Sn 127, 215, 664; Dh 66, 78, 211, 242; J 1:128; Pv 2.6,16 = *lāmaka* (Comy), 2.9,3; Pug 19; Dha 30, 101; Miln 204 opp *kalyāṇa*; Vism 268 = *lāmaka*, 312 (of dreams, opp *bhaddaka*). Fem **pāpikā** Dh 164, 310; *apāpikā*, free of evil, innocent, of a young maiden (*daharā*) Thī 370; Vv 314, 326 (so explained by VvA, but ThīA explains as faultless, ie, beautiful).

⁶ The apostrophe here in **line a**, *pāpass’*, as well as in **line b**, *kusalass’*, marks a resolution of compound (the -a is elided to keep the 8 syllables of a śloka). So too in **line c** the resolution of cpd is 5th syllable, thus: *-pariyodanapaṇam*, pronounced as [paryo-]. For the same reason, in **line d** the -m is elided in *buddhānam*. These are cases of *metri causa* (in keeping to the metre): see Dh:N 108 n182.

⁷ Patna Dh 357 *-pariyodamanam*; Uv 28.1 *-paryavadanam* (prob for *-dānam*); Mvst 3:420,13* *-paryādāpanam*. It is prob that the *dam-* and *dap-* forms are linked through an intermediate *dav-* form. For the *m/v* alternation, see **Dh 355** *-gavesino/*-gamesino*; **371** *bhamassu/bhavassu*. For Jain parallels to **Dh 183**, see K Watanabe, “Avoiding all acts by both Buddha and Mahavira,” *Bulletin d’Études Indiennes* 11-12, 1995:29-32.

⁸ See SD 51.21 (1.2).

⁹ **Sacitta,pariyodapanan** *ti pañcahi nīvaraṇehi attano cittassa vodāpanam* (DhA 3:237,17 f)

¹⁰ See **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1; (**Nīvaraṇa**) **Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55), SD 3.12.

<i>evaṃ jātena maccena</i>	even so much good should be done	<i>d</i>
<i>kattabbam kusalam bahum</i>	by a mortal who is born (in this world).	<i>c</i>
	(Dh 53)	
<i>Yassa pāpam kataṃ kammam</i>	A bad deed that is done,	
<i>kusalena pithiyati</i> ¹¹	he blocks off with good [a wholesome deed],	
<i>so imam lokam pabhāseti</i>	such a one brightens this world	
<i>abbhā mutto'va candimā</i>	like the cloud-free moon.	
	(Dh 173 = Tha 872) ¹²	

2.3.2 Akusala and kusala

2.3.2.1 In important ways, the term **akusala** (the unskillful) overlaps with the early Buddhist senses of *pāpa* (evil/bad). Whatever is evil or bad (*pāpa*)—being stingy, mean, immoral, lustful, hateful, deluded, selfish, doubting¹³ and superstitious, and so on—falls into the range of these 2 near-synonyms. However, when the suttas speak of *akusala*, it invariably means something that distracts one from the path of training, hence also from the path of awakening.

In terms of spiritual development, *akusala* refers to the ignorance or misconception of our potential for rising above our self by measuring ourself against some higher power or depending on an outside agency for succour or salvation. We are thus limited by our faith and views—of our self, of others and of things. We fall into the darkest depths of false reality when we hand over our mind to others. Mindless, we are leashed by dogma and nose-led by blind faith like sheep or beasts to the pen and then the shambles.

2.3.2.2 On the other hand, by cultivating *kusala*, the wholesome, we make merits (*puñña*) and skillfully build them up as a safety wall against the floods of greed, hatred and delusion, and store goodness in a tower of mindfulness, directing the mind onward with charity by way of love and learning. Cultivating **love** (*mettā*), we cultivate moral virtue, and unconditionally accept all beings as they are; with love, we see our own errors and weaknesses as occasions for **learning** (*suta*). This is open-mindedness.

As our learning deepens, our understanding leads to deeper calm and sharper clarity, so that we are able to settle the mind more quickly, more deeply. With deeper **mental concentration** comes even greater calm and clarity, with which we are able to see directly into true reality. In this way we become more skillful in **mental cultivation**, the basis for insight wisdom and mental freedom.

2.3.3 Karma as intention

2.3.3.1 One of the most significant contributions that the Buddha made to Indian religion and human spirituality is to radically reject and debunk the brahminical notion of **karma** as ritual by declaring karma to be the truth of self-reliance and the reality of self-awakening without the need of any religious dogma or belief. By understanding oneself one understands the mind; by understanding the mind, one is freed from views and delusion. With freedom from views and delusion, one gains awakening, that is, liberation from suffering which brings freedom from enslavement by the senses and the world.

¹¹ *Pithiyati* (vll *pidhiyati*, *pithiyyati*; pass of *pidahati*, “he covers, shuts”; BHSD *pidhayatti*, *apidheti*, etc; Skt *api-dahati*), to be covered up, close, shut (off), obstructed (M 86,18*/2:104, 130,18/3:184; Sn 1034, 1035; Nc 442; Tha 872; Dh 173; J 1:279. 2:158, 6:432). For a philological analysis, see Tha:N 247 n872.

¹² See SD 18.1 (6); also Tha:N 247 n872.

¹³ “Doubting” (*vicikicchā*) refers to the habitual disregard for the efficacy of good, kindness and other wholesome acts. The last 3 are the 3 fetters (*samyojana*), through the breaking of which one becomes a streamwinner. See Abhabba Tayo, dhamma S (A 10.76,6), SD 2.4; Emotional independence, SD 40a.8; SD 3.3 (5); SD 56.1 (4.4.1).

2.3.3.2 The key aspect of the Buddha’s teaching on action is that karma is **intention** (*cetanā*) [2.2.2.2]. Here intention refers to the thought or drive behind an action—the body, speech or the mind—which is one of the 6 roots (*mūla*) of action, that is, the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) (greed, hatred or delusion) and the 3 wholesome roots (*kusala, mūla*) (non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion). Intention thus also refers to the moral quality of our actions.

When any of the *unwholesome* roots drives an action, that action (and its result) are unwholesome; when any of the *wholesome* roots moves an action, it is wholesome. An important point to note here is that **karma**, as a rule, is a conditioned reaction: we tend to act or react in a way that we have done before. When we are *lustful*, we are likely to be *lustful* again; when we show *love*, we will likely be *loving* again —depending on similar conditions.

2.3.3.3 Considering the fact that our intentional acts tend to be conditioned and habitual, our karmic acts may be either **conscious** (*cittaka*) or **unconscious** (*acittaka*), that is, it may be done mindfully or purposefully (*sampajāna*) or occur unmindfully (*asampajāna*).¹⁴ Even though karma may be habitual, these actions are *not* regarded as reflexive or involuntary (*kiriya*). This last term includes repetitive natural actions such as breathing, walking or personal quirks (such as tics).

Karma, whether conscious or unconscious, is rooted in one of the 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hatred or delusion) or in one of the 3 wholesome roots (non-greed, non-hatred or non-delusion). Since the **arhats** have uprooted greed, hatred and delusion, they are incapable of creating bad karma; all their actions are naturally moved by non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, and create no new karmic fruit.

— — —

¹⁴ SD 17.8b (1.2); SD 51.20 (2.2.2); SD 57.10 (1.3.2.1); SD 63.5 (3.1.2.5).

Kiriya,ṇḍī Sutta

The Discourse on One Who Teaches Action

A 2.33

2 Then a **certain brahmin** approached the Blessed One and exchanged friendly words and cordial greetings with the Blessed One. When the friendly greetings were concluded, the brahmin sat down at one side and said to the Blessed One:

“What does Master Gotama teach; what does he declare?”

3 “Brahmin, I teach a doctrine of **doing** (*kiriya*) and a doctrine of **non-doing** (*akiriya*).”¹⁵

4 “But how does master Gotama teach a doctrine of doing and a doctrine of non-doing?”

“Brahmin, I teach **non-doing** of misconduct [bad conduct] of the body, of speech, and of the mind;

I teach *non-doing* of the numerous kinds of bad unwholesome qualities.

Brahmin, I teach **doing** of good conduct of the body, of speech, and of the mind;

I teach *doing* of the numerous kinds of [good] wholesome qualities.

It is in this way, brahmin, that I teach a doctrine of doing and a doctrine of non-doing.”

5 “Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, master Gotama!

Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned,

or were to reveal what was hidden,

or were to show the way to one who was lost,

or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms,

in the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been declared by master Gotama.

Master Gotama, I go to the blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the sangha of monks.

May master Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

—evaṃ—

260321 260324 260711

¹⁵ Here, “doctrine of doing” (*kiriya,ṇḍā*) and “doctrine of non-doing” (*akiriya,ṇḍā*), ie, the commission of good (*puñña*) or wholesome (*kusala*), and omission of bad (*pāpa*) or unwholesome (*akusala*). Technically, *akiriya,ṇḍā* also refers to a rejection of **karma** (*kamma*), that there is the efficacy of neither good nor bad intentions or actions; for a Buddhist critique of *akiriya,ṇḍā*, see **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60,13/1:404,21-35), SD 35.5, and **Sandaka S** (M 76,10/1:516,3-17), SD 35.7. The present Sutta seems to be extracted from (**Licchavī**) **Sīha S** (A 8.12,1 f/4:179-188) SD 71.5.