

How to learn from karma 2 of 2

Source: SD 61.5b, The Buddha's karma © Piya Tan 2024.

6.1.4 Karma as loving (1) 2 kinds of pain

6.1.4.1 The Suddhodana Vatthu (DhA 13.2) relates that the Buddha during his first visit to Kapilavatthu, went out for alms in the morning. His father rajah Suddhodana was shocked that his own son had shamed their royal lineage. The Buddha replied that his was the Buddha-lineage (*buddha, varṇsa*) and all buddhas go for almsround. Then the Buddha gave his father and the gathering a discourse on **Dh 168-169**.

The 3rd line of both verses says:

dhamma, cārī sukhaṃ seti One who lives Dharma lies happily [The Dharmafarer sleeps happily]
asmim̐ loke paramhi ca in this world and the hereafter" (Dh 168c = 169c)¹

"Lies (down)" (*seti* or *sayati*) can mean either "lies asleep" or "lives one's life." The 2 verses actually refer to the Dharmafarer's happiness in all 4 postures: whether standing, walking, sitting or reclining.

Why is one happy? The elder Dhammika explains it in his **Dhammika Thera, gāthā**:

dhmmo have rakkhati dhamma, cārīm̐. The Dharma protects the Dharmafarer. (Tha 303)

6.1.4.2 How does the Dharma protect one who lives the Dharma, that is, *who keeps the precepts, trains his mind to be calm and clear, and cultivates insight wisdom*? So long as the Dharma is practised properly, the practitioner is likely to lighten the impact of the bad karmic fruits, and even prevent their fruiting. As in the Buddha's case, we notice that (at worst) only his body is affected, but his mind remains calm, clear and undistracted. [1.1]

This is called the teachings of "the 2 kinds of pains," that of the body and the mind, as taught in **the Sall'atthena Sutta** (S 36.6), which says that when those who are worldly are wounded by the dart of suffering by way of a painful physical feeling, they "sorrow, grieve, lament, beat their breast, become confused," so that they suffer both body and mind. Thus they suffer 2 kinds of pain: the bodily and the mental. This is the work of their **delusion**, which continues to grow in them.²

Furthermore, they show **aversion**, and so it grows and lies latent in them. When there is aversion, there arises **lust**, the desire to seek some kind of unwholesome pleasure, whether it is revenge on those whom they perceive as having caused them pain, or feel the desire to enjoy some kind of sensual pleasure or to collect things. Thus, the latent tendency of lust grows and lies latent in them.

Thus, foolish worldlings are thus hit by the 2 darts of suffering: one of the body, another of the mind.

One who is **wise**, who has learned and practised some Dharma, emulating the wise noble disciples of the Buddha, they "neither sorrow nor grieve nor lament nor beat their breast nor become confused," when their body feels pain. They calmly and mindfully manage the pain so that they feel only bodily pain, but their minds are calm, clear and undistracted by that pain.

They are neither yoked [attached] to a pleasant feeling, nor to an unpleasant feeling, nor to a neutral feeling. Hence, they do not feed the latent tendencies of lust, of aversion and of ignorance.³ Hence, we can see how the wise manage the effects of pain, whether they arise from karmic causes or non-karmic sources. [3.4]

¹ DhA 13.2/3:163-165. Dh 168c = 169c, Ap 400c = 401c, J 64c (**Dhamma, dhaja J**, J 384/3:267-270).

² See also **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20/1:242-244), SD 1.12.

³ S 36.6/4:207-210 (SD 5.5).

6.1.5 Karma as loving (2) When the good do bad

6.1.5.1 We have already referred to **the (Kara,ja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.209) which counters the notion of karmic absolutism, that is, how boundless love (*mettā*), properly cultivated, works to soften the impact of bad karma, even prevent its arising⁴ [5.1.2]. We will here mention a last important text in connection with preventing bad karma and its effects from arising and by lessening its effects on us, that is, **the Loṇa,phala Sutta** (A 3.99), which may be regarded as the classic Sutta against any notion of karmic absolutism.⁵

The Sutta teaching starts with the Buddha stating that there are those who have this wrong view,

*Yathā yathā’yam puriso kammaṃ karoti
tathā tathā tam patisaṃvediyati*

Whatever karma this person has done,
he would experience *that very same karma*,
(A 3.99,1)

meaning that whatever bad karma we have done before, we will experience (again) the bad effects of that very same karma (intentional action). One interpretation of this is that of *lex talionis* or “an eye for an eye” [5.2.1.4]. It may seem possible in a historical situation, where such a law was enforced by human agencies, but as a moral/ethical idea, it seems to be **fatalism**. This is, in fact, a classic definition of karmic absolutism: to every karmic action there is an equal and opposite reaction!

In that case, concludes the Buddha, “There is no living of the holy life,” we will not be able to find any kind of freedom from karma; there will be no awakening.

6.1.5.2 The right way as to how karma acts, the Buddha continues, is as follows:

*Yathā vedanīyam ayaṃ puriso kammaṃ karoti
tathā tathāssa vipākam patisaṃvediyati*

Whatever karma that a person does, he would
experience its fruit in just the way it was felt.
(A 3.99,1.2)

This means that when A does a bad karma to B, and B feels its effect C; then, whenever the conditions are right, A will feel C. The “conditions” here are, of course, the mental state of the doer that triggered the first action. Only this time, A will feel the same effect as B felt the first time.

Let’s say an angry child D breaks the favourite toy of child E who cries as she misses it. E then hits back at D by breaking D’s favourite toy. Now, suppose D hits back again—and it becomes a seemingly endless tit-for-tat (a simple expression for “an eye for an eye”). Then a person lovingly explains to D and E that it is normal that they feel pain on losing their toy. “Normal” means both D and E feel the same about the loss of their toy. Once they understand this, it is easier for them to learn to share things.

One imagines karma to be a kind of internally constructed mental mechanism that will go off whenever the right buttons are pressed. We must also remember that it is rare that any karma will fruit all alone. It’s more likely that a number of karmic mechanisms will be triggered at the same time (more or less), and it is difficult to imagine how their interaction and what their total effects will really be like. For bad karmas, their total effects will really be bad; for good karmas, one must imagine their overall effects may be even better. Hence, it’s better to do good.

6.1.5.3 Next, the Loṇa,phala Sutta records the Buddha as speaking plain Pali but presenting very complex ideas about a person’s karma and its effects on that person thus, followed by my own comments:

⁴ A 10.209/5:299-301 (SD 2.10).

⁵ A 3.99/1:249-253), SD 3.5.

1 What sort of person **has done only a slight bad karma, but it takes him to hell?**

Here, bhikshus, a certain person is of

2 uncultivated body, uncultivated moral conduct; uncultivated mind, uncultivated wisdom:

3 he is mentally limited, with a small self, dwelling with (only a) little suffering.

1 The phrase “**only slight bad karma**” refers to what is generally perceived by most people, but a bad-doer often cleverly hides their evil, and their evil affects just a few people, or even just one person. The bad karma they create now, although neither apparent nor numerous, are of such grave unwholesomeness that it takes them to a suffering state. Those “grave unwholesomeness” as described as follows:

2 “**Uncultivated body**” refers to their body and speech being unrestrained and unwholesome (SA 2:395); hence, they are said to have “**uncultivated moral conduct.**” In other words, they are likely to be breaking any number of the precepts.

“**Uncultivated mind**” means that their mind is ridden with unwholesome thoughts (lust, ill will, conceit, pride, etc). Without a cultivated mind, they naturally lack wisdom, but have great cunning, pretence, casuistry, religiosity, and so on; hence, they have “**uncultivated wisdom.**”

3 “**Mentally limited**” means that they are lacking in various virtues, like being very self-centred, often craving for attention, generally of bad character. On account of this, they are “**with a small self,**” one that lacks lovingkindness. They dwell with “**little suffering**” since their present karmic conditions are good.

6.1.5.4 Then, the Buddha presents a person with a wholesome nature, thus:

1 What sort of person **has done such a slight bad karma experienceable right here and now** but which he does not experience in the least, how would it ever be abundant at all?

Here, bhikshus, a certain person is of

1 cultivated body, cultivated moral conduct; cultivated mind, cultivated wisdom:

3 he is mentally unlimited, with a great self, who dwells mentally immeasurable.

1 “**The slight bad karma experienceable right here and now**” refers to such actions as a good person criticizes or scolds an evil person. Although this is bad karma, the evil person experiences its effect only “slightly,” such as feeling annoyed and vowing revenge. The reason is quite simple: All those “bad karma” did not affect him very much since he is callous and has no respect whatsoever for this good person.

2 “**Cultivated body**” refers to the body and speech of a good person, that is, being restrained and wholesome; hence, they are said to be of “**cultivated moral conduct,**” including keeping the precepts. “**Cultivated mind**” means that they are mentally cultivated, characterized by wholesome thoughts (generosity, love, honesty, humility, etc). On account of their love of learning and habitual mental cultivation, they have “**cultivated wisdom.**”

3 The good is “**mentally unlimited**” in the sense of having various virtues which make them selfless, and generally of good character. On account of this they are said to be “**with a great self.**” They are filled with boundless love, compassion, joy and peace; hence, they “**dwell mentally immeasurable.**”

6.1.5.5 The theme of **the Loṇa,phala Sutta** centres on the Sutta title, the salt crystal of a sizeable lump. The parable has a pair of similes. In the 1st simile, a large crystal of salt is mixed with a little water in a small bowl. The mixture will taste very salty and unfit to drink. This refers to how a person of little wholesome virtue committing a small bad karma and suffers much for it, even falling into a suffering state. It is not the act itself but the person’s negative reaction that is of such badness that the karmic effect feels bigger.

In the 2nd simile, a salt crystal of the same size is thrown into Ganges River. This does not affect the river water in any way by way of making it salty and unfit to drink. (We assume here that at the time of the Buddha, the Ganges River had clean clear water so that it was suitable for drinking.) Anyway, the point is that a person with great wholesome qualities may commit a small bad karma, which normally fruits in this life itself.

However, the person, on account of their great goodness, does not feel the fruit at all. For example, the good person may be triggered by some odd remark to show anger, but this is quickly resolved, and the person may even realize they should not have reacted in that way.

This is like the Buddha who on account of scolding Devadatta, induces him to take revenge on the Buddha by way of trying to kill him, but the Buddha is in no way affected by such karma at all.⁶

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⁶ See SD 61.5a (3.1.1).