

The karma of “somethings” (S 482)

Source: (Māra) Piṇḍa Sutta (S 4.18, SD 61.13), Māra deprives the Buddha of food but he lives on joy, © Piya Tan, 2024.

4.1 THE KARMA OF “SOMETHING” (S 482)

8	<i>apuññam pasavi māro āsajja naṃ tathāgataṃ kiṃ nu maññasi pāpima na me pāpaṃ vipaccati</i>	S 482	You’ve made great demerit, Māra! You have assailed the Tathagata— What do you think, O evil one, that “My bad deed does not ripen”? ¹
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4.1.1 Making something out of nothing

4.1.1.1 In very simple terms, it can be said that early Buddhism differs from later Buddhism, other religions and secular systems, with Buddhism rejecting even the notion of “**something**” (*kiñcana*), that is, view of some external reality or agency in ultimate reality. Theistic religions, for example, begin by wondering, “Why is there *something* rather than nothing?” and jumps into the conclusion that that something must have been placed there or created by a “God.”

For anything to exist and make sense, it must change; to exist is to be impermanent. Therefore, there can be no “eternal” agencies or entities. Hence, the Buddha unequivocally rejects **eternalism**, the claim that any agency or entity can exist eternally, since it is a meaningless statement. It would not be wise to proclaim such claims as a “private truth” or “private reality”: this is how we define “madness”!

4.1.1.2 While it is easy to reject eternalism regarding an *external something*, it is much more difficult to detect an *internal* eternalist view, such as a self-view. How can an unchanging everlasting “self” exist since we are each an ever-changing being? Our memory of the past, experience of the present, and vision of the future allows us to imagine that there is a continuity of such ideas. We then misconstrue this series of causes and effects as existing “eternally.” These are merely our ideas or imagination about the past, the present and the future.

Even the present moment ceases to exist as we breathe in and out. We only experience the rise and fall of the breath, the beginning and ending of states of reality. We may see, hear, smell, taste or touch something, but our *ideas* of them project a false idea that they seem eternal—that “something” actually exists beyond this change.

4.1.2 There is really no “thing” but states

4.1.2.1 A house may still exist whether we have an idea of it or not; it does not cease to exist when we stop thinking about it. Yet, the house, like all things that exist are “constructed.” Firstly, it arose from our ideas and actions; secondly, it is itself

¹ See above (4.1).

made up of basic elements, that is, earth, water, fire and wind (like all physical things). In modern terms, we speak of solid, liquid, heat and motion.

Earth as **solidity** is what we can touch and feel (resistance of hardness, softness, roughness, etc). Water as **liquid or fluidity** is the cohesiveness of such things, giving it shape and structure. Fire as **heat** is basically decay; these elements are decaying all the time. We take advantage of this decaying process as heat to assemble different shapes and structures. Then, there is wind or **motion**: every physical object is made up of tiny atoms and molecules of matter that are in perpetual motion. Hence, all constructed realities are “formations” (*saṅkhārā*): they *rise, persist and then cease*.² In such a dynamic state of true reality, there is neither nothing nor something that exists. All is change.

4.1.2.2 Earth, water, fire and wind are the 4 fundamental states of matter or physical reality. Then there are **space** and **consciousness**. These are the 6 fundamental elements of the physical world. These 6 elements are best understood in terms of our own personal existence; “personal” in the sense that we are nothing but body (the 4 elements) and mind (consciousness). Space is the emptiness that fills up where the 4 elements seem not to be present (such as our oral cavity, and the spaces in our nose, ears and so on), and the “me”-like volume that we display in this world.

We make sense of all this because of our consciousness. These other elements cease to exist for us when we lack the consciousness to experience them. Even then our consciousness depends on the level of wisdom we are capable of cultivating. An animal, for example, may not be aware of the elements as we would be. A fish only “knows” how to live in water or mud, perhaps only for a limited time out of water. A worm knows little more than the earth in which it exists. What about the “higher” species?

4.1.2.3 Humans have that special faculty that is **the mind**, with which we are able to learn new things and even transcend our senses by mastering the mind in meditation. We are also aware of other states of existence, and are able to attain them. We are either reborn into the animal state by way of karma; or we may attain celestial form by letting go of our body-dependent selves. Finally, by freeing ourselves from all self-views and ignorance, we are able to attain that liberation called nirvana.

What unifies us with the rest of the sentient world is that we *all* have some level of **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*). Through consciousness, we interact with others in our own species and with other species (such as animals), and with other sentient beings (such as celestial aliens). We can see qualities like memory, kindness, even love, commonly expressed in animals, too. The suttas and Buddhist stories speak of these capabilities in both animals and sense-world beings and celestials.

Since consciousness is how we are *aware* of ourselves, of others and of our environment, and plays a vital role in our *being* human, we can just as easily be dominated by an “animal” consciousness (both good and bad), and animals, too, may not only display “human” consciousness but even be reborn as humans or as

² On the 3-phase momentary event, see SD 62.10a (3.3.6.3).

divine beings. The early Buddhist texts often relate how animals are born as divine beings: even animals such as elephants, monkeys, bats and frogs can and do go to heaven.³

The Buddha is recorded as praising the loyalty and trustworthiness of some animals which humans should emulate!⁴ Hence, how we treat animals also influences our rebirth karma.⁵ If we understand the modern usage of “soul” as referring to our consciousness, especially as suggested by Caitrin Keiper in “Do elephants have souls?”, it is this consciousness that is the common denominator of all living beings.⁶

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³ SD 6.1 (3); SD 26.1 (7.2). See also Piya Tan, “Animals go to heaven,” 2009: [R68a](#); “My influence on the Buddha,” 2010: [R152](#).

⁴ See the Udena cycle, **DhA 2.1(2)**/1:171-173, where the Buddha is quoted as saying that “animals are straightforward and not given to deceit. Humans, however, think one thing in their heart but say another with their lips.”

⁵ On how humans are reborn as well-cared for pets, see **(Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177), SD 2.6a.

⁶ Here is a series of fascinating articles suggesting “evidence for non-human intelligence, awareness and emotion”: the first article, Caitrin Keiper, “Do elephants have souls?” 2013 [[NewAtlantis](#)]. (Thanks Matt Jenkins for this insightful link. 7 Dec 2024.)