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The Short Analysis of Kamma

A Discourse by the Buddha

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by

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The Short Analysis of Kamma

A Discourse by the Buddha

The Buddha's shorter Discourse on the Analysis of Kamma provides a comprehensive analysis of kamma and its results, that is, of the moral law of cause and effect. The Buddha attained Enlightenment after seeing with insight this law of cause and effect. On the night of his Enlightenment, in the first watch he attained to the knowledge of the recollection of his past existences. He saw how he had wandered in *samsara* in a multitude of different forms, the entire process governed by this moral law of cause and effect. He saw the names he bore, the forms he had assumed, the lifestyles he had followed, the pleasures and pains he had experienced, the periods of time he had lived in different births and the good and bad kamma he had accumulated during these lives.

In the middle watch, he attained the knowledge of the divine eye by which he saw all living beings in all world systems, and their births and deaths, and the

good and bad actions that had led them to happy or woeful states. He was able to see with his divine eye seven days ahead and seven days past in all their detailed happenings.

Immediately before the Enlightenment, he discovered the sequence of causal laws binding together all actions and their results in the three periods of time: past, present and future. That is the reason why contemplation on the law of cause and effect became the foundation for his awakening to the Perfect Enlightenment of Buddhahood just as the night drew to an end.

The Cullakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta is an explanation of the law of kamma and its fruit. It elucidates, in a remarkably clear and comprehensible presentation, the principles which govern the ripening of morally significant action. Before we examine the sutta itself, we will sketch its background, related in the commentary of Ācariya Buddhaghosa.

King Pasenadi of Kosala had given a grant of a village to a wealthy and learned brahmin. The village was named Tudi and as the brahmin was the lord of the village, he came to be known as Todeyya. He had an only son named Subha, called thus because of his handsome and comely appearance. The father Todeyya was a miser who never gave away anything

even to a beggar. He turned away virtuous and noble people from his door with harsh words. He even discouraged and prevented others from giving alms. Todeyya had a hoard of treasure, yet he lived like a pauper, reluctant to spend even on necessities like food and clothing. Todeyya invited his relatives to his home twice a month, and in their presence, advised his son Subha thus: "Just as the cake of kohl that you rub on your eyes wastes away with constant use, so does one's wealth decrease when one gives to others. Do not give even as much as one cent to another. Take an example from the termite, who labours to collect grains of sand to build his huge chamber, or the bee that collects drops of nectar to build the hive; so must you collect wisely and unceasingly to become a wealthy householder."

When Todeyya died, strong miserly feelings still obsessed his heart. As a result, he was born again in the same household, this time as a dog. Strangely, Subha took a great liking to this dog. He tended it himself, giving it the comforts of good food, regular baths, and anointings with scented oils. It slept on a cushioned bed.

Every morning the compassionate Buddha looks out upon the world to see if there is anyone he might benefit. The Buddha's vision comprises two special types of knowledge that enable him to effectively help

others and guide them to realization of the Dhamma. One is the knowledge of the ripeness of the spiritual faculties of beings, by which he can determine who is potentially receptive to the Dhamma. The other is the knowledge of the propensities and latent defilements of beings, by which he can perceive what obstacles prevent people from entering upon the way of Dhamma and what means would be most effective in helping to remove those obstacles.

On that day the Buddha's compassionate vision fell on Subha. He knew that if Subha was helped that day, he would become a true follower of the Dhamma, even if he did not immediately attain to a stage of realization. He also saw that the Dhamma he would preach to Subha on that occasion would not only benefit Subha, but the entire world of gods and human beings, for it was to be a discourse on kamma and its results. Early in the morning, the Buddha set off with his alms-bowl in hand and stood outside Subha's home, from which no person had ever received any food. The purpose of this visit was to open a conversation with Subha.

The little dog—the former Todeyya—came forward barking at the Blessed One. The Buddha gently said, within ear-shot of the servants, “Todeyya, not only now, but in earlier births too you received me and my disciples in such a manner. You now reap the results

of those deeds. Not content you bark at me. Do you know that such conduct will result in a birth in a hell realm?" The words that the Buddha spoke were at once understood by the dog. In deep shame the animal cowered away and curled to sleep on the hearth and could not be persuaded to come away to its usual place.

The Buddha returned to the monastery. When Subha heard of the Buddha's visit and how he had addressed the dog with his father's name, he became furious and set out for the Jeta Grove. Fully aware of the course of coming events, the Master directed his compassion towards Subha. Subha's anger subsided and when he confronted the Buddha. He merely said: "My father has been born in the Brahma-world. Why did you have to demean my father by addressing the dog in his name?"

The Buddha's words have the power to calm, pacify and soothe all beings, and thus they extinguished the fires of anger in Subha's mind. The Buddha asked him: "Subha, have you ever heard of certain treasures that belonged to your father, the whereabouts of which you don't know yet?"

"Yes I have. Lord. I have heard of four treasures—a priceless gold necklace, a pair of slippers of equal worth, a shawl worth a million, and another million in

gold coins. I was not told where he buried them.”

“If so, Subha, go back home and prepare milk-rice unmixed with water, feed this to your dog, and put it to sleep. When it is in deep sleep, whisper in its ears: ‘Father, please show me where your treasure is buried.’ If the dog is your father reborn, as I say he is, he will direct you unfailingly to the treasure. It will thus be proved that the dog is your father reborn and none other.”

Subha, hearing this story, was glad about two things. If the story proved true he could lay his hands on the treasure: if not, he could declare the Buddha was a liar.

Subha went home and carried out the instructions. When the request was made, the dog got up as if in a trance, walked out and scaped the garden in four places. The treasures were recovered and Subha was much struck by the Buddha’s wisdom.

Subha, thus convinced that the Buddha was truly an Enlightened One, decided to visit him again in order to clarify a problem of fourteen points about which he had long been confused.

Brahmins are by nature proud and Subha too was a proud man. He did not prostrate himself before the Buddha, but stood aside respectfully and opened a conversation. This was only the preliminary to the

more important questions he had in mind to ask.

“Reverend sir,” he began, “there is to be seen among people a marked division into high and low birth, the mediocre and the great, those that enjoy a long life and those who die young, the healthy and the diseased, the noble and the lowly, the beautiful and the plain, those of distinguished birth (caste) and those of menial birth (caste), the wealthy and the poor, the wise and the stupid. Venerable Gotama, explain to me why such discrepancies exist among people born in the same way into the human world.” In great earnestness Subha put these questions to the Enlightened One that day.

As Subha was a proud man, the Buddha decided to give him a brief answer to his questions. He stated simply: “Young man, beings are the owners of their deeds, the heirs of their deeds; they spring from their deeds, are bound to their deeds, have their deeds as their refuge. It is deeds that divide beings into the inferior and the superior.”

Although Subha was full of conceit about his own wisdom, he could not understand this brief answer and thus with great humility he said: “Reverend Sir, I am not able to understand this short explanation; please, sir, out of compassion explain this matter to me at length so that I may understand it fully.”

The Buddha then taught the flawless Dhamma to Subha in all its characteristic glory and lucidity:

“There are, young man, beings in this world who inflict pain on others, who bring about the death of others, without the slightest thought of kindness and compassion. Those with blood-stained hands who kill other beings are reborn in the woeful realm as a result of the evil deed of killing. If reborn in the human world again they will suffer a short span of life, or they may even die in their mothers’ wombs. Sometimes they may live a few hours, a few days, or a few months or years, and are denied a full life.

“In the same way, there are people in this world who live with compassionate hearts, without weapons that inflict pain on others, looking with fear and shame on the killing of other living beings. Such people are reborn in higher worlds or in the heavens after the dissolution of their bodies. If reborn again into the human world, they enjoy long life, with no threat to life from any physical force. Thus, Subha, the unwholesome kamma of destroying life gives one a short life, while the wholesome kamma of kindness and compassion helps one to enjoy a full and healthy life.

“Some there are in this world who delight in inflicting pain on other living beings, causing them

physical pain and misery and eventual death. Such unwholesome kamma causes them to be reborn in the woeful realms, or if they do come back to the human world, their lives are miserable—made miserable either by incurable diseases or by dreadful injuries.

“On the other hand, those who think of all living beings with kindness and compassion, never causing pain to others, gain such merit or wholesome kamma that leads them to the heavens after death. If they come back to the human world, they enjoy a full and healthy life undisturbed by the numerous diseases and injuries existing in the world.

“Young man, some there are in this world who cannot bear the prosperity of others. The affluent homes, lands and families of others, their kinds of employment, their position in society, and the respect they earn from the people are to them a source of envy and annoyance. People with such strong envy and jealousy are reborn in the woeful realms. If reborn in the human world, they become helpless and aimless, shunned by society, unwelcome by all.

“On the other hand, some there are who are truly happy at others’ success, happy at the prosperity of others, unenvious and gentle. At their death, they are reborn in the heavenly realms, or if reborn as a human being, they will enjoy great wealth and worldly

prosperity. Thus, young man, the unwholesome kamma of envy will make one helpless and destitute while the wholesome kamma of wishing for the well-being and prosperity of others will result in one's own fame, prosperity and popularity.

"Young man, some there are in this world who are easily angered, full of hatred and ill will towards others. These, when they die, are reborn in the hell realms, or if reborn as human beings, they will be ugly, deformed, disliked by others and will be considered as persons unsuitable for association.

"If, on the other hand, one shows loving-kindness to others, is devoid of hatred, is able to accept with equanimity whatever losses and gains come one's way, whatever fame or lack of fame one may meet, yet is able to radiate thoughts of kindness to those that harm one, such wholesome kamma will give one birth in a heavenly realm. If reborn as a human being, one will enjoy great physical beauty, and will be loved and appreciated by others. One's company will be sought after and one will be treated with respect. Thus, young man, anger and ill will result in ugliness and deformity whereas patience, loving-kindness and compassion are the cause of great beauty in this world.

"Some there are in this world, who, due to pride

and conceit, do not respect those who deserve respect, worship those who are worthy of worship, offer a seat to those who should be offered a seat, give way on the road to those who deserve to be given way to; thus due to pride and conceit, they do not consider the worth of holy, noble and wise people, nor care for and respect their parents, teachers and elders. Such people after their death, due to the unwholesome kamma of pride and conceit, are reborn in the woeful realms, or if they are reborn in the human world, they will appear in families and homes considered low caste and of lowly birth.

“Young man, others there are who are pious and wise and noble in thought, word and deed. They respect those who should be respected, offer seats to those who deserve to be given seats, give way on the road to those who should be given way to, and act at all times without pride and conceit. Such wholesome kamma enables them to be reborn in a heavenly realm or, if they are reborn as human beings, they will receive honour and respect from others and will be reborn into a noble caste. Thus, the unwholesome kamma of pride and conceit results in low birth while the wholesome kamma of humility and non-conceit results in a noble birth.

“In this world, young man, there are people, who, due to their extreme miserliness and greed, do not

give alms to others, nor do they participate in alms given by others. They even go to the extent of preventing and dissuading others from giving alms and discouraging the recipient of the gift from accepting it. The unwholesome kamma of miserliness and greed results in rebirth in the woeful realms, or, if they are reborn as human beings, they will suffer extreme poverty and remain helpless and destitute.

“But, young man, there are others who give freely and generously to the pious, noble and worthy, and equally so to beggars, to the sick and weak, and to birds and beasts with thoughts of non-greed and generosity. They also participate and rejoice in the alms given by others and share merit. Such persons, after death, will be reborn in the heavens, or if reborn as human beings again, they will enjoy great wealth and plentiful harvests from their lands, which quantities will not diminish in their lifetime. Their fortune is indestructible: kings cannot acquire it, thieves cannot steal it, fire and water cannot destroy it. Thus the unwholesome kamma of miserliness and greed will result in poverty and its attending ills, while the wholesome kamma of generosity will bestow wealth and prosperity on beings.

“And finally, young man, there are beings who do not associate with the pious and the wise, the noble and worthy, who do not listen to the Dhamma nor

have discussions to clarify the doubts that arise in their minds: 'What are wholesome and unwholesome kamma? What should one emulate and what reject? What will benefit beings here and hereafter?' These inquiries, which help one to learn and understand the Dhamma and thereby to acquire wisdom, are ignored by them. After their death, these people will be reborn in the woeful realms, or if they are reborn again in the human world, they will be dull, deaf, dumb or blind or mentally unbalanced.

“On the other hand, if one seeks the company of the pious, the wise and the noble and worthy, listens to the Dhamma and has one’s doubts cleared through discussion with the knowledgeable; knows what is wholesome and what is unwholesome action, what one should emulate and what one should reject, what will benefit beings here and hereafter—such a person after death will gain rebirth in the heavens, or if reborn as a human being, he will be of great intelligence and able to understand the deep and sublime Dhamma to his great benefit and advantage. Thus you see that the unwholesome kamma of not listening to the Dhamma will result in weak understanding while the wholesome kamma of often listening to the Dhamma will bless one with intelligence and awareness required for a fruitful life.

“Young man, beings are the owners of their deeds,

the heirs of their deeds; they spring from their deeds, are bound to their deeds, have their deeds as their refuge. It is deeds that divide beings into the inferior and the superior.” Thus the Blessed One explained to Subha the nature of kamma and its result.

The young and intelligent Subha understood the explanation of the Enlightened One as clearly as one sees the sun in the radiant heavens. A limitless joy and a confidence and faith in the Buddha-word arose in Subha. Just as the spark hidden in the embers comes alight suddenly, the good kamma of the past blossomed forth in Subha. Falling prostrate at the feet of the Blessed One, he said: “Magnificent, O Lord, is the Dhamma taught by you, noble and lofty from beginning to end. Just as an over-turned vessel might be turned upright, just as a hidden treasure might be revealed, just as the straight and correct path might be shown to a person who has hopelessly lost his way, just as darkness might be dispelled by a lamp so that one with good sight might see forms, just so, O Lord, have I understood the Dhamma taught by you. I seek refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha to become your humble lay follower as long as life lasts.” Prostrate on the ground at the feet of the Buddha, Subha sought refuge in the holy and unfailing Triple Gem.

According to the Buddha, kamma is volitional

action, and thus the ultimate factor responsible for kamma is the volition (*cetana*) in one's own mind. The world is divided into the high and low, the pleasant and the unpleasant, because of the ripening of our own volitions. Apart from kamma there is no other force—no god or all-powerful overlord of the universe—who bestows happiness and sorrow on beings. Nor do happiness and sorrow come upon us arbitrarily, purely as a matter of chance or luck. Depending upon their kamma, their own deeds, as the cause, beings are born in happiness or misery and meet with good fortune or bad fortune during the course of their lives. As the Buddha says:

“Kamma brings one fame and praise, kamma brings disease and torment. Seeing thus the differences in kamma, how can one deny this law?”

As long as one journeys through the round of becoming there is no escape from the results of kamma. Neither in the sky nor in the ocean, nor in a remote mountain cave, can one evade the consequences of one's own deeds. Like a shadow, one's kamma follows one wherever one may go.

Both unwholesome kamma and worldly wholesome kamma are accumulated through ignorance of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the

cessation of suffering. Because of ignorance of the truths we engage in good and bad actions, which generate kamma. This kamma gives rise to a rebirth consciousness by which we come into a new existence, equipped with a new mind and body. As our six sense faculties mature, we make contact with the objects of the senses. Through contact we experience feelings. Feelings of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, give rise to craving. Craving conditions intensified greed and attachment. Through attachment we accumulate fresh kamma. And this kamma propels us into a fresh birth, by which we again meet old age and death along with the host of sorrows, lamentation, pain, grief and despair: the entire mass of worldly suffering.

As followers of the Buddha, what we need to cultivate is not simply worldly wholesome kamma, but the kamma that leads to the extinction of kamma. This is the development of the seven factors of enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. When the seven factors of enlightenment are cultivated, the Noble Eightfold Path comes into being, and by following the Noble Eightfold Path we can overcome all ignorance and escape the round of repeated birth and death.

All things that compose this world—the continents and the oceans, the sun, moon and stars, all the beings

in all the realms—all these formations are subject to change and thus impermanent; they are unsatisfactory and thus a basis for suffering; they do not follow our desires and thus are not our self. Being stamped with the three universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self, they come under the noble truth of suffering. The cause of this suffering is craving, the second noble truth. The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering, Nibbāna, attained by eradicating the cause of suffering. And the path that leads to the end of suffering is the unique and incomparable Noble Eightfold Path, the Fourth Noble Truths.

All the Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas, and countless Arahants cultivated the sublime perfections, the *pāramīs*, over aeons of time and came to the realization of the Four Noble Truths, by which they attained Nibbāna. May the merits we acquire by the practice of generosity, virtue and meditation turn into *pāramīs* that will help us gain the noble wisdom needed to realize the Noble Truths in this rare period when the Buddha's teaching is available.

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