

Good and Bad

Kamma

All beings continue in a series of rebirths according to their accumulated kamma¹-results. The uninitiated are enslaved by unwholesome kamma-actions that prolong the continuance of rebirths. Buddhas come to this world and spread the all-important message: not to indulge in unwholesome kamma-actions but to engage in kamma-actions that are wholesome and meritorious. In that way beings can become free from the suffering of continuing rebirth.

Question:

How does a Noble Disciple who takes refuge in the three Refuges nullify accumulated unwholesome kamma-results, enhance wholesome kamma-actions and become free from the series of rebirths?

The Supreme Buddha fully understood the manifestations of kamma. He acquired wisdom which freed Him from its influence. He explained kamma clearly in the discourse of the ***Kamma Sutta***.

¹ Kamma – the action or deed.

This is a discourse in *Anguttara Nikaya* of the *Tripitaka*². In that discourse He mentions four types of kamma-actions:

- 1) Black kamma-actions that bring about black results,**
- 2) White kamma-actions that bring about white results,**
- 3) Black and white kamma-actions that bring about black and white results,**
- 4) Kamma-actions neither black nor white but such that they help to negate results of accumulated kamma-actions.**

Kamma-actions that bring about black results are identified as the tenfold unwholesome actions: Killing a living being, stealing, adultery, speaking untruths, conveying malicious rumour, speaking vicious words, indulging in useless talk, ignorance, anger, and holding wrong views.

Kamma-actions that bring about white results are identified as the ten-fold wholesome actions: Selfless giving, the practice of virtue, meditation, offering merit, sharing merit, taking care of those who need care, honouring the deserving, speaking the Dhamma, attentive listening to the Dhamma, and strengthening the right view.

Black and white kamma-actions are a mixture of unwholesome and wholesome volitions that bring about wholesome or unwholesome kamma-results subject to the weight

² Tripitaka – Tripitaka is the Buddhist's holy book. It is included 84 000 parts of doctrines preached by Lord Buddha. The largest religious book of the world is the Tripitaka.

age of the action. They bring about pleasant as well as unpleasant results.

A kamma-action neither black nor white but such that it helps to negate results of other kamma-actions is 'insight' meditation – where intuitive light flashes forth and exposes the truth of impermanency, suffering and the non-self nature of all corporeal and mental phenomena of existence. It is called the meditation of *vipassana* (*vidharshana* in Sanskrit).

Such was the truth that was realized and taught by the Supreme Buddha. Black volitions that bring about black kamma-results cause continuance of the process of existence and rebirth in the lower worlds of the Hells, the world of animals, and the world of ghosts. White volitions that bring about white kamma-results cause the gain of rebirth in worlds that knows no suffering such as the world of the **Subhakinna** Devas. Kamma-actions that are black and white cause rebirth in the worlds of the Devas and human beings.

The Supreme Buddha discoursed that when volition negates kamma-actions that bring about black results and when volition negates kamma-action that brings about white results such volitions bring about the dissipation of kamma. Through such volitions a person discards all attachment to the five aggregates of clinging and attains the state of **Arahat**. So all Supreme Buddhas discourse is;

*Thus advise and enjoin all Buddhas in discoursing:
 Not to indulge in unwholesome kamma-actions,
 But accumulate wholesome kamma-results,
 By cleansing one's mind and mental volition.*

It is clear from the words of the Supreme Buddha that a kamma-volition neither white nor black forms when one has developed concentration and wisdom through meditation of tranquillity and insight, by cultivating virtue, concentration and wisdom, and travelled the Noble Eightfold Path. Such kamma-volitons bring about the negation of white as well as black kamma-results.

The Buddha's Doctrine emphasizes the need to be eventually free from all kamma, good and bad. So, by means of wise consideration, anyone can understand the nature of kamma and proceed towards becoming free from its manifestations.

In one's life kamma occurs due to volition. The Supreme Buddha explained this interconnection between volition and kamma in His discourses. He said to the disciples, "**Bhikkhu**³s, what I say about kamma is that it is also volition that causes kamma-action. When volition occurs, one accumulates kamma-results by bodily action, word and thought."

He has also discoursed that when a person rife in ignorance accumulates a wholesome kamma-result by doing a meritorious

³ Bhikkhu – The Pali word for the Buddhist monk.

deed, a meritorious consciousness forms. Similarly, when a person rife in ignorance accumulates an unwholesome kamma-result by doing an evil action that person's consciousness forms according to the unwholesome kamma-result. Furthermore, when a person rife in ignorance accumulates formations such as meditative absorptions and attains other stages of meditation, his or her consciousness forms according to those absorptions.

Thus we can see that if one commits a kamma-action nurtured by ignorance and caused by volition then that kamma-action accumulates kamma-results. Such a kamma may bear fruit in this present life, it may bear fruit in the next birth, or it may bear fruit in yet a later life. The Supreme Buddha has discoursed that the continuance of actions and results of kamma are incalculable, which means the phenomena of kamma are beyond the comprehension of the mundane mind.

The question whether great wholesome kamma-actions can negate other unwholesome kamma-results has been amply answered in instances of real-life accounts of people of the Buddha's time: Examples are the highway robber **Angulimāla** who became an **Arahat** and the courtesan **Ambapālī** who became an **Arahat**. These are proof that unwholesome kamma-results can be negated by powerful wholesome kamma-actions.

There was a Brahmin named **Kasi Bharajvāja**. On a certain occasion he berated and insulted the Buddha: "I am a farmer who grows what I eat. Reverend Sir, you should stop going about with

your begging bowl poised to receive alms and instead earn your living.” Later, however, he became a disciple of the Buddha and became an Arahāt. These incidents illustrate that accumulated unwholesome kamma-results can be negated by ardent, mindful practice of the Dhamma.

Not only unwholesome kamma but also meritorious kamma-results can be completely overcome and nullified. In the Discourse of the Gems (*Ratana Sutta*), an Arahāt is described as someone whose previous accumulated kamma have been all negated, and who does not continue kamma-actions that accumulate any more results. One then has no more bonds with the process of existence. One’s consciousness has ended the process of recurrence of kamma. Like a lamp that is extinguished when its oil is exhausted, an Arahāt becomes extinguished at the end of his or her holy life.

Thus, by following the Noble Eightfold Path we can extinguish unwholesome kamma-results, by the accumulation of powerful wholesome kamma-actions. However, there are exceptions to that rule. The five heinous sins: matricide, patricide, killing of an Arahāt, causing injury to a Supreme Buddha and causing disharmony among the community of Bhikkhus, are exceptions. However powerful the merit, the results of those five sins have to complete their course before beneficial negating kamma-actions can take effect.

Question:

One hears about a debate occasionally: since both merits as well as sin tend to prolong the process of existence, is it not better to abstain from merit as well as well as from sin?

There is some validity in that argument. Accumulation of merit continues the process of existence. Accumulation of sin also continues the process of existence. There is indeed a way of shortening the process of existence by abstaining from merit as well as from sin. But to do that we have firstly to understand the activity that leads to that situation. The correct procedure in that pursuit is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

If one is diligent in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path and culminates in the fruition of the state of **Arahant**⁴ one has understood fully the activity that leads to the negation of all kamma-results. In the Buddha's words, "An Arahant who forsakes nights of sleep and rest to find that true and Noble Eightfold Path has no more lurking fears."

Although we see clearly that merit and sin are two factors that prolong the process of existence, the only way to nullify the results of merit and sin is the Noble Eightfold Path. Attachment to a view such as "Merit and sin both prolong the process of existence, and so they are both unnecessary," is nothing more

⁴Arahant - The enlightened disciple of Lord Buddha.

than another unwholesome volition that prolongs the process of existence.

The Supreme Buddha has discoursed that the way to exhaust accumulated kamma-results is to engage in kamma-actions that are neither black nor white so that their results are also neither white nor black. In other words, one should engage in such kamma-actions as would negate accumulated white as well as black kamma-results.

That is what would occur through the development of concentration and wisdom, through meditation of tranquillity and insight and the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. Tranquillity develops wisdom and concentration develops knowledge. When one's wisdom and knowledge develop one develops understanding of reality. Then one would see things impermanent as things impermanent, things engulfing suffering as things engulfing suffering and things of non-self as things of non-self.

Thus one would be at the threshold of Nibbana. The only road that leads to it is the Noble Eightfold Path, comprising virtue, concentration and wisdom.

